

How Educated are Nova Scotians? – Education Indicators for the Nova Scotia Genuine Progress Index

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How Educated are Nova Scotians?: Education Indicators for the Nova Scotia Genuine Progress Index is a document produced by GPI Atlantic and is a breath of fresh air in what has come to be called the field of educational assessment and accountability. Apart from the data and analysis circulated by government departments on student achievement and other educational indicators, a growing number of NGOs, lobby groups and even media outlets have been joining in to rate and rank educational performance of publicly funded schools and universities. These analyses are generally conceptually impoverished counting exercises that do little to help the public understand the complexity of educational processes in contemporary societies. Rather, straightforward rank-order tables with easily digestible bottom-line scores help to create the opposite impression, i.e. that education is a simple input-output, production procedure like any industrial process.

Groups like the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and the Fraser Institute have, to a large extent colonized the field with problematic school ranking schemes that essentially treat education as just another form of production that can and should be measured and represented by simple bottom line summative scores. The performance of schools measured and reported in this way is usually justified in terms of the ability of those schools to contribute to the workforce of an increasingly competitive global economy. The authors of the GPI Atlantic education indicators project understand this problem and understand how it has distorted and narrowed the popular vision of what counts as education. Authors Karen Hayward, Linda Pannozzo and Ronald Colman write:

... the last two decades have seen a surge in education indicators related to economic policy objectives in an effort to assess whether formal education in particular is contributing adequately to economic productivity and competitiveness in the global economy.
(p. 5)

In the case of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, the public is treated annually to a league table that ranks Atlantic Canadian high schools. The result is a letter grade for each school that alleges to compare the “objective” performance of each school to all others. Unfortunately, these data are widely reported in the popular media, lending credibility to the exercise. What impact this process has on schools is unknown other than that many of the province’s most challenged schools, which tend to be in the province’s

most challenged communities, are forced to waste valuable time and resources dealing with the fallout.¹

By contrast, what GPI Atlantic is proposing is a complex and nuanced set of educational indicators that seek to understand education as a complex of literacies which are crucial for both individual and social well-being today. This framework is very much in keeping with the work of Jacques Delors and UNESCO. Delors (1996) articulates a “four pillar approach” to contemporary education that involves: 1) learning to do (socialization, practicality and work preparedness), 2) learning to know (cognitive skills and foundational knowledge), 3) learning to be (psychological well-being and pro-social participation), and, 4) learning to live together (creating an inclusive, just global society). This vision of education is rather obviously more challenging and sophisticated than producing the educational equivalent of GDP. It is also much harder to measure.

Specifically, the GPI Atlantic indicators project seems to embrace the complexity and challenge of visions of education like that of Delors. Through a focus on multiple literacies² GPI Atlantic goes well beyond traditional definitions of print literacy to include scientific, health, nutritional, arts, media, civic, political, ecological, statistical and other literacies. The indicators are also sensitive to Indigenous knowledge and by the way that formal education has typically been constructed and measured as a neutral process which both ignores the culturally contested nature of knowledge and the way that identifiable equity seeking groups have been excluded from full educational participation. This level of analysis is seldom seen in educational indicators in Canada.

Rather than looking at education as a functional tool for the perpetuation of a particular kind of economy or an established set of social relations, the GPI Atlantic document positions education as a matter of transformative capacity. Drawing on the work of Canadian philosopher John McMurtry, education is understood outside the normal frames of economic contingency using the concept “principled ground” which is a vision that values education as an end in itself rather than a means to some instrumental end. Education is a question of developing a more just, responsive, compassionate, sustainable and critical citizenry. In other words, it is about fostering a better quality of life. Whether or not this is unequivocally good for economic competitiveness is to a large extent beside the point. Yet, I suspect along with Delors, that it is. GPI Atlantic’s focus on: 1) ecological literacy and sustainability, 2) the broad framework of social and economic health and well-being already developed by GPI and 3) Delors’ Four Pillars concept, seems to me to be a sound framework within which to expand the boundaries of the rather narrow conversation about what counts as education in Nova Scotia.

¹ The school ranking schemes I mention here do not actually analyze or even look at what goes on in any of the schools contained within the sample. The entire exercise is constructed from quantitative data. For a fascinating look at the “worst” school in the Fraser Institute’s league table, the CBC’s Mark Kelley (2006) spent a week in Roosevelt Park Elementary School in Prince Rupert British Columbia. Not surprisingly Kelley discovered not a dysfunctional school, but one which actually responds amazingly well to the level of educational challenge faced by teachers, administrators, parents and the children themselves.

² For an analysis of multiliteracies at the conceptual level see the New London Group (1996). The New London Group was an international group of literacy scholars who developed an idea of literacy into broader educational terrain including many of the categories delineated by GPI Atlantic.

GPI Atlantic concludes that good, comprehensive data to assess education within a broader context is not generally available in Canada. Currently available standardized tests and graduation statistics do not really tell us much about either the functional success of graduates or their ability to engage in positive, proactive social transformation. The data, which are actually presented by GPI Atlantic demonstrate a weakening commitment by all levels of government to funding education. At the postsecondary level, this has led to higher levels of student debt, causing students to work longer hours in order to survive in an increasingly privatized system of higher education. Universities have also been challenged to continue to offer quality programs with decreasing state support. In the public K-12 sector, Nova Scotia has been at or near the bottom nationally in per capita student funding. Other cited indicators include limited measures of ecological literacy, multicultural literacy (using bilingualism as an indicator for which data are available), civic/political literacy (essentially defined in terms of general historical and political knowledge), and what is called basic adult literacy (the OECD International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey or IALSS).

The challenge for GPI Atlantic is to develop and find indicators for educational questions and problems, which have not been taken particularly seriously by many governance bodies and institutions with the resources to actually measure complex educational and social phenomena. There is clearly much to be done. It is clearly easier to rely on fragmented, partial and narrow data that ignore the complexity introduced into conversations about educational assessment by considerations of social context, ecology, multiliteracies, transformative learning. It is much easier to gauge those things which can be readily measured and imagine that they are valid and complete indicators of educational “performance.” GPI Atlantic challenges such assumptions about the validity of such limited indicators. Bravo! This is exciting and important work. In my opinion this work deserves the full support of anyone or any group that is seriously interested in improving educational quality in Nova Scotia by broadening the parameters of how we understand the entire process. I am skeptical however about the extent to which governments are committed to moving beyond the simple numbers and the simplistic thinking about education that they represent.

References

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