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

Improving the educational outcomes for all students, particularly for students from objectively disadvantaged backgrounds, has been a key goal for governments, policy makers, and academics around the globe. Minimizing educational inequality for disadvantaged students continues to be the focus of copious research efforts and correspondingly copious funding. However, as Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See argue in *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education*, ~~authors Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See argue that,~~ despite the volume of research, the lack of rigor and quality of these studies makes any policy decisions informed by this flawed research not only inadequate, but perhaps even harmful. Therefore, the authors urge the ~~academic~~ scholarly community to put an end to biased examinations of the roots of academic disadvantage and instead point out areas where more research is desperately 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 or compelling models of disadvantage exist. Finally, the authors distinguish between fixed and modifiable causes of disadvantage. ~~Where~~ Fixed causes consist of those that cannot be changed by policy such as health or family background and modifiable causes are those that can be influenced by interventions. This work

~~contributes to the field educational research on disadvantage by demonstrating the limitations of the current body of research scholarship, particularly as it relates to the causes of and interventions to eliminate educational disadvantage, and suggesting ways to bolster this body of knowledge.~~

Gerard and Huat See begin by describing the causation model that is utilized throughout the book to prove rigorous and unbiased relations between a cause for disadvantage and the manifestation of that cause. The above causation model states findings must be repeatable, sequenced, demonstrate repeated changes when adding an intervention, and a coherent mechanism explaining the casual link. They continue by defining “modifiable” determinants of disadvantage, such as teacher and peer effects, segregation by poverty between schools, and student motivation and behavior. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the poor quality of existing datasets and the lack of rigor in the application and analysis of the given datasets when seeking to causally determine the cause of 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 (“do you like science” or “how far do you think you will get in school”) with no legal definitions and nothing external to which to calibrate, resulting in findings that do not hold up to the causation model the risk of tautological conclusions stated above. All of these 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 continue by pointing out the dangers of missing data or measurement error associated with existing large datasets. One example is the Annual Schools Census (ASC) in the UK, a widely-used dataset in current [education](#) research, [which](#) does not account for ~~respondents~~ who are missing because they are [more mobile](#) [transient populations](#), [less truant](#), [prominent](#), less literate, or less likely to speak the language of data collection (13). Using the existing data from [available responsive respondents](#) [participants](#) to fill in gaps for the missing respondent data, [as evident in many research reports](#) [a common practice used to fill in large data sets](#), worsens the bias. 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. Vast differences in findings muddy the usefulness of current research utilizing these data. Chapters 4 through 11 present summaries of existing research in the field and problems associated with the causal mechanisms [they](#) utilized. [These chapters](#), [focusing specifically](#) on the role of stratification among and within schools, the role of teachers, [the](#) desired outcomes from schooling, the role of the individual, and the role of parents. The final chapter [outlines advances](#) the best approaches [moving forward](#) for producing evidence-informed research to overcome disadvantage in education.

The most concrete reform offered is described in Chapter 4, [stating that schools should diversify student populations](#). Throughout the book, the authors deny the casual relationship between certain variables —parental involvement, teacher quality, school quality—and educational disadvantage. However, the authors note that there is sufficient

causality between diverse student populations within schools and increased performance for disadvantaged students when utilizing their model, suggesting an association between social segregation and damage to society and individuals. After cogently detailing ~~Several sources of this causality,~~ The authors determine that ~~are compellingly detailed~~ and controlling the school composition to ensure diversity is ~~argued to be~~ “the most important educational task facing central and local governments, even though they probably do not realize this” (49). Schools, according to the authors, should represent the rich diversity of the communities in which they are located instead of the segregation found among neighborhoods within communities. The authors continue, offering a hopeful 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). The implications for this widespread dismantling of a societal apparatus of neighborhood schools are somewhat glibly ignored by policy makers and reformers. Creating a system in which all schools are equal and the makeup of each school reflects the diversity of society at large is somewhat unrealistic, and would boldly lead to the decline of the neighborhood school by forcing students to attend schools outside of their neighborhood for the sake of maintaining diversity within schools.

By focusing on the shortcomings of the data used in studies that contribute to underlying the label of “disadvantaged,” the authors add an important voice to the chorus of those whose work scholarship assumes grapples with eliminating disadvantage and focuses on how to eliminate it in the context of and equalizing educational opportunity. However, 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 terms labels have the tendency to take away from the authors’ well-constructed, compelling arguments against 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 overgeneralize the critiques of existing research in the field, suggesting there are few if any rigorous causal studies of disadvantage. The authors does not sufficiently present examples in which where data analysis has been efficacious, which could have been a useful tool for further illustrating the authors’ their arguments for reform.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, this book still highlights important, often overlooked, dangers of 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 the *interActions* readership to explore. I would particularly recommend this book to graduate students relying on exiting datasets and published studies for ongoing research. This book questions assumptions, pokes gaping holes in existing research, and asks important questions of current researchers. The authors do an exceptional job laying a foundation for skepticism of educational research on disadvantage.

Reviewer

Allison Hansen is an Ed.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education with a focus on education leadership. Allison's research interests include district-grown school leadership preparation programs, teacher mentorship, and Teach For America (TFA) and university partnerships. Allison is currently in her second year as a Penn mentor for first-year TFA teachers in Philadelphia charter schools. Prior to undertaking her doctoral studies, Allison completed her Master's Degree in School Leadership from UPenn while teaching and leading at Lanier Charter Elementary School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana