

# EARLY LITERACY SUCCESS: A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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**WHEN CHILDREN AT RISK** RECEIVE THE SUPPORT NECESSARY TO DEVELOP LITERACY SKILLS EARLY IN THEIR SCHOOL CAREER, THEY CLOSE THE GAP WITH MORE ADVANTAGED PEERS.

CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ARE FRAMED BY CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL and historic conditions that mean different things to different people at different times. Today, definitions of social justice vary widely with mandates ranging from the eradication of poverty and the provision of inclusive schooling to the ordination of women. Whatever the mandate, equity and fairness are common tenets of social justice movements that are manifested in broad goals such as equality for all, a fair distribution of resources, achievement of the greatest good for the greatest number, and enhancement of the life conditions of marginalized citizens.

In Canada, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognizes every individual as equal before and under the law, and provides for affirmative action programs to ameliorate the 'conditions of disadvantaged individuals'. While the equality rights section of the Charter does offer a mechanism to redress inequity, inequality persists, particularly for those from low socio-economic backgrounds. This inequity is readily apparent in our public education system, a series of provincially governed institutions entrusted with the mandate to prepare Canadian children for their future roles as citizens and workers. However, one in five of those children lives in conditions of poverty. The degree of child poverty in Canada is well documented, as are its negative educational consequences.<sup>1</sup> In comparison with advantaged peers, children living in poverty are more likely to enter school with deficits in language and school readiness skills<sup>2</sup> and are more likely to present with cognitive and behavioural difficulties,<sup>3</sup> or with other limitations that impede school learning.<sup>4</sup> Inequity between advantaged and disadvantaged children is apparent at school entry, remains unchanged throughout the school career, and is maximally evident as each cohort exits the school system.<sup>5</sup> Thus, although schooling is publicly funded and universally available, educational results continue to diverge along socio-economic lines. The issue, then, is not having equal access to education, but deriving equal results from the educational experience.

## **THERE IS NOW CONVERGING RESEARCH EVIDENCE THAT CHILDREN WHO ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY IN LEARNING TO READ CAN BE IDENTIFIED IN KINDERGARTEN, AND THAT MOST READING DIFFICULTIES CAN BE PREVENTED.**

In a literate and democratic society, literacy achievement is one result of education that has a compelling impact on both academic and life-course outcomes. Strong literacy skills are requisite to curricular access and academic achievement during the school years, to post-secondary education and training in young adulthood, and to participation in the cultural, economic, and civic life of the community during the adult years. The attainment of strong literacy skills is fundamental to educational equity and is an essential first tier in the defence against social class segregation. Although weak literacy skills occur across all economic strata, children from minority groups and those living in conditions of poverty are disproportionately represented in the 40 percent of Grade 4 students who struggle with reading.<sup>6</sup> While there are no magic bullets in education, it is our opinion that schools can most effectively ensure that students achieve more equitable results by front-loading resources to teach children to read early and well. This opinion is based on both our practical experience as educators, and on research evidence showing that most reading difficulties can be prevented when they are identified early and when identification is followed by timely and appropriate intervention.

In the following sections, we briefly discuss the roots of educational disparity, the components of a preventive early intervention approach, and the contribution of a preventive approach to amelioration of inequity. We also offer the opinion that the prevention of reading difficulties is not only a worthwhile goal, but a social obligation, and that improving literacy skills is not just about raising reading scores, it is a matter of social justice.

## **INSTEAD OF BEING EXPECTED TO DO MORE WITH LESS, SCHOOLS SHOULD BE EXPECTED TO DO LESS, BUT DO IT BETTER... SCHOOLS CAN BEST BENEFIT SOCIETY AND BEST REDRESS SOCIAL INEQUITY BY DOING WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT AND WHAT THEY ARE UNIQUELY EQUIPPED TO DO: TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ EARLY AND WELL.**

### **ROOTS OF EDUCATIONAL DISPARITY**

Most children make the transition to formal schooling already oriented toward success or failure. Children without a secure language background are more likely to have poor school readiness skills and are less likely to meet with success in the early school years. Children of advantaged families are more likely to enter school with greater cognitive maturity, higher readiness skills, and a far greater level of parental support.<sup>7</sup> The longer they stay in school, the wider the gap becomes. Research suggests that even though disadvantaged students make progress during the school year, their summer drop-off in learning is sharp because resources and supports are not available to foster learning during out-of-school time.<sup>8</sup> Thus, if early language

learning is insufficient, if difficulties arise during the primary grades, and if these difficulties are not addressed, the literacy trajectories of disadvantaged children will diverge further from that of same-age peers and become increasingly resistant to change.

Given the demands on children during their transition to formal schooling and the challenges they face early in their academic careers, schools must intervene early if they are to influence the academic outcomes and, ultimately, the life trajectories of children who enter schools with deficits in language and school readiness skills. Timing is crucial since learning trajectories are established early in the school career, early achievement deficits are cumulative, and early rankings persist.<sup>9</sup> However, there is now converging research evidence that children who encounter difficulty in learning to read can be identified in kindergarten, and that most reading difficulties can be prevented.<sup>10</sup>

### **PREVENTION OF READING DIFFICULTIES**

Prevention is the most effective strategy because when children at risk receive the support necessary to develop literacy skills early in their school career, they close the gap with more advantaged peers. They then engage in successful encounters with print from an early age and experience increased literacy and language growth, all of which enables them to keep on track in the development of subsequent literacy skills. Keeping on track in early literacy learning is vital. Children must learn to read during the first few years of school because by Grade 3 they are expected to read in order to learn. Their proficiency in reading will



determine how well they access curriculum across the content areas; how well they do academically, and to some extent socially, during the school years; and ultimately, how well most of them will do in life.

We must heed current research and design literacy interventions that begin to level the learning field for all children the moment they enter school. Ideally, those interventions would begin prior to kindergarten with school-community partnerships and high quality early childhood education.<sup>11</sup> However, working within the K-12 mandate of most school systems, we must redirect our efforts and resources away from ineffective strategies such as early grade retention to empirically validated and cost-effective approaches such as preventive early intervention. A preventive approach identifies children with literacy learning difficulties as early as kindergarten, intervenes to bring them 'on track', and stems the cycle of failure and disengagement.

Contemporary approaches to preventive early intervention generally consist of the three tiers suggested by the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children.<sup>12</sup> The *primary preventive* tier is excellent, integrated classroom literacy instruction delivered to all children as soon as they enter school. Primary prevention ensures that all children are provided high quality literacy instruction by well trained and well supported teachers who skilfully integrate literacy fundamentals with active, engaging, and meaning-making activities.

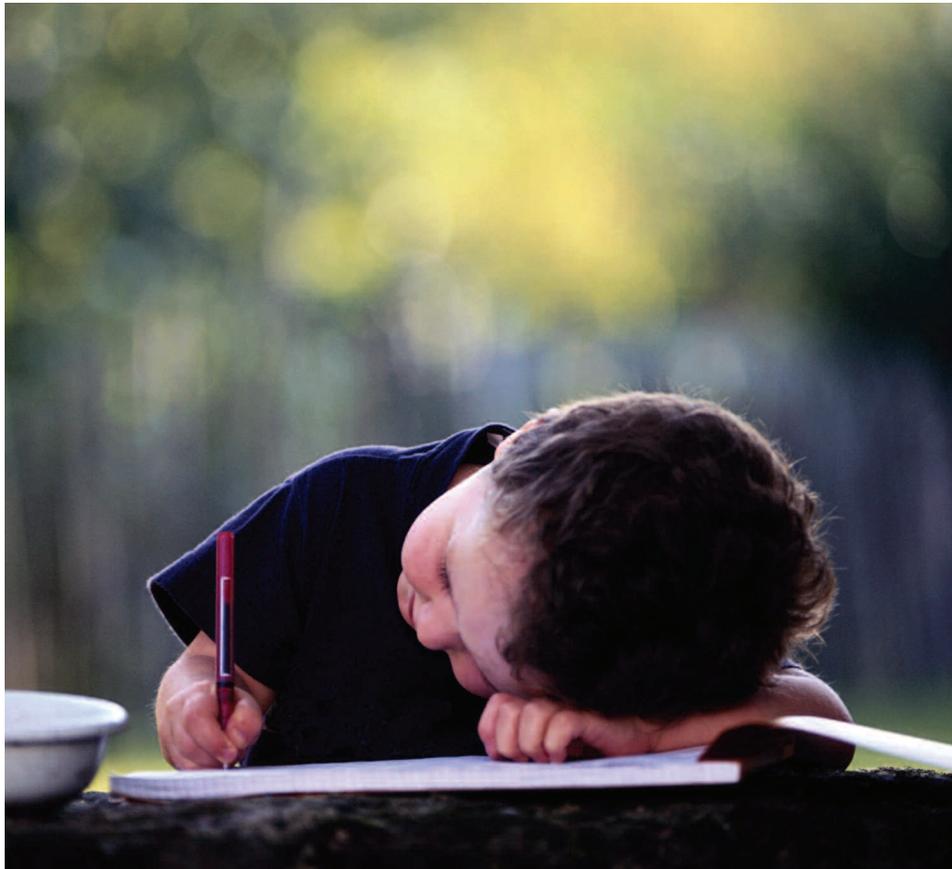
A quality high-calibre curriculum delivered to all children ensures that the learning bar is raised for everyone. However, because disadvantaged children and those with learning difficulties enter school with deficits in language and readiness skills, levelling the learning bar requires greater preventive efforts for these children. To redress past inequity, and to mitigate future inequities, a *secondary preventive* tier allocates added resources to enhance the learning opportunities of children who, because of disability or disadvantage, encounter more challenges in learning to read. Secondary prevention requires that schools become proactive by identifying 'at-risk' children early and intervening before failure occurs.

A third or *tertiary preventive* tier is intended to address the literacy learning needs of students who do not make adequate progress even with excellent literacy instruction and supplementary support, those for whom primary and secondary preventive efforts have been inadequate. These children may require further diagnostic assessment to characterize the nature of their learning difficulty, and specialized intervention in addition to classroom instruction. Such tertiary interventions typically include intensive augmentative instruction and support delivered by highly trained personnel.

## CONCLUSION

In framing early literacy instruction within a social justice model, we acknowledge that schools cannot, and should not, be expected to cure all social ills. School outcomes are influenced by factors in the home and community, as well as by what happens at school, and efforts to improve the educational achievement of children must focus on the society and community, as well as the school. However, there are many alterable factors that are within the control of the school system. Literacy is an alterable factor. Schools

**EN BREF** La prévention des difficultés dans l'apprentissage de la lecture est une question de justice sociale. L'incapacité de lire avec facilité est tout autant « un vestige d'une iniquité passée que le présage d'une iniquité future ». S'il est vrai que l'on observe dans toutes les couches socioéconomiques des enfants qui ont de la difficulté à lire, un nombre disproportionné d'entre eux sont issus de groupes minoritaires ou de foyers économiquement défavorisés. Or, c'est en se basant sur des recherches qui indiquent clairement que l'intervention préventive rapide est à la fois une démarche efficace et sensée sur le plan pédagogique que les écoles peuvent le mieux redresser les iniquités sociales et cela, en faisant un travail qui leur sied bien, c'est-à-dire enseigner aux enfants à lire avec compétence, dès le début de leur scolarisation.



can change the language and literacy trajectories of many children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but that change must occur early in the school career.

With this mandate in mind, we suggest that instead of being expected to do more with less, schools should be expected to do less, but do it better. In our opinion, schools can best benefit society and best redress social inequity by doing what is most important and what they are uniquely equipped to do: teaching children to read early and well. While preventive early intervention during grades K-2 is the most effective way to reduce the rate of reading failure for all children, it holds the greatest promise for those who are disadvantaged. Prevention is crucial because early skill deficits foreshadow low literacy levels and academic underachievement, which are in turn associated with negative life-course outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, disadvantage is transmitted from one generation to the next, thereby perpetuating the cycle of low literacy, low achievement, and low socio-economic status.

The institutions of society reflect its aspirations.<sup>14</sup> Schools can better reflect Canada's commitment to equity and inclusivity by equalizing educational opportunity for disadvantaged children at an early age. Research clearly

shows that preventive early intervention is cost-effective and educationally sound. All Canadians pay in the long run if we do not heed the research evidence. We pay in the failure of our students, the limitations of their future prospects, their reduced participation in our economic, cultural and civic life, their higher rates of incarceration, and the increased likelihood of propagating a new at-risk generation. Poor literacy skills are as much a cause of poverty as they are a consequence of poverty. Poor literacy skills are reflective of past inequity, and are predictive of future inequity. Poor literacy skills curtail participation in every facet of our democratic society. Hence, improving literacy outcomes is not just about raising reading scores; it truly is a matter of social justice. |

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#### Notes

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# Italian Campaign Victory in Europe D-Day Liberation of Holland



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