

Educational Discrimination

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Abstract

While the research, theory and policy literature on race, class and gender discrimination in education is extensive, the problem of education-based discrimination itself has been widely overlooked. Indeed, the dominant ideologies of meritocracy and human capital (into which we are inculcated throughout our lives by schools, media and the state) proclaim that higher levels of education are and should be linked with greater reward. In a world where education is regularly invoked to legitimate inequality, it can appear nonsensical even to raise concern about education-based discrimination as a matter of social injustice. We need, however, to challenge those who have taught us not to see what has essentially become an elephant in our living room. Otherwise, we will find ourselves unable ever to use our public systems of education for universal emancipation and empowerment.

Keywords:credentials; discrimination; education-based discrimination; meritocracy

Introduction

Run a keyword search through Sociological Abstracts, ERIC or any similar online academic database for ‘education’ and ‘discrimination’ and you will come up with a list of thousands. Run the same search on Google and you will generate a list of over 50 million. But try searching on any of these sites for ‘education-based discrimination’ (or some variant) and you will find next to nothing. Among the few hits you do get will be legal experts and human resource advisors telling disappointed job-seekers that education-based discrimination is not considered discrimination in the eyes of the law, along with one anonymous letter-writer to the Washington Post who complains that ‘I couldn’t find anything online that says education-based discrimination is illegal, but it seems pretty awful to me that this is allowed’ (Garcia 2006). Education-based discrimination, at least in the world of cyberspace, simply does not exist. In the rest of the world, too, it regularly disappears from view. We talk

endlessly of class, race and gender discrimination that occur within and through education. But, too often, we forget to talk about discrimination that occurs on the basis of education itself: that is to say, on the basis of differences in individual educational status, achievement, ability, credential and/or opportunity. How can this be? On a common-sense level, at least, most of us have a pretty good suspicion that discrimination based on education does exist, and indeed, exists on a massive and everyday scale. We may think of the prejudice, false and unjust beliefs widely harboured about the uneducated and illiterate – that ‘mistaken association of literacy difficulties with ignorance, mental backwardness and social incapacity’, as Brian Street (1995, 23) puts it. Indeed, such manifestations of elitism and condescension occur all the way up the educational hierarchy, so that ‘failed academics’ may be scorned, disregarded and excluded in much the same way as are high school dropouts and the unschooled.

The problem of how discrimination is commonly defined

Two key factors have prevented easy recognition of education-based discrimination as a phenomenon and problem in its own right. The first is that the basic concept of discrimination itself is often defined as constituting the failure to base rewards and benefits upon an individual's educational (and other) accomplishments. The Free Online Dictionary, for example, defines discrimination as 'treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit', and merit as 'demonstrated ability or achievement'. Differentiation on the basis of education, in other words, is presented as that which occurs when discrimination has been successfully eliminated. Similarly, in both popular and academic discussions of the distinction between unjust and just forms of differentiation, education is one of the most widely used examples to illustrate the latter. 'Distinctions between people which are based on individual merit (such as personal achievement, skill or ability) are generally not considered socially discriminatory', says the Wikipedia entry on discrimination. David Wasserman, in his essay on the topic for the Encyclopaedia of Applied Ethics, likewise writes: 'Merit and qualification surely play a role in our understanding of discrimination: we generally do not regard it as discrimination to deny a benefit to someone because he is unqualified for it' (1998, 807). The assumption that there are certain characteristics (race, gender, etc.) on the basis of which it is always and inherently unjust to differentiate, and others (education) for which differentiation is always acceptable, however, is unsustainable (Alexander 1992). At a minimum, there are certain types of rights (human rights, for example) that are considered to be inviolable and that may not be denied anyone on the basis of any category of identity. Conversely, even for

those categories, such as race, for which differentiation is considered most objectionable, there are still going to be instances in which differential treatment and consideration may be deemed legitimate and even necessary

The problem of overlapping and proxy discrimination

The second factor that has prevented widespread recognition of education-based discrimination is that this is a type of discrimination that regularly co-occurs with other types of discrimination, notably race, class and gender: education-based discrimination has long been obscured by the overlapping shadows of these more readily acknowledged patterns of discriminatory injustice. Moreover, since differential treatment and consideration on the grounds of education is generally deemed to be just and acceptable, education-based discrimination has commonly been used as a proxy for these other types of discrimination. Voting is one of the only – perhaps the only – arenas in which it is clearly illegal to discriminate on the basis of education in the United States. The Voting Rights Act states that: No citizen shall be denied the right to vote in any Federal, State, or local election because of his failure to comply with any test or device ... The phrase 'test or device' shall mean any requirement that a person as a prerequisite for voting or registration for voting (1) demonstrate the ability to read, write, understand, or interpret any matter, (2) demonstrate any educational achievement or his knowledge of any particular subject, (3) possess good moral character, or (4) prove his qualifications by the voucher of registered voters or members of any other class.

The credentialism critique

While there has not been a fully developed theoretical, research or policy body of work addressing the issue of education-based

discrimination as such – certainly nothing approaching the work that has been done on race, class and gender discrimination in and through education – this social problem has by no means been entirely ignored either. The literature on educational theory has generated at least three essential and directly relevant critiques: the critiques of credentialism and meritocracy, and the defence of public education. Credentialism is the ideology and practice of promoting formal educational qualifications as the means for getting ahead in society and for acquiring access to positions of power and influence, high-level jobs and further learning opportunities. The critique of credentialism is that, contrary to claims of technocratic, meritocratic and human capital theories of society, formal credentials often have limited correlation with real or significant differences in individual ability, worth or potential, or with actual job requirements or performance needs. Rather, credentials tend to be used by employers and elite groups as a way to unfairly and arbitrarily screen out some individuals and subordinate groups from privileged jobs and social positions. Credentialism, it is argued, not only discriminates unfairly against those lacking credentials, but also fundamentally changes the nature of education itself, alienating learners and commodifying the entire schooling process.

The meritocracy critique

The critique of credentialism argues that discrimination on the basis of education (understood as formal credential and qualification) is unjust because educational qualifications are often arbitrary and do not map reliably onto actual or significant differences in ability or achievement – they are in some sense ‘untrue’. A more sweeping and fundamental claim is made by the critique of meritocracy. Here the argument is that even if formal

credentials are ‘true’ and do reflect genuine differences in ability or achievement, it is nevertheless unjust and arbitrary to discriminate broadly on the basis of education (understood as the combination of credential, achievement and ability) – to the degree that such discrimination leads to the creation of a second-class of citizen, determined by these citizens’ relative educational failures and shortcomings. The term ‘meritocracy’, coined by Michael Young in his 1958 novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, refers to a society that is governed and led by the best and brightest, and in which opportunities in education, employment, civil society, political office, and so on, are made available purely on the basis of talent and achievement. The ideal of meritocracy has since become a core part of common-sense belief in our society, formalized in social science through conceptual models such as human capital theory. In a meritocracy, discrimination based on race, gender, class, family and influence has all been swept away: all that is left is differential treatment and consideration based entirely on each individual’s educational merits. Despite the obvious attraction of such a (hypothetical) social order in eliminating other forms of discrimination, Young, along with other social and educational theorists who followed, was deeply critical of the education-based differentiation that remains at the heart of meritocracy as a political and social ideal. For a meritocracy is, or tends to be, a radically unequal society, in which the ‘best and brightest’ are enabled to rise to the top while the rest can be legitimately left to fall off behind. As many have by now pointed out, the equality of opportunity that is promoted by meritocratic ideology is a poor substitute in progressive politics for previous commitments to equality of social and economic outcome (Dench 2006).

The defence of public education critique

The critique of credentialism addresses the problem of education-based discrimination where education is understood as credential or qualification. The critique of meritocracy addresses education-based discrimination where education is understood primarily as ability or achievement. The defence of public education, on the other hand, addresses education-based discrimination where education is understood as opportunity: it is concerned with questions of fairness and justice in the overall distribution of educational opportunities throughout society. From this vantage point, education-based discrimination can be seen to be unjust for the additional reason that it undermines the social contract on which the very concept of public education rests. One of the core social functions of public education is, inevitably, to sort and select individuals for different jobs and types and levels of educational achievement. Our society – and any society – would not work if everybody became an MBA, LLB, PhD or MD and nothing else. Individual opportunity in education and society in general thus always ‘depends on the opportunities of others’, and educational achievement has an inescapably relational or positional as well as absolute dimension (Brown 2003, 150). It is not just what we do with our schooling that matters in determining its consequence, but what everybody around us is doing as well. The selection function in public education has been the source of some confusion in educational theory.

Why having a concept of education-based discrimination matters

Education, Alison Wolf writes, has replaced ‘socialism as the great secular faith of our age’ (2002, x). Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson (2004) talk similarly of the rise of the ‘education

gospel’. The ideology of skills and training, says Gordon Lafer, ‘has taken root as national common sense’ (2002, 210). For governments around the world, education has been embraced as a universal panacea, the way forward for individuals and societies alike to get ahead, prosper and reap rich social, cultural and economic rewards. As the protections of the welfare state have been progressively dismantled, governments are erecting in their place what are essentially new ‘education and training states’ (Mizen 1995; Peters 2001). This positive and promiscuous embrace of education, however, has a flipside: for it is not just a promise that governments are issuing to themselves and their electorates, but a threat and, indeed, a license to discriminate. Education has become the most explicit and widely used ideology worldwide to legitimate and explain away all forms of inequality. Those who do not have high levels of education no longer have the right to expect equality, full rights to participation in society, social, political and economic protection and reward, respect and dignity. In the education state, only those who are educationally accomplished can legitimately claim such things. To take a stand against education-based discrimination is not to take a stand against education. It is to insist, however, on rights and equality for everyone, no matter what their level of educational achievement, qualification, opportunity or ability; and it is to demand an end to the casual and wanton acceptance of differential treatment and consideration based on education, without any reflection as to whether such differentiation is just or discriminatory. Given the dramatic rise and rise of government-sponsored education dogma, now more than ever do we need a strong understanding of and opposition to discrimination based on education. As with all types of discrimination, education-based discrimination takes on different forms, is

engaged in by numerous kinds of actors, and variously impacts different sectors of society. Education-based discrimination bloats and distorts our schools and universities, as people are driven to pursue degrees that help them reach goals (e.g. attain jobs) for which these degrees are not strictly necessary, or to secure a basic standard and security of living to which they should have access no matter what their level of education. When employers start demanding college degrees for jobs that never used to require them, and that really have not changed all that much in the interim, this leads to costly, inefficient and irrational demands being placed on higher education. This distracts colleges and universities (and high schools) from focusing on other, important kinds of educational ends. This also cuts off alternative forms of social mobility through workplace career ladders, by introducing arbitrary ceilings and barriers that are difficult, expensive and time-consuming for individuals to have to return to formal schooling in order to navigate around.

Conclusion

The most prevalent reason for discriminating in education is due to racial disparities. Many of these discriminations are a result of past discriminations against a group of people that seems to affect their children. The most important time for children to learn cognitive abilities and for behavioural development is during the preschool years. The amount of school readiness that a child has before they enter preschool depends mostly on the child's parents. Throughout my research, I have discovered the time before a child even enters school can have a huge impact on the child's academic achievements for perhaps the rest of their life. Studies show that children who start of preschool at a disadvantage in school readiness usually fall farther back while those that start with an advantage usually pull farther ahead. In my

interview, I learned about the issues faced by underprivileged children in disadvantaged environments where learning can be difficult. The past discriminations in race have led to a disparity in economic statuses which have further put children at a disadvantage.

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