

The Inequality Project

Non-governmental tools for teaching economic inequality in the classroom

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Abstract

Economic inequality is a growing problem in North America, and the results are visible in neighbourhoods, cities, and across state and provincial lines. It is vital to understand this phenomenon in our societies. The first step towards widespread understanding of the issue could be in our own backyards: by teaching about economic inequality in high schools across Canada and the USA. But, is this a topic that is explicitly mandated in government curricula?

The Inequality Project is offering the first in-depth study into where, why, and how high schools in Canada and the United States of America teach about the subject of economic inequality. This portion of the project will examine what alternative curricula, resources, tools, and frameworks have been proposed to facilitate learning about economic inequality. Resources from teaching groups and topic groups will be collected to discover what type of non-governmental tools exist for assisting with the teaching of this complex subject. This research will assist the long-term goals of The Inequality Project by providing a selection of approaches and learning objectives that reflect the positions and interests of civil society in youth knowledge. As well, it will postulate alternatives to the current government curricula and challenge the status quo of learning for students in North America.

Results

There are few prominent patterns displaying specific themes or predominant concepts within the resources analyzed. There is a lack of references to some economic actors and concepts around inequality, such as very few references to the role of unions or labour movements, and only one mention of financial literacy over all the documents.

Poverty was mentioned most frequently, appearing 82 times among the 54 pages of resources. This is one of the main concepts presented as an issue related to inequality.

Few resources extensively discussed the issues with economic disparity and poverty, rather focused on the issues with poverty. Few looked at other consequences of inequality, but of those who did, some mentioned spending beyond resources to attempt to equalize themselves, and lack of economic mobility.

The resources explained many common sources of inequality, most frequently citing structural causes. This includes systemic, historic, governmental and political reasons.

Five of the seven resources presented strategies to address economic inequality. Those which did not were purely identification based resources which did not extend beyond simplistic identification of the issue. Some of these strategies include: reforms to education, job creation, government policies, income assistance, and increased economic growth.

Introduction

This project takes on the search for alternative resources that teach about economic inequality, which are available in the public domain for teachers' use in the classroom.

It only includes resources found which are intended specifically for classrooms in Canada and the USA, for high-school level students.

This project examines non-governmental curriculum and classroom resources to examine the propositions and suppositions of civil society when discussing economic inequality.

Title of Resource	Type of Resource	Organization
Socially-based Curriculum Unit: Stop Poverty - We Have What it Takes	Lesson Plan and PowerPoints	Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
A Historical Primer on Economic (In)Equality	Reading Primer and Writing Prompts	Teaching Tolerance
Class in Session: Why Aren't All Countries Rich?	Teacher's Primer on Poverty, Classroom Activity Suggestions	Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond
Income Inequality Measuring the Gap	PowerPoint Slides	Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (DataPost)
WebQuest- What Is Poverty and Who Are the Poor?	Lesson Plan for a WebQuest	Foundation for Teaching Economics
Gini in a Bottle: Some Facts on Income Inequality	Primer on inequality, student activities, lesson plan	Economic Education Group of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis
Economic Inequality in America: Developing a New War on Poverty	New York Times Articles, Activities, Video	The Learning Network (NYT Blog)

Table 1: List of resources analyzed

Title of Resource	Topic Foci	Pages in Document	Economic Inequality (Explicit)	Income Inequality	Poverty	Government Role in Economy	Results of EI	Strategies to Address EI
Socially-based Curriculum Unit: Stop Poverty - We Have What it Takes	Poverty; International; Geography;	8	0	0	36	2	3	5
A Historical Primer on Economic (In)Equality	History of Poverty; Politics of Poverty; Economics; Social Justice	8	1	0	3	11	6	13
Class in Session: Why Aren't All Countries Rich?	Poverty; Development; Inequality; Economics	8	0	3	15	5	2	6
Income Inequality Measuring the Gap	Household Income Inequality	6	0	4	0	0	0	0
WebQuest- What Is Poverty and Who Are the Poor?	Poverty; Definitions of Poverty	5	0	0	13	2	2	0
Gini in a Bottle: Some Facts on Income Inequality	Income Inequality; Economics;	12	0	12	0	3	0	6
Economic Inequality in America: Developing a New War on Poverty	Economic Inequality; Poverty; Government Actions	7	3	0	15	5	2	6

Table 2: Selection of coding results

Methodology

This research was completed by searching with key words combining economic inequality and teaching materials, in order to find resources that have been proposed by non-governmental organizations. Based on the coding criteria developed by the research team for the review of the state and province curricula, an appropriate cross-section of categories were selected to be coded. Due to time constraints, not all documents could be coded at this time. However, as most organizations presented more than one resource, the resource most explicit in its focus on economic inequality was coded as an exemplar.

The coding was based on independent conceptual mentions of a topic, rather than by every mention of a word. Word phrasing, however, has to be exact, unless otherwise mentioned as a "general reference", where in this case, was coded for the concept, due to the extreme variance of language.

Conclusion

Non-governmental teaching aids, curricula, and lesson plans are challenging to find in the public domain. They do exist, but they vary in outlook, quality, type of resource, and learning standards used.

The resources, much like has been found so far in the state and provincial curricula, vary significantly in their content and conceptions of economic inequality, especially in their stipulations of the consequences of economic inequality, and their explanations for its existence and manifestations. The mentions of economic inequality are infrequently explicit, and are few compared to the amount of references to income inequality and poverty.

More research must be done on this topic to infer conclusions regarding the access, content, and quality of non-governmental teaching materials about economic inequality. The documents found must be analyzed further, and it will be interesting to look at the political, regional, and organizational influences on their content.

This research will eventually play a role in discovering who teaches about economic inequality in their classrooms, and what potential resources they may be using.

Selected References

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