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## ***EDUCATION IN CANADA: IN PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND EQUITY***

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### ***Educación en Canadá: a la Búsqueda de una Educación de Calidad y Equidad***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Canada is one of the few countries in the world that does not have a national department of education but several provincial departments of education which are responsible for educational governance. The article provides an overview of Canada's educational systems. It describes the current political, economic and social context and provides a brief historical overview of the evolution of these systems. The article addresses educational quality and equity by drawing on educational indicators and discusses educational reforms that have taken place. The strengths and weaknesses of Canada's systems of education are analyzed. The article concludes with remarks on the inter-relationship between educational equality and societal inequality.

**KEY WORDS:** Canada, Provinces, Education, Quality, Equity.

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**RESUMEN**

Canadá es uno de los pocos países en el mundo que no tienen un Ministerio Nacional de Educación sino numerosos departamentos provinciales que son los responsables de la gestión educativa. El artículo proporciona una panorámica de los sistemas educativos canadienses. Describe el actual contexto político, económico y social y ofrece un breve repaso histórico de la evolución de esos sistemas. El artículo enfrenta la cuestión de la calidad y la equidad educativas a través de indicadores referidos a educación y plantea críticamente las reformas educativas que han tenido lugar. Se analizan los puntos fuertes y las debilidades de los sistemas educativos de Canadá. El artículo concluye con interesantes aportaciones sobre la estrecha relación entre equidad educativa e inequidad social.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Canadá, Provincias, Educación, Calidad y Equidad.

**INTRODUCTION**

Canada is the only country among the OECD countries that does not have a national department of education since Canada's provinces are responsible for their own systems of education. Even though there are some differences among these systems, there is a tendency for them to converge. This is partly due to the fact that the foundation elements of these systems were established in the late 1800s. Subsequent educational practices were influenced by developments taking place in the United States and in Europe.

Generally speaking, Canada maintains a relatively high level of educational quality and equity. At the same time, there are areas that require improvement. The fact that Canada does not have a universal child care system implies children at a young age will have differential access to quality child care. This does not only impact children's well-being but it also creates barriers to employment for parents, particularly single mothers. Another area that requires attention is addressing educational equity for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal students have lower high school completion rates and are less likely to graduate from a post-secondary institution compared with the general population. A third area that requires attention and that has begun to weaken the public nature of education in Canada is the adoption of market-like practices particularly in the post-secondary education

sector. Finally, given Canada's growing diverse student population, the teaching workforce needs to become more inclusive and reflect this diversity.

The article provides an overview of the Canadian educational systems. It begins with a description of the current political, economic and social context. It then provides a brief historical overview of the evolution of these systems and describes the current nature of educational governance and federal involvement in education. The third section addresses educational quality and equity by drawing on educational indicators. It then discusses the development of comprehensive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s and educational reforms that took place in the 1990s as systems of education were closely aligned with labour market development. This is followed by a discussion of teacher education. The final section describes the strengths and weaknesses that Canada's systems of education are facing. The article concludes with remarks on the inter-relationship between educational equality and societal inequality. An integrated, holistic and inter-disciplinary perspective is required to resolve problems of inequality and inequity.

## **1. CANADA'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT**

Canada is the second largest country in the world, spanning six time zones and with coastlines on the Atlantic, Pacific and the Arctic Ocean. Most Canadians live in urban areas. The largest population growth has been in the metropolitan areas of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Canada's total population is 33 million with 36% of the population living in the province of Ontario and another 21% living in the province of Quebec. The least populated areas in Canada are the territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, with populations of 33,000, 43,000, and 31,000 respectively.

Canada is a federation consisting of ten provinces and three territories. It is a parliamentary democracy organized into three levels of government: federal, provincial and municipal. Under the *Constitution Act* of 1867, power is divided between the federal and provincial arenas. Section 93 of the Constitution gives exclusive power to the provinces to make laws about education. The provinces and territories are responsible for all aspects of educational governance and the provision of learning opportunities at the

**Figure 1. Map of Canada**

Source: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels including vocational and technical education. Under Section 91 of the Constitution, the federal government has jurisdiction over national defence, Indian affairs, the territories, prisons, external affairs and the economy. There are certain educational responsibilities that arise such as the education of service personnel and children of members of the armed forces; the education and training of prison inmates; and the education of 'Registered Indians' (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 46).

As in most industrialized countries, Canadians were impacted by the recent economic recession but not as severely as their counterpart. The labour market lost 2.4% of its total workforce or 417,000 positions (TD ECONOMICS, 2010). In order to stimulate economic recovery, the Government of Canada put in place an Economic Action Plan which injected over \$62 billion of stimulus money into the economy over a two-year period (FINANCE CANADA, 2010). Job losses have since been regained with nearly 423,000 jobs created since July 2009 (TD ECONOMICS, 2010;

FINANCE CANADA, 2010). However, recent job growth has been characterized by increased temporary employment and self-employment (YALNIZYAN, 2010).

Approximately 70% of Canadians are employed in the service sector which encompasses transportation, administration, education, health care, arts, accommodation and other services. 30% of Canadians are employed in goods-producing sectors such as agriculture, forestry, mining, oil, manufacturing, construction and utilities (TD ECONOMICS, 2010). Canadians are well educated with 87% of the population having attained post-secondary education (OECD, 2010: 35). Compared with other OECD countries, Canadians are more likely to enrol in two to three year college programs which are occupationally oriented and lead directly to employment (OECD, 2010: 64).

Even though Canada is a wealthy country which displays high levels of economic competitiveness<sup>1</sup>, Canadians have experienced increasing income disparities and higher rates of poverty in the past 20 years. According to the Government of Canada's Indicators of Well-Being, average incomes for the bottom 20% remained the same between 1976 and 2007 whereas incomes for the top 20% increased during the same period (HRSDC, 2010). In fact, families in the top bracket earned 8.4 to 9.1 times more than the bottom 20% between 1976 and 2007 (*ibid.*). According to Statistics Canada, in 2008, approximately 3 million Canadians lived in poverty which represents 9.4% of the population<sup>2</sup> with 606,000 children aged 17 and under living in low income or poor families (STATISTICS CANADA, 2010a).

A recent report by the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, pointed to the failure of government programs to get Canadians out of poverty. The report noted that such programs are designed to alleviate the effects of poverty but they are unable to lift people out of poverty (STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, 2009). In particular, there are marked inequalities

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<sup>1</sup> The World Economic Forum Competitiveness Report ranks Canada 10th for 2010-2011. Compared to other countries, Canada ranks high when it comes to health care and primary education and higher education and training (WEF 2010: 23-24).

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada uses the alter tax Low-Income Cut-Off as a low income or 'poverty line' measure.

that exist between the mainstream population and marginalized groups. These inequalities have a profound impact on the lives of children and youth. As Jessica Yee, a First Nations feminist activist, points out, the data demonstrate that it is crucial to change the current situation for Aboriginal youth — 27,000 First Nations children are in state care; Aboriginal youth have the highest rate of sexually transmitted infections in Canada; and 40% of Aboriginal youth live in poverty (YEE, 2010).

Another aspect to Canada's social context is its diverse population. Canada admits about 250,000 immigrants a year (CIC, 2010). According to the 2006 Census, one in five Canadians were born outside of Canada with more than half reporting their country of origin from Asia (STATISTICS CANADA, 2010b). Among Canada's population, 24% reported being part of a visible minority group. Recent projections made by Statistics Canada estimate that by 2031, 47% of Canadians will belong to a visible minority group (*ibid*: 22). Not only is Canada becoming more ethnically and racially diverse, its population is also becoming more religiously diverse. In 2006, 8% of the population reported being non-Christian. It is projected that by 2031, 14% of the population will be non-Christian (*ibid*: 25). Canadian institutions will need to adapt to these demographic changes. More specifically, schools will need to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of all their student populations. One policy area they will need to focus on is to create an inclusive workforce with an ethnically, racially and religiously diverse teacher population (RYAN, POLLOCK and ANTONELLI, 2009).

An important dimension to Canada's social context is its aging population. As in most OECD countries, the proportion of people aged 65 years and older is growing. In Canada, this group constitutes approximately 13.7% of the population. By 2025, 20% of the population will be over the age of 65 (CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA, 2006). Of concern is maintaining Canada's economic competitiveness and productivity as it faces declining workforce participation rates (MINER, 2010). Various solutions are proposed to ensure labour force growth. These include increasing labour market participation from marginalized groups such as Aboriginal peoples and people with disabilities, increasing immigration levels, and encouraging older workers to retire later through various incentives (CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA, 2006; MINER, 2010).

## **2. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CANADA'S SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION**

Canada is a colony that was settled by the French and the British in the 1600s. Its original inhabitants, the First Nations peoples and the Inuit, were colonized by French and British settlers who were intent on territorial expansion. Prior to colonization, indigenous peoples had developed their systems for transferring knowledge and for self-governance that were adapted to their needs (DANIELS-FISS, 2008; AXELROD, 1997). Tribal education instilled specific techniques for teaching young people skills, knowledge and wisdom for adulthood (DANIELS-FISS, 2008). When the settlers arrived in Canada, they attempted to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity and change their ways of life (AXELROD, 1997). An aggressively assimilative strategy was instituted as early as the 1800s to prepare Aboriginal children for a European way of life (ABORIGINAL HEALING FOUNDATION, 2005). This strategy became known as Canada's Residential School System.

The French began to settle in Canada along the St. Lawrence (Montreal and Quebec City) and in Acadia which came to be known as New France. The colony of New France was granted royal government by Louis the IV in the 1660s securing its survival (TITLEY and MILLER, 1982). One of the major institutions to be transferred to the New World was the Roman Catholic Church. The Church came to be responsible for the operation of schools in New France (*ibid*: 12). It set up a small network of 'petites écoles' which became Canada's first formal schools (AXELROD, 1997: 4). The first schools in the region of Acadia were established by missionaries. Secondary education began with the Jesuits opening a college in Quebec that offered traditional studies in Greek and Latin literature, philosophy and theology (JOHNSON, 1968: 9).

After a series of wars between the French and the British, the British conquered New France in 1763. The British Empire now included approximately 60,000 French colonists of Roman Catholic faith. Scottish and English merchants began to settle in New France. An exodus of United Empire Loyalists migrated from the American colonies into Canada during and after the American Revolution, the majority of which settled in what is today southern Ontario. Because of this huge influx of settlers, the British

created a new constitution for Canada. The *Constitutional Act* of 1791 divided the former colony into Upper Canada (southern Ontario) and Lower Canada (southern Quebec) (JOHNSON, 1968).

Common schools (elementary schools) and grammar schools (secondary schools) began to be established in Upper Canada in the late 1700s. Common schools were opened without government assistance by those who desired to teach (JOHNSON, 1968: 23). The first school to receive government assistance was a grammar school which was opened in Kingston in 1792 (*ibid*: 23). The *Public Schools Act* of 1807 authorized a Grammar School in each of the eight districts with the schoolmaster's salary being publicly funded. These schools charged tuition and residence fees and only the wealthy could afford to enrol their children. The *Commons School Act* of 1816 created a system of elementary education. It allowed local property owners to meet, select three trustees and hire a teacher who, if approved by the local district board of education, was eligible for a grant-in-aid from the state (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 26; JOHNSON, 1968: 24).

After the 1837 Rebellions in Lower and Upper Canada, a new *Act of the Union* was enacted in 1841 which created one united colony. The colony came to be known as 'Canada East' and 'Canada West' (JOHNSON, 1968; YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998). At the first session of the new united Parliament of Canada, the *Common School Act* of 1841 was passed (JOHNSON, 1968). The Act created a central administrative authority by establishing the post of the chief superintendent of education to oversee the operation of education in Canada West and Canada East. Subsequently, this post was abolished and an assistant superintendent was appointed for each section (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 26). A series of acts were enacted and by the 1850s a 'public' school system emerged in Canada which came to form the contours of the present day provincial educational systems (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998).

Local options through which residents of school districts could vote to fund elementary schooling from public revenues had already been established by the 1840s (AXELROD, 1997: 29). For example, free school acts were passed in Nova Scotia in 1865 and in Ontario, New Brunswick and British Columbia in 1871 (AXELROD, 1997: 36). In the 1850s, legislation for school public funding began to be enacted. Legislation for compulsory school attendance was first passed by the province of Ontario in 1871.



Children aged seven to twelve were required to attend school. Other provinces passed similar legislation in the late 1800s and early 1900s — Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in 1877, 1882 and 1905 respectively. British Columbia's legislation of 1901 was strengthened in 1921 to include children seven to fifteen. Quebec and Newfoundland enacted compulsory education legislation in 1942 (AXELROD, 1997: 35-36).

Church-sponsored colleges and universities began to be established in the 1800s. Charters were secured from England in order to establish these institutions. By the 1850s, provincial universities began to be institutionalized. The University of Toronto was founded as a non-denominational university when King's College was reorganized (JOHNSON, 1968: 26). Today, Canada has 163 recognized public and private universities and 183 recognized public colleges and institutes, including those granting applied and bachelor's degrees. There are also 68 university-level institutions and 51 college-level ones operating as authorized institutions, at which only selected programs are approved under provincially established quality assurance programs (CMEC, no date).

The institutionalization of education was an inherent component of state formation as the Canadian colonies came to establish a system of representative government and a bureaucratic state administration (CURTIS, 1992). The early school promoters wanted to create an education system that served "to make future generations better than the existing one" (PRENTICE, 1999: 27) through "school organization and discipline" (*ibid*: 34). Free schools were viewed as institutions for helping to alleviate class friction between the rich and the poor. As Prentice notes, "Education would be made free, and all children brought into schools. This would bind the classes together in a common enterprise and their children in a common history of having been schooled together" (*ibid*: 120).

## **2.1. Denominational and language rights**

A unique characteristic of the present provincial educational systems is the entrenchment of denominational and minority English and French language rights. Between 1841 and 1863, a series of education acts created "separate schools" and "dissentient schools" which allowed Protestant and

Catholic parents to establish their own schools and to receive public funding. These rights came to be entrenched in the *Constitution Act* of 1867 which was designed to protect the rights and privileges of religious minorities (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 30; MACKAY, 1984: 12). The Constitution guarantees minority-group rights to denominational schools (BROWN and ZUKER, 2002). However, these rights are accessed in various ways at the provincial level depending on the status of denominational schools prior to entry into Confederation and the outcome of legal and political developments since Confederation (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 30; MACKAY, 1984: 15). The provinces have the discretionary power to provide funding to schools of all religious denominations. British Columbia and Alberta, for example, fund private schools whereas in Ontario, private schools are not directly funded (BROWN and ZUKER, 2002: 12).

Canada's Constitution and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantee the provision of education in Canada's two official languages: French and English (BROWN and ZUKER, 2002). Section 23 of the Charter provides parents who speak the minority official language in their province with specific rights to public schooling for their children (BROWN and ZUKER, 2002: 22). The provinces left it to the courts to determine how they should comply with Section 23. One set of issues relate to when these rights apply. The second set of issues that the courts were asked to rule on relate to the homogeneity of schools and control over minority language education (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 32-33).

Under the *Official Languages Act* of 1988, the federal government can encourage and assist provincial and territorial governments in offering educational programs to language minority communities. The federal government provides financial support to the provinces for minority-language education and second-language instruction. Through the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction 2009-2010 to 2012-2013*, funding arrangements have been agreed upon between the federal government, and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada amounting to about \$235 million<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The protocol is available at: <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/211/protocol-for-agreements-2009-2013.pdf>.

## **2.2. Educational governance**

As noted earlier, education in Canada is a provincial jurisdiction. Each province has a Department or Ministry of Education that is headed by a minister of education. The minister is a member of the provincial legislature and a member of the Cabinet. The department of education is headed by the Deputy Minister who coordinates its work. Typically, a ministry of education addresses areas such as planning, school finance, curriculum development and assessment, special education, language programs and renovation/construction of school buildings (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 35). Provincial governments are also responsible for the governance of higher education. Higher education learning can be organized into three broad categories that include apprenticeship and vocational education, college education and university education.

School boards are responsible for the day to day operation and administration of schools. They are required to act with the parameters laid down in provincial legislation and regulation. In most provinces, school board trustees are elected either by the electorate of the school division or by individual wards. School board members are assisted by a professional administration headed by a superintendent or director of education (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 41). School boards are viewed as important players in educational governance as leaders of educational change and implementers of provincial innovations (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2008: 6).

The school boards hire and pay school personnel, develop transportation systems and provide physical facilities for students. They also are responsible for closing schools when enrolments decline, setting budgets and, in certain cases, raising local education taxes (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 37). Over the years, the provinces have consolidated school boards in order to facilitate equitable access to education in both rural and urban areas and to improve operational efficiency (*ibid*: 39). For example, in 1998, Ontario replaced its 129 school boards with 72 district school boards. It improved access to French-language schools by creating 12 new French-language boards (GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO, 2007).

Another aspect to educational governance has been the creation of school councils that provide a mechanism for local involvement in schools. One of the first provinces to enact legislation on this matter was British Columbia.

The *British Columbia School Act* of 1989 formally established the right of parents to have a parents' advisory council in each school (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998: 44). A recent survey of Ontario school councils reported that school council members spend most of their time on fundraising activities to raise money for library books, art and music, computers, text books or classroom supplies (PEOPLE FOR EDUCATION, 2010: 7). Schools that are in affluent neighbourhood and that have higher numbers of students from middle and upper-middle class background will be more successful in raising funds than those in poorer neighbourhoods. Such fundraising activities erode the public nature of schools since private funding is being sought to supplement school budgets. In addition, these private funds create inequities between schools with certain schools benefiting disproportionately from this funding compared to others (RICCI, 2009).

In all provinces and territories, students' academic achievement is assessed through provincial examinations, national examinations such as the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program, and international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Most provinces directly administer these assessments. Ontario created the Education Quality and Accountability Office, an independent provincial agency, to administer provincial, national and international student assessments.

Higher education is also being monitored. In 2005, Ontario also created the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. BC created the EQA seal as a quality assurance designation that identifies BC public and private post-secondary institutions that have met or exceeded provincial government recognized quality assurance standards and offer consumer protection.

### **2.3. Federal involvement in education**

As noted earlier, the federal government has exclusive legislative authority in relation to "Indians, and Lands reserved for Indians." The federal government exercises jurisdiction over Aboriginal people who live on reserve and has treaty obligations in relation to the education of members of various bands (BROWN and ZUKER, 2002: 29).

The federal government created a Residential School System that encompassed a range of institutions for educating 'Indian' children including industrial schools, boarding schools, homes for students, hostels, and residential schools (ABORIGINAL HEALING FOUNDATION, 2001:5). Many children were taken away from the safety of their homes to live in residential schools. Aboriginal children were not allowed to speak their language and were punished for doing so by their teachers. Haig-Brown describes residential schooling as a form of "cultural genocide" since it was a deliberate attempt by the colonizer to eliminate the language of the colonized and to negate their culture (1988: 15).

This schooling system can be organized into three historical phases. Phase 1 (mid-1800s to 1910): the education of Aboriginal children consisted of imparting the skills to function in the dominant society by isolating the children or by placing the children in settler's homes to learn their customs. Phase 2 (1910-1951): aboriginal children were streamed into residential and day schools to 'civilize and christianize'. The federal government delegated responsibility for the daily operation of residential schools to the church including Roman Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian. Phase 3 (1951-1990): aboriginal children were enrolled in mainstream schools and residential schools came under secular administration. The last residential school was closed in the 1990s (ABORIGINAL HEALING FOUNDATION, 2001).

First Nations people resisted the control of their children's education and in 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (known today as the Assembly of First Nations) released a policy paper entitled 'Indian Control of Indian Education'. It was based on two foundational principles-parental responsibility and local control of education which were supported by Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian Affairs (BARMAN, HÉBERT, and McCASKILL, 1987: 2).

Subsequently, the federal government began to devolve the delivery of elementary and secondary education services to First Nations students on reserve to First Nations communities. The federal government funds most First Nations educational services except for seven federal schools that the federal government continues to run (AAND, 2009). In 2008-2009, the federal government invested \$1.3 billion in First Nations education. Sixty percent of First Nations students attend school on reserve and forty percent

off reserve. First Nations communities pay tuition to the provincial school boards that the students are attending (*ibid*).

Even though the federal government has transferred control of education to First Nations communities, Mendelson notes that the major elements of an education system remain missing. First Nations lack the “necessary organizational and financial infrastructure for a high quality First Nations education System” (2009: 2). Such an infrastructure would involve creating new institutional arrangements such as First Nations school boards to manage and provide services to on-reserve schools and a First Nations Regional Education Authority that has responsibilities similar to a provincial ministry of education. Financial investments would need to be made in order to restructure and reorganize the current system (Mendelson, 2009). A new *First Nations Education Act* would need to be legislated to create this infrastructure (*ibid*: 27).

Another area of federal involvement is vocational education. The federal government enacted in 1919 the *Technical Education Act* and in 1942, the *Vocational Training Coordination Act*. It also passed legislation in 1960 to include funding for teacher vocational education. However, a national system of vocational training did not develop due to lack of sustained federal investment (TAYLOR, 2010: 506). Currently, the federal government has allocated funding for apprenticeship training embodied in such programs as the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant and the Apprenticeship Completion Grant.

The federal government maintains involvement in education policy through the exercise of its spending power (MAC KAY, 1984: 15; MORGAN, 2008). Over the years, this involvement has come in the form of financing arrangements to universities, transfer payments to the provinces, federal research grants and student loans and scholarship programs (MORGAN, 2008: 180). The federal government views investing in education as significant to maintaining Canada’s economic competitiveness in the knowledge based economy (MORGAN, 2008).

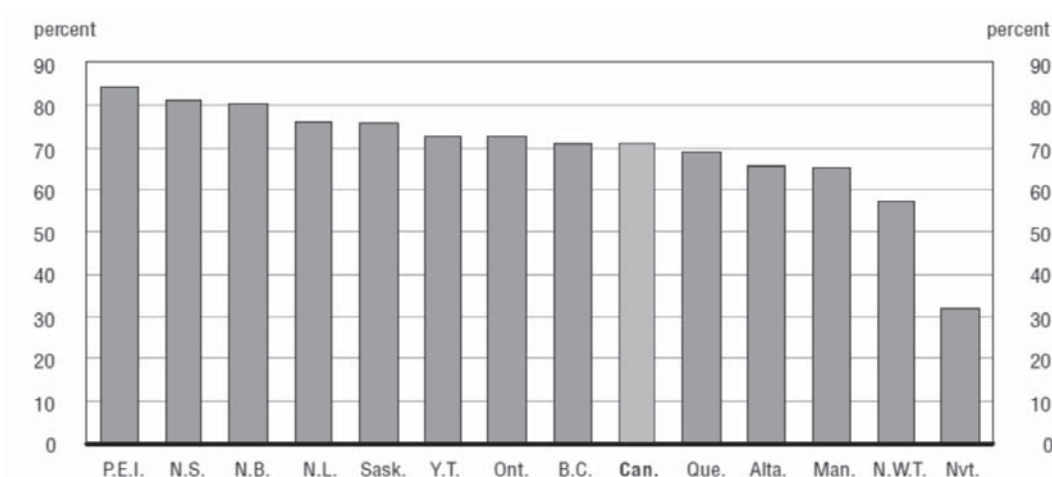
## **2.4. Recent legal developments**

There have been recent provincial developments that have either impacted education policy or raised concerns about the future of Canadian

schooling. In Alberta, amendments were made to Alberta's *Human Rights Act* in June 2009 to include a 'parental opt-out' provision. This provision gives parents and guardians the rights to remove children from school instructions dealing with "religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation.... without academic penalty." School boards must give advance notice that these lessons will take place. If they fail to do so, then parents can file a complaint with the human rights commission against the teacher or school board (CBC NEWS, 2009). As the BC Federation of Teachers has noted, such legislation "interferes with teachers' abilities to do their jobs and severely inhibits the abilities of students to learn about their similarities and differences as global citizens" (WELLS and CHAMBERLAIN, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, Canada is becoming increasingly religiously diverse. For example, in Ontario, there are 53,000 students who attend Islamic, Hindu, Jewish and Christian schools. Religious minorities have requested public funding for faith-based schools similarly to what is currently available for separate schools. This was an agenda item that the Conservative party had on its platform during the 2003 provincial elections. Integration of students from various faiths into a secular education system is another issue that has gained focus, particularly in Quebec. In 1994, a Montreal high

**Figure 2. Secondary graduation rate, Canada, provinces and territories, 2007/2008**



Source: Brockington, Riley (2010). Summary Public School Indicators for Canada, the Provinces and Territories, 2001/2002 to 2007/2008. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Chart 3.

school student was sent home for wearing the head scarf because it contravened the school's dress code. Private schools instituted similar practices. Quebec Muslims defended their rights by filing a complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission. The Commission ruled in 2005 that Quebec schools did not have the right to prohibit any student from wearing religious attire (CBC NEWS, 2005).

### **3. EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND EQUITY**

According to a recent poll, the majority of Canadians believe that schools in their communities are giving boys and girls an equal chance to succeed in school (CANADIAN TEACHERS' FEDERATION, 2010). It is important to note that concepts such as educational quality and equity have been redefined over the years. The indicators used to measure such concepts change as new educational objectives and goals are articulated<sup>4</sup>. Today, provincial and territorial educational systems measure their educational quality against indicators of student achievement and high school completion rates. These statistics paint a general and aggregate picture of high levels of educational quality and equity. However, when the data are disaggregated, it becomes evident that certain regions and population groups are exposed to lower levels of educational quality and equity.

In 2007-2008, there were 5.11 million students enrolled in about 15,500 Canadian public (BROCKINGTON, 2010: 6) with over 327,000 students graduating in the same calendar year (*ibid*: 9). Graduation rates varied across the provinces and territories with 84.3% for Prince Edward Island and 32% for Nunavut, as demonstrated by the graph below.

The graduation rate at the Canada level in 2007-2008 was higher for females (74.8%) than for males (67.5%) (BROCKINGTON, 2010: 10). Dropout rates have decreased from 16.6% in 1990-1991 to 8.5% in 2009-2010 (GILMORE, 2010). However, there are variations with the territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut) experiencing higher drop out rates than the rest of the provinces (*ibid.*). Nunavut had the highest dropout rates at

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1, Understanding Education Quality, in UNESCO's EFA Global Monitoring Report provides a very good overview of the differing conceptualizations of educational quality.



50%. Aboriginal youth living off-reserve experience higher dropout rates than the rest of the population at 22.6% (*ibid.*).

Canada's educational systems are well resourced providing students with opportunities to succeed in achieving their educational goals. Even though educational enrolments are in decline, the total number of educators increased with 333,000 educators employed in 2007-2008. The Canada student-educator ratio in 2007-2008 was 14.4 students per educator (BROCKINGTON, 2010: 14).

Educational expenditures are also increasing amounting to \$51.2 billion in 2007-2008, up 2.9% from a year earlier and 28.6% since 2001-2002 (BROCKINGTON, 2010: 15). Average expenditure per student was \$10,678 across Canada in 2007-2008. Compared with other OECD countries, Canada allocates a larger share of its GDP to educational institutions — 6.2% compared with the OECD average of 5.7% (STATISTICS CANADA and CMEC, 2009).

In general, Canadian students perform well in school. Canada's ranking in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000, 2003 and 2006<sup>5</sup> has been relatively high. In PISA 2006, Canadian students' performance in science was one of the highest with only Finland and Hong Kong-China performing better than Canada on the combined science scale (HRSDC, STATISTICS CANADA and CMEC, 2007: 14). Provincial results show that Alberta performed better than the Canadian average and Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia performing as well as the Canadian average (*ibid.*: 20). The federal government funds provincial participation in the OECD PISA. The data provide the federal government with comparative indicators to measure the performance of provincial educational systems across Canada (MORGAN, 2009).

Another assessment that is used to measure educational quality at the national level is the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP). PCAP is administered to only 13 year olds, 2 years before they are destined to take the PISA. As with the PISA, the PCAP tests student learning in reading, science and mathematics. It focuses on one major domain every three years. Reading was the major domain for the first PCAP, which took place in 2007

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<sup>5</sup> PISA 2009 results will be released in December 2010.

(MORGAN, 2009: 9). PCAP results indicate that Quebec students scored highest followed by Ontario. Among all the provinces and territories, the Atlantic provinces scored the lowest.

### **3.1. Comprehensive secondary schools**

Before the 1960s, Canada's secondary schools created internal differentiations among academic, general, and vocational educational programs. Students were allocated to these programs according to their aptitudes, abilities, and achievements (MANZER, 1994: 149). In the 1960s and 70s, three provincial reports influenced the trajectory of educational reform across Canada. These included reports produced by the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec (Parent Commission); the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives in the Schools of Ontario (Hall-Dennis Committee); and, the Commission on Educational Planning in Alberta (Worth Commission). Each commission made proposals for a comprehensive reform of school organization and curriculum in their respective provinces (MANZER, 1994).

The Parent Commission's recommendations were aimed at making secondary education truly accessible to all youth by diversifying and integrating educational programs. It proposed reorganizing Quebec's education system into six years of elementary school, five years of secondary school, and two years of post-secondary 'institute'. In grades 9 to 11, students would choose their electives based on their "individual learning needs" (PARENT COMMISSION, quoted in MANZER, 1994: 152), whether they were pursuing job preparation or further academic or technical studies. However, once students were in grades 12 or 13, they would then enrol in 'institutes' that combined pre-university and vocational education (MANZER, 1994: 152). Today, Quebec's secondary school system is characterized by the CEGEPs (Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel) which offer a two-year general academic program for university preparation and a three-year technical-vocational program leading directly to employment. In Ontario, the Hall-Dennis Commission recommended a "learning continuum". This would constitute a unified

school period of thirteen years without horizontal or vertical divisions such as elementary and secondary or academic and vocational (MANZER, 1994).

### **3.2. Reforming education in the 1990s**

Educational reforms of the 1970s and 1980s focused on the individual's self-development. Secondary schools implemented curricula designed to address the individual needs of students. However, this form of humanistic education came under attack as industrialized countries experienced the effects of a global economy and the restructuring of their economies. Government policies increasingly focused on lowering income taxes, decreasing expenditures, balancing budgets and instituting accountability structures (BASU, 2004). These policy approaches were also applied to Canada's educational systems in the 1990s. Rather than framing educational goals in humanistic terms, policy makers were concerned with setting goals that reflected the economic returns to education particularly in ensuring "economic competitiveness and individual employability" (MANZER, 1994: 216).

Under the Conservative government of Ralph Klein, Alberta was the first province to institute significant educational reforms. Between 1993 and 1995, the Klein government cut educational budgets while at the same time it centralized funding; it amalgamated school boards; it made school councils mandatory; it legislated permitting charter schools; and it increased reporting and standardized testing (TAYLOR, 2000: 95). In Ontario, similar reforms were put in place under the Conservative government of Mike Harris. As part of its Common Sense Revolution, the Harris government reduced the powers of school boards, mandated a standardized curriculum and put in place province-wide testing of students (BASU, 2004). The secondary school program was shortened from five to four years, comprising grades 9 to 12. The reform also included a grade 10 literacy test, which students would have to pass in order to graduate, and a required 40 hours of community volunteering activities (ZEGARAC and FRANZ, 2007).

Today's secondary school systems reflect a combination of humanistic and instrumental approaches to education. As an example, the Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty, which was elected in Ontario in 2003, continued with many of the Harris government's reforms. However, its

approach was more conciliatory and less confrontational, particularly with the teachers' unions (MORGAN, 2006). One of the first things that the McGuinty government did was to revoke controversial legislation that would have instituted teacher assessments. Instead of cutting budgets, the McGuinty government expanded school boards' educational budgets in order to ensure smaller class sizes.

In terms of providing students with an individualized curriculum, the McGuinty government put in place a strategy entitled, 'Student Success / Learning to 18'. The strategy's goal included increasing high school graduating rates and engaging students in structured learning until age 18 or until graduation (ZEGARAC and FRANZ, 2007). One of the Strategy's initiatives offers high school students a customizable curriculum that meets their individual learning needs. Students can enrol in one of the Specialist High Skills Majors such as Arts and Culture, Energy or Transportation<sup>6</sup>. Students graduating from one of these majors can pursue an apprenticeship, college<sup>7</sup> or university education.

#### **4. TEACHER EDUCATION**

In Canada, teaching is regarded as a professional activity. From this vantage point, teachers acquire specialized knowledge in their profession through post-secondary education and apply this knowledge in practice. Even though the teaching profession is provincially managed through a certification process, Canadian post-secondary institutions play a dominant role in educational governance (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2009; YOUNG, HALL and CLARKE, 2007: 85). More specifically, teachers' education in university Faculties of Education are characterized by three components: they are centres of expertise underpinned by a theoretical perspective; they are centres of research and scholarship which provide a basis for improved professional practice; and, they are centres for maintaining a critical tradition (YOUNG, HALL and CLARKE, 2007: 85).

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<sup>6</sup> See the publication, Specialist High Skills Major, available at: [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/studentssuccess/pathways/shsm/shsm\\_act\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/studentssuccess/pathways/shsm/shsm_act_sheet.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The term "college" in refers to career-oriented post-secondary institutions which issue diplomas and certificates, unlike universities which issue degrees, e.g., BA, BSc and graduate degrees.

Each province is responsible for regulating its system for educating teachers. For example, in order to teach in Ontario, one would need to obtain an Ontario teaching certificate from the Ontario College of Teachers. This certificate requires an undergraduate degree and one year of teacher education. Ontario universities also offer Bachelor of Education programs. Similarly, in British Columbia, the BC College of Teachers regulates the teaching profession. In other provinces, it is the department of education that is responsible for teacher certification. For example, in Québec, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport is responsible for teacher certification. The Teacher Development and Certification Branch of Alberta's Ministry of Education (Alberta Education) is responsible for the evaluation of credentials and issuance of certification for teachers in Alberta.

The federal government is encouraging labour mobility across provinces and territories through the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT). Compliance with the AIT would ensure that certified teachers can move between provincial jurisdictions and can have access to employment opportunities in the teaching profession. However, concerns have been raised that the model being pursued for AIT narrowly focuses on occupational standards and competencies that are grounded in training versus an educational orientation to teacher preparation. Such an approach could lead to alternative programs outside the university being created for teacher education thus undermining the professional status that Canadian teachers have (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2009).

One of the special features of the teacher education system in Canada is that it reflects a "moral and political expression of each province for the education of their children" that goes beyond training and technical requirements (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2009). The responsibility for education is entrenched constitutionally with the provinces. By moving towards standardizing teacher education across Canada, there is a risk that provinces begin to relinquish autonomy over educational matters, especially those relating to teacher education.

## **5. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND CHALLENGES**

Broadly speaking, provincial and territorial public education systems are founded on principles of public accessibility and equality, public funding,

and public control (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2008). It is these elements that strengthen Canada's systems of education. At the same time, Canada's systems of education are not uniform but are diverse. This allows for experimentation to occur within each system and the adoption of promising practices. Since provinces have jurisdiction over education, they are able to create a public school system that reflects its specific "demographic, cultural and regional character" (HENLEY and YOUNG, 2009).

An area of tension that exists in the Canadian school system is the struggle over decentralization versus centralization of educational decisions (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998). Primary authority for education resides with the provincial legislature. However, considerable authority is delegated to school boards. Such a situation creates tension between provincial and local interests. There are tendencies to centralize authority at the provincial level. For example, provincial educational systems have in place standardized curricula that are developed by ministries of education. In contrast, countries such as Finland allow for more local autonomy in determining school curricula (RÄSÄNEN, no date).

A second challenge that educational systems face is deciding how to allocate professional authority — should teachers and administrators or parents and community members be able to determine school affairs (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998). By instituting provincial student testing, parents can exercise more choice in their children's schooling based on these results. Another mechanism for addressing parental choice is by creating charter schools. Charter schools are funded by government but with local parent committees deciding the school's philosophy or focus. Only Alberta has permitted the creation of charter schools.

Another challenging area education systems face is in resolving tensions between uniformity and diversity (YOUNG and LEVIN, 1998). In Canada's systems of education, language and religious rights of those who first settled Canada — the French and the British — were addressed constitutionally. However, as Canada becomes increasingly diverse, how will provincial and territorial systems address issues of language and religion?

Teacher diversity is another dimension that has to be addressed. Educational systems need to employ teachers from various ethnic and religious communities that reflect Canada's diverse society. However, the

integration of immigrant teachers has been very slow. Despite better qualifications than Canadian-born teachers, visible minority and Aboriginal teachers are severely under-represented in the teaching labour force. It appears that there is a tendency to exclude non-Whites immigrants and linguistic minorities in the teaching profession (RYAN, POLLOCK and ANTONELLI, 2009).

Improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students is one of the most important challenges facing provincial and federal governments. Aboriginal students' graduation levels must increase to ensure they have access to the same employment opportunities as the majority population. Otherwise, Aboriginal people will continue to have lower incomes and higher unemployment rates compared with the rest of the population. More specifically, Aboriginal people with a high school diploma or higher had significantly better labour market outcomes than those without one (SHARPE and ARSENAULT, 2009). In addition, access to post-secondary education for Aboriginal students must also be improved. Part of the problem is the lack of funding. In 1996, the federal government put in place a 2% cap on funding increases for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. This has translated into First Nations youth being denied access to higher education with a 20% decline in enrolment between 1999-2000 and 2008-2009 (ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS, 2010: 7).

One of the weaknesses of Canada's systems of education is the lack of universal child care provision. Each province and territory is responsible for developing its own child care system. Quebec is the only province which provides universal childcare for its residents. Ontario has begun to provide parents with a pre-school option. As of 2010, Ontario will provide full-day learning opportunities for four— and five-year-olds. The province is investing \$200 million in 2010-11 and \$300 million in 2011-12 (ONTARIO MINISTRY OF FINANCE, 2010).

Preserving the character of Canada's public school system as publicly funded institutions is paramount to working towards equality of opportunity for all Canadians. Furthermore, ensuring that Canadian teachers are respected for their professionalism helps to uphold high quality educational institutions. Despite the pressures to make Canada's public education systems more market-oriented, there has been little enthusiasm for adopting practices such

as vouchers, charter schools and merit pay for teachers. This dominant discourse is being contested by other narratives from institutions such as teachers' unions, left-leaning think tanks and academics. When it comes to higher education institutions, there has been an expansion of privately-run institutions. In addition, tuition rates have gone up for students resulting in increased debt loads. Finally, universities are developing attractive programs for students in order to increase their enrolments while at the same time employing a larger number of contract instructors to teach their courses (MORGAN, 2008).

## **6. CONCLUSION: TACKLING EDUCATION EQUALITY AND SOCIETAL INEQUALITY**

Canada's systems can be described as equitable and of high quality. At the same time, not all Canadians achieve the same learning outcomes nor do they benefit equally from attending educational institutions. There are several areas that require improvement in Canada's educational systems. The fact that Canada does not have a universal child care system implies children at a young age will have differential access to quality child care. This does not only impact children's well-being but it also creates barriers to employment for parents, particularly single mothers. Another area that requires attention is addressing educational equity for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal students have lower high school completion rates and are less likely to graduate from a post-secondary institution compared with the general population. A third area that requires attention and that has begun to weaken the public nature of education in Canada is the adoption of market-like practices particularly in the post-secondary education sector. Finally, given Canada's growing diverse student population, the teaching workforce needs to become more inclusive and reflect this diversity.

The data also demonstrate that a proportion of the Canadian population continues to live in poverty. Indicators point to growing disparities between low income and high income Canadians. It appears that in order to ensure all students reap the same benefits from public education, interventions and supports need to be established at the community level that help address local living conditions and economic opportunities.



John Porter, one of Canada's leading sociologists, examined the relationship between education and inequality. His work led him to differentiate between educational opportunity that provides equal access and the effects of education which were not necessarily equal. Although Porter had believed that a more equal society could be attained through educational equality, he later admitted that educational reforms may not be enough to achieve equality —“The crucial point is that education has failed to equalize. Perhaps it was naïve to think that it might have or that educational reform alone was sufficient to deal with the basic structure of inequality, which in its consequence is much more pervasive and deep rooted than we think” (PORTER, quoted in CLEMENT, 1987: xxiv).

It is precisely because inequality is “pervasive” and “deep rooted” that educational researchers must work towards developing sophisticated research to help inform educational policy decisions. Educational statistics need to be combined with other sources of information to paint a complex and integrated picture of inequality. If the educational policy goals are to improve educational outcomes for all students then a clear understanding of the barriers children and youth face must be attained. One approach is to develop analyses based on information-rich resources. For example, the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy has carried out sophisticated research by linking education, income assistance, and child welfare system data to the health data it maintains (ROOS, BROWNELL and FULLER, 2010). The data were presented by geographic residence, showing the critical relationship between socioeconomic status and children's educational outcomes” (*ibid.*: 397). When policymakers and decision-makers see this evidence, they are more likely to put in place programs that are multi-dimensional. Such programs are not solely focused on increasing grades but they provide the support students need in their communities (*ibid.*: 397). Similar approaches to data analyses need to be adopted by all the provinces and territories to help ensure that educational outcomes for all Canadian students are being successfully attained.

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