



Sign of the Times: Through the Lens of the Pandemic

Educational Inequality Canada and UK

With the onset of the global pandemic, the closure of schools in the UK and Canada is fraught now with questions about the unknown effects of Covid-19, particularly on children and youth. This is accompanied by great uncertainties about how and when to re-open schools in ways that children will be safe.ⁱ The closure of our schools necessitated by Covid-19, as well as the rise of online learning have amplified the many, chronic inequalities in our educational systems. Online learning *can* work if you have access to technology and the internet. Online learning *can* work if you have parents or other adults at home who have sufficient education and language skills to help you with your assignments. Online learning *can* work if you are not living with a front-line worker or other adult with whom you must observe social distancing. Online learning *can* work if you do not have psychosocial, physical, behavioral, or emotional challenges that require face-to-face contact in a special learning environment. Online learning *can* work if you are well fed and do not miss the daily breakfast and lunch your school provides for you. Online learning *can* work if you live where you have space and quiet to work on assignments. Online learning *can* work if you are a self-motivated and diligent student. Among all these concerns is the major challenge of how online learning can work when businesses reopen, parents return to work outside the home, schools remain closed, and daycare services continue to be closed. How *will* online learning work when parental or adult supervision is not possible?

The current population of Canada is approximately 38 million and the current population of the UK is approximately 67 million. In both countries, educational disparities are furthered by the ever-expanding income gap. While 14.8 million children are living in poverty in the UK, and 3.2 million are similarly disadvantaged in Canada, a relatively small percentage of children in both countries are the beneficiaries of privately funded schools, which have abundantly more resources than the UK State schools, or the Canadian public schools. These advantages include the areas of academics, class size, access to technology, cultural enrichment, music, art, sports extra-curricular activities, and community involvement,. To add insult to injury, private schools in Canada can be tax havens for parents who can benefit from Revenue Canada Grants meant to offset childcare costs for children up to age 16.ⁱⁱ This is not the case for parents of children who attend public school.

In Canada, shameful educational disparities especially plague our First Nations communities. The median income of Canada's Indigenous population, aged 25 to 54, is estimated to be \$11,000 lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, the employment ratio is 14.3 percentage points lower for First Nations individuals than for others. Thus, it should not be surprising that the 2011 postsecondary education graduation rate of First Nations youth was only 35.3 percent. Compare this to the 78 percent graduation of their non-Indigenous counterparts. Moreover, income inequality and the educational disparities associated with it are further aggravated when we differentiate between First Nations living on and off reserves.ⁱⁱⁱ Comparable statistics, or worse, are reflected in educational inequities in the UK and Canada with respect to the children of our refugees, immigrants, migrants, visible minorities, low-income families, single-parent households with an hourly wage-earner (often female). In general, there is a lack of equal opportunities for girls and young women to finish their education.

The growing accumulation of student post-secondary debt is reaching outstanding proportions. In Canada, as of the 2016/2017 school year, Canada Student Loans (CSL) was administering a portfolio of \$18.2 billion dollars in loans to more than 1.7 million borrowers.^{iv} These loans and the spread of Covid-19 mean most graduates and students now face life without employment, or any source of income to meet their basic needs, let alone pay their debts. The UK forecasts that interest on debts being accrued will rise from £4.2bn to £8.6bn a year by 2024.^v Again, with the spread of Covid-19,

such debt presents a bleak future for students and graduates facing unemployment and the lack of income with which to pay their debts.

It is hoped that soon we will be making our way to physical and economic recovery from this pandemic. What can we do to be present to, as well as support, our children and youth as they navigate returning to school amid the possibility of masks on their faces, a taped space of social distancing around their desks, and isolation rules and regulations for when they go out to play? What can we do to help young adults navigate education in a world of post-economic collapse? How can Covid-19 motivate us to ensure the vision of inclusive and equitable quality education, while promoting life-long learning opportunities for all, as stated in UN Sustainable Development Goal #4.^{vi}

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-51643556> ;

https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/18/keeping-schools-closed-in-england-will-widen-educational-inequalities-study-ifs?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/statcan-says-3-2-million-living-in-poverty-including-566-000-children-1.4824546>)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.opencanada.org/features/inequality-explained-hidden-gaps-canadas-education-system/>

^{iv} <https://www.hoyes.com/press/joe-debtor/the-student-debtor/>

^v <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/aug/12/graduates-in-england-face-increasing-debt-burden-labour-warns>

^{vi} <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>