June 2007

A Population Perspective on School Performance and Educational Testing

Repeatedly, educational performance is shown to be strongly associated with the socioeconomic characteristics of a child’s neighbourhood and with the relative levels of education, income, and occupation of the child’s family. Indeed, socioeconomic status remains the single most powerful predictor of educational and other life outcomes.

Using the Manitoba Population Health Data Repository, Noralou Roos and colleagues looked at whether typical reporting of education test results underestimates the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes. The study followed all children born in Manitoba in 1984 who remained in the province for 18 years, to assess their educational achievement according to several key socioeconomic risk factors: membership in a family receiving social assistance, affluence of neighbourhood of residence, and maternal age at child’s birth.

The Manitoba data emphasize the remarkably different levels of educational achievement across socioeconomic groups. For example, results suggest that for those children who stay in school and are not retained, the differences in achievement across socioeconomic groups are modest. Programs that keep children from disadvantaged backgrounds in school and progressing through with their peers are critically important. The data also confirm, however, that assessments of educational achievement do not capture the entire population of children who should be taking the test. This overestimates the performance of groups at risk for poor outcomes and provides distorted, inaccurate comparisons of school performance. By ignoring those children not at their age appropriate grade level and those who have dropped out, SES differences in performance are markedly underestimated.


CRISPfacts are sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through its Initiatives on the New Economy program.

Copyright © 2007 UNB Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP). All Rights Reserved.