

Review Essay / Essai Critique

An Atrophied View of Canadian Education

The State of Education in Canada

By Thomas T. Schweitzer, Robert K. Crocker, & Geraldine Gillis

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The State of Education in Canada is a light-weight contender in the current battle of educational ideas in Canadian public policy. Although each author contributes some useful insights into the current state of elementary and secondary education in Canada, the reader is offered, especially in Schweitzer's main piece, a mixture of facile assumptions, conclusions that over-run (and sometimes run over) the data presented, and selective myopia in data choice. All these problems are crowned by simplistic and frequently conflicting prescriptions (overt and implied) about how to "fix" Canadian education. Short and simple, then, this book is dangerous.

Although neither Schweitzer nor his co-authors use the term, the ghost of "excellence for all" (Alberta Education, 1991; Paquette, 1994, p. 9) haunts this volume, even though Schweitzer, at least, acknowledges variability in interest, motivation, and intelligences among students. None of the authors, however, addresses in any satisfactory way the fundamental underlying questions of whether and why the country ought to want all, or nearly all, students to complete a mostly in-school secondary program. There are, after all, reasons to believe that keeping all, or nearly all, young persons in classrooms virtually full-time until they reach 17 or 18 years of age is unsound economically, educationally, and morally (Allison, 1984; Green, 1983; Seidman, 1996). Schweitzer, however, is generally content to pledge allegiance to the traditional human-capital assumption that "learning causes earning" in a simple, generic, undifferentiated, linear way—an idea that has been roundly trashed since Blaug unveiled its doubtful assumptions and soft methodological underbelly a generation ago (Klees, 1989, p. 246).

Crocker, to his credit, does not let this key assumption pass unchallenged. He also notes that Schweitzer's facile discussion of the purposes of education

(pp. 17–19) is limited almost exclusively to two educational goals: raising the scores of Canadian students on standardized tests of mathematics and science, and keeping students in school as long as possible (p. 104). Such goals are important to Schweitzer because of his commitment to human-capital theory. Schweitzer takes for granted that more years of schooling, provided that that schooling also yields higher grades on international and national science and mathematics tests, will make students healthier, wealthier, and wiser. Here Crocker's rejoinder is important, although it fails to demonstrate fully the poverty of Schweitzer's argument.

Although Crocker outlines the "screening" and galloping credentialism arguments against the learning-causes-earning thesis of generic human-capital theory, he fails to unpack the realities hidden behind the simple fact of higher average employment incomes for secondary school graduates. Among these realities, as I point out in my analysis of Canadian census data on educational attainment and employment income data during the 1980s, are the following: (a) employment income "premiums" associated with secondary graduation are much lower for younger persons, (b) losses in real-dollar mean-employment income are greater for young persons, including secondary graduates, than for the rest of the population; (c) the probability of 20- to 24-year-old secondary graduates having no employment income increased by almost 2% from 10.6% in 1980 to 12.5% in 1990; (d) a substantial decline in the proportion of persons in the 20–29 age range with \$12,000 (1981 dollars) or more in income and a substantial increase in the proportion of those with less than \$8,000 income (Paquette, 1995a, pp. 35–36); and (e) the growing precariousness of employment, again especially for the young—including moderately well-educated young persons (Fréchet, 1993). From the point of view of an academically not-very-successful potential dropout, these and other realities (Paquette, 1994, 1995a, 1995b), which Schweitzer does not adequately consider, make the argument for staying in school much less compelling.

The strongest point in Schweitzer's text is his treatment of the international comparative achievement and School Achievement Indicators Program test data, although here Gillis seems amply justified in her charges of biased over-interpretation of these data. Schweitzer's central point that, with such high relative educational spending levels Canadians have a right to expect unusually good performance from students, is both obvious and important. Nonetheless, as Gillis insists, readers should be very wary of the type of "cognitive Olympics" (Burstein, 1992, p. xxxiii) in which Schweitzer engages in this chapter. Schweitzer, moreover, does not take account of measurement-error issues and provides no explanation of "adjustments" he made to correct for various potential incomparabilities in national data sets.

Schweitzer accepts uncritically Hanushek's (1994, 1995) "vote-counting" meta-study approach to summarizing the literature about resource effects on educational outcomes—and Hanushek's conclusion that, in the end, money does

not make a difference. In doing so, Schweitzer ignores, as Crocker observes, more sophisticated analyses of existing studies (Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994; Laine, Greenwald, & Hedges, 1995). The germ of truth in Schweitzer's argument is, of course, that money does not *necessarily* make a difference. But Hanushek's underlying point is vitally important and worth emphasizing in the Canadian context—it matters *how* money is spent. Money can make a difference, if it is spent in appropriate ways, and no money equals no service—regardless of governance or regulation.

All three contributors agree that Canada's provisions for "vocational education" are inadequate. Both Schweitzer and Gillis decry, rightly in my view, the low social status in Canada of even relatively highly skilled and intellectually demanding technological occupations. But in taking this argument further, Schweitzer's argument is contradictory. He notes that "many leading European countries retain only 25–50 percent of their 16 year olds in general education, but they have for the others good and prestigious apprenticeship programs in a multitude of professions [*sic*], often combined with formal part-time theoretical instruction" (p. 47), and contends that "by trying to be all things to all students, the North American [*sic*] education system can be said to fall between two stools: it neither stretches the academically inclined as far as they could go and as far as the best foreign school systems do, nor does it equip the more practically inclined with the needed knowledge and skills to earn a living" (p. 47). But there is every reason to doubt that even the best of integrated education-apprenticeship programs can assure decently paying jobs for most young persons. The provision of jobs for all (or most) young people appears very unlikely in face of increasing automation throughout the world.

Schweitzer, then, seems to admire those countries in which the private sector absorbs a large share of the responsibility (and costs) for preparing skilled technicians and tradespeople. But his enthusiasm points inevitably to a highly differentiated system, at least at the secondary level. In his two pages on streaming, Schweitzer seems to subscribe to the position that a more desirable state of affairs would be to "assess the true capacity of each child, . . . group [children] into classes accordingly and then set the level and speed of instruction for each in an optimal manner" (p. 82). This phraseology ignores all of the complexity in the ability grouping and streaming debates, especially the distinctions between sorting by generic "ability" and regrouping for particular subjects (Slavin, 1986, 1987, 1990). Such sloppy thinking is, unfortunately, typical of Schweitzer's text.

Schweitzer concludes his two pages on destreaming with the following ambiguous assertion: "If destreaming without deleterious consequences can be achieved at all, it can be done only by exerting the necessary effort needed to keep difference in education achievement among the students to the unavoidable minimum from Grade 1 on" (p. 83). But surely it matters what is meant by keeping differences in achievement to an unavoidable minimum. If it means

either intelligent, effective, multi-faceted interventions to avoid early reading and school failure (Slavin, 1987; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1993; Slavin, Madden, et al., 1993), or “accelerated” programs that help lagging students improve their academic performance (Levin, 1994), so much the better. If, however, it means merciless “teaching to the middle” and undermining the motivation of the best and brightest students, so much the worse.

Schweitzer’s concluding comments decrying “Robin Hood” policies and structures that might “raise . . . the achievement level of the weakest 10% of students by five percentage points at the cost of lowering the achievement of the top 10%” (p. 135) seem to place him unequivocally in the camp of those who advocate strong differentiation in educational programs, if not in the camp of those who advocate refocussing resources on the best and the brightest (and most favoured) students (e.g., the Bradley Foundation [Miner, 1995] or the Heritage Foundation [as cited in Bacharach, 1988, p. 488]). The problem here is not that Canadians should be unconcerned about such potential trade-offs (despite what the best available streaming meta-studies report), but that they should be concerned about such trade-offs within a policy context that has some regard for equity as a serious educational policy goal.

On the related issue of improving technical-vocational education, Schweitzer holds up the German model as the preferable paradigm. Yet, indulging his bent for confusion and inconsistency, he then implies that the proper place for high-level technical-vocational education is *within the school system*. He laments that the low status of such education in the eyes of Canadian parents provides “little inducement for educational policy makers to upgrade the quality and equipment of vocational courses in the public system” (p. 90). But he cannot have it both ways; either the schools should get out of the business of high-level technical vocational education and collaborate with private-sector partners in a cooperative approach similar to the German model, or the schools should continue to try to be all things to all persons (which Schweitzer specifically says they should not [p. 47]).

Schweitzer’s work is also a prime specimen of the current devaluing of equity as a serious educational policy priority and concern. His treatment of equity is largely limited to disapproval of a too-elitist system. In what may be his grandest over-simplification he reduces the potential significance of “the egalitarian streak in Canada’s social attitudes” largely to the sole and simple question of access. Aside from the apparent thinly veiled contempt for equity issues buried in the “egalitarian-streak” epithet, equity is much broader and much more complex than simple access to education. The other contributors to this volume ought to have exposed, analyzed, and rebutted in careful detail Schweitzer’s strong elitist orientation. Equity matters in public education—and will continue to matter.

Both Schweitzer and his respondents offer some bits of solid meat that help to redeem what is otherwise very thin gruel indeed. Schweitzer, for example,

insists on the central importance of student responsibility for learning (pp. 82–83)—an important and neglected point. He also raises the issue of the place of television and media in the private and academic lives of students—and *in the lives of their parents* (pp. 60–61). And Crocker is to be commended for pointing to the destructive impact of the large and growing gap between policy goal statements and what schools can reasonably be expected to do (p. 104). “Excellence for all,” of course, is but one of the most egregious cases in point. Crocker, however, flushes out only some of the perverse impacts of such fulsome, ridiculous, and occasionally oxymoronic “educational goals,” which do far more than “set . . . schools up for failure” (p. 104)—they can induce a powerful narcotic effect on the education community’s equity conscience. After all, one is “doing equity” by providing high quality for all! Quality displaces equity in a way reminiscent of one of the most chilling lines in Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*: “So we accept some things and we forget some other things and what we can’t forget we learn how to shut out of mind and we adopt the rhetoric that is required of us and we speak of ‘quality’ or ‘excellence’—not justice” (Black principal, cited in Kozol, 1991, p. 152).

In sum, the positive features of *The State of Education in Canada*, unfortunately, are counterbalanced and obscured by some remarkable banalities. Its few illuminating insights are buried in an oppressive opacity of confusion, contradiction, and non-sequiturs.

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