

Overcoming Disadvantage in Education by Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See. New York: Routledge, 2013. 203 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-53689-9.

The ability to improve educational outcomes for students, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is a key goal for governments, policy makers, and academics around the globe. Specifically, minimizing educational inequality for disadvantaged students continues to be the focus of copious research efforts and funding. However, as Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See demonstrate in *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education* there exists a lack of rigor and quality in many of these respective studies, which makes any policy decisions not only inadequate, but perhaps even harmful. Therefore, the authors urge the scholarly community to put an end to biased examinations of the roots of academic disadvantage and instead, point to areas where more research is needed to design effective interventions.

The aim of *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education* is three-fold. First, the authors describe where the solutions to disadvantage are located, suggesting researchers and policy makers are currently asking the wrong questions and using inappropriate, easily-biased data sources. Second, the authors adopt a social science causation model and, through the analysis of primary, secondary, and published evidence for the causes of disadvantage, conclude that very few complete, plausible and compelling models of disadvantage exist. Finally, the authors distinguish between fixed and modifiable causes of disadvantage to identify appropriate variables for targeted interventions. Fixed causes are characterized as immutable to policy (such as health or family background) and modifiable causes are those that can be influenced by interventions. The authors ability to distinguish between the two causes of disadvantage further clarifies intervention effectiveness and applicability. As such, *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education* comprehensively demonstrates the limitations of current scholarship and advances equitable interventions for disadvantaged populations.

The causation model that is utilized throughout the book provides rigorous and arguably unbiased relations between a cause for disadvantage and the manifestation of that cause. Respectively, the authors develop a causation model that holds findings to demonstrate repeatable, sequenced, and coherent mechanisms for explaining the casual link. Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See identify modifiable determinants of disadvantage, such as teacher and peer effects, segregation by poverty between schools, and student motivation and behavior to locate potential sites of intervention. After introducing the their causation model along with modifiable variables, Gorard and Huat See then square in on the roots of ineffective interventions. In chapters two and three, the authors scrutinize the poor quality of existing datasets and the lack of rigor in their application and analysis, specifically when seeking to determine factors

leading to disadvantage in education. The authors analyze the difficulties of defining and measuring variables proposed by scholars to overcome disadvantage, such as the wide array of arbitrary classifications utilized by researchers to define what it means to be “economically disadvantaged.” Further, they note that much of the research in the field is based upon psychological constructs such as attitudes or expectations; questions such as “do you like science?” or “how far do you think you will get in school?” have no legal definitions or objective measures that can calibrate these variables, resulting in findings that do not hold up to their causation model. All of the issues raised by Gerard and Huat See, from the difficulties in defining social categories such as “ethnicity” to the subjective measurement of outcomes such as expectations for attainment of education, lead to error and bias in existing datasets.

The authors also explore the hazards of missing data and measurement error associated with the large datasets that currently exist. For example, the Annual Schools Census (ASC), a widely-used dataset in recent studies on education in the United Kingdom, does not account for transient populations, and/or students with diverse literacy abilities (13). The data gaps created by missing data in large datasets, like ASC, is often replaced by the existing respondent data. Gorard and Huat See argue that this practice, although common, worsens the bias within large datasets. Ultimately, the authors determine that none of the techniques derived from random sampling theory, such as significance testing or confidence intervals, can help overcome the bias because it is impossible to adequately capture the experience of more vulnerable populations whose responses are missing. The act of filling in data gaps with existing participant data ultimately biases the entire dataset because it undercuts the vast differences in findings among participants and underrepresents disadvantaged populations. Throughout this section, Gorard and Huat See provide a compelling critique of existing datasets, providing one line of reasoning for the existing limitations in educational research on disadvantage.

Chapters four through eleven present summaries of existing educational disadvantage research and the methodological challenges associated with these studies. These chapters focus specifically on various roles, including: stratification among and within schools, teacher impact, desired outcomes from schooling, community impact, and the role of parents. The final chapter advances the best approaches for producing evidence-informed research to overcome disadvantage in education.

The most detailed reform is offered in chapter four, where the authors establish why schools should support diverse student populations. Specifically, they argue that diversity should be implemented by assigning pupils to schools in a way that composes a diverse student population, radically rethinking how we populate public schools. Gorard and Huat See note that there is sufficient

causality between school diversity and increased performance for disadvantaged students when utilizing their model, thereby suggesting a causal relationship between social segregation and damage to society and individuals. Explicitly, the authors critique previous research by denying the casual relationships found between particular variables—such as parental involvement, teacher quality, school quality—and educational disadvantage. They determine that controlling the school composition to ensure diversity is “the most important educational task facing central and local governments, even though they probably do not realize this” (49). According to the authors, schools should represent the rich diversity of the broad communities in which they are located as opposed to the socioeconomic segregation found among neighborhoods within these communities. They suggest a scenario in which “schools, in their structure and organization, can represent to young people the kind of society that we wish to have, rather than reflecting the inequalities of the society we actually have” (48). Gorard and Huat See affirm that enforcing diversity within public schools will end the cycle of poverty, eliminate neighborhood segregation, and raise achievement for disadvantaged students. The authors also suppose that the beneficial implications of the widespread dismantling of neighborhood schools, which forces students to leave their neighborhood communities and attend an assigned public school, is somewhat glibly ignored by policy makers and reformers. However, the authors fail to consider the impracticality in creating a system in which schools have equal resources and demographic diversity that mirrors society at large. Their suggestion would boldly lead to the decline of the neighborhood-oriented school by forcing students to attend schools outside of their neighborhood for the sake of maintaining diversity within schools. Despite the intangibility of their suggested reform discussed above, chapters four through eleven offer many innovative points of departure that should be considered by policymakers and educational scholars trying to eliminate educational disadvantage.

While Gorard and Huat See undoubtedly add an important voice to the chorus of scholars grappling with eliminating disadvantage and equalizing educational opportunity, there are some limitations to their analysis. First, the authors’ wholesale rejection of existing constructs may limit the practical applications of their recommendations. Throughout this work, the authors level harsh criticism upon existing research, calling it “absurd,” “wasted,” “erroneous,” and “unethical” (26). These somewhat alarmist labels have the tendency to detract from the authors’ well-constructed, compelling critiques of the validity of existing research. I urge the readership of the book—graduate students, academics, researchers, and policy makers—not to be dissuaded by the tone but instead to focus on the opportunities for improved validity presented within the latter section of each chapter. Further, although this was most likely not the authors’ intent, this book tends to exaggerate the critiques found within existing research on

educational disadvantage, suggesting there are few if any rigorous causal studies of disadvantage. The authors do not sufficiently present examples where data analysis has been efficacious, which could have been a useful tool for further illustrating their arguments for reform.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, this book highlights important and often overlooked limitations in regards to data misrepresentation within the body of existing research on disadvantage in schools. Compelling arguments against value-added methods, the dangers of school choice, difficulties involved with measuring teacher effectiveness, and the all-too-common assumption that parents are to blame make *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education* an extremely timely, useful, and illustrative book for educators and policymakers. I would particularly recommend this book to scholars utilizing existing datasets and published studies for their research so as to better understand the data limitations. This book questions assumptions, provokes further insight to existing research, and challenges current researchers to more carefully construct their methodology. The authors do an exceptional job laying a foundation for skepticism of educational research on disadvantage.

Reviewer

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