

Running head: EUGENICS AND EDUCATION IN AMERICA: TEXT ANALYSIS

Eugenics in Education: Apologetics for Oppression

Nicholas D. Hartlep, M.S.Ed.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

EDUC 701-001

Publication Date: November 10, 2008

Eugenics in Education: Apologetics for Oppression

For many people an esoteric educational topic is eugenics. This brief text analysis will provide a textual as well as contextual analysis of Dr. Ann Gibson Winfield's book (2007) *Eugenics and Education in America: Institutionalized Racism and the Implications of History, Ideology, and Memory*. Winfield objectively critiques eugenic apologetics. This text analysis will assess how well Winfield's book accomplishes the following: (1) discussion of the scientism-or pseudo-nature of eugenics, (2) description of the compositional and structural eugenic-laden inequities that pervade education, (3) discussion of eugenic labels used in the past within education, and (4) discussion of eugenic labels presently used within education.

Introduction

Albeit esoteric to many in education, the practice of eugenics finds itself deeply rooted in a pseudo-science framework/ideology. In 1904, eugenics was broadly defined by Francis Galton (as cited in Winfield, p. 5): "Eugenics is the *science* [italics added] which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage." Eugenics, simply summarized, is a racist and antipathetical attempt to create a perfect—Nordic—race. Eugenics is propelled by a scientism-nature insofar as it is predicated upon the notion that, with selective breeding, sorting, labeling, and categorizing, the world can reach utopia. This utopia is predicated upon the creation of a superior race. While attempting to create a superior race may appear absurd and incredulous in the 21st-century, eugenic tendencies continue to permeate and pervade education.

Scientism-or Pseudo-nature of Eugenics

What is more, eugenics is constructed upon not a hard-science, but rather an imitated science—a science that many times is a shape-changer, escapable, and elusive. In previous epochs, eugenics proudly defended its suppositions under the banner of better heredity—something finite and inescapable; however, this was eventually repudiated with the tardy and latent understanding that the practice of eugenics was grossly unethical, furthermore, disadvantageous. In addition, Paul (as cited in Winfield, p. 65) argues, “[...] [T]he notion of heredity as a central component of eugenic thought...was disproved by advances in genetic research.” Eugenics imitated real science.

Examples of this scientific imitation are when eugenicists used phrenology and physiognomy to make assertions of individuals’ mental capacities and worth. While analyzing cranial shape and form (phrenology) may sound scientific, it was and continues to be wide of the mark. The same holds true with physiognomy, or the assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance. While at this particular juncture in time, these were held as valid *scientifically*-based declarations, nowadays people would decry them as incredible and disingenuous.

Nonetheless, the varying inequities that exist in contemporary education may some day be deemed the same (incredulous and not genuine declarations). As one may ascertain after close examination and reflection, there are many compositional inequities that continue to pervade education.

Compositional and Structural Eugenic-laden Inequities

Many of the compositional inequities that exist in education originate in large part from following eugenic practices in previous decades, as they relate to education. These

eugenic practices are inclusive of, but are not limited to, the following labels and practices: (1) feeble-minded (2) imbeciles, (3) morons, (4) unfit, (5) idiots, (6) mongrels, (7) utilizing phrenology and physiognomy to make assertions of one's *intelligo*, (8) strictly enforced sterilization laws, and (9) the disapproval of interracial-marriages. The use of eugenic labels in education was rampant and detrimental to students in the past (early-1920s), yet continues to plague, be detrimental, and be rampantly used in schools in the current era (early-2000s). As an educator, I bear witness to these malicious eugenic practices that perpetuate the inequities that exist in education on a daily-basis, as I teach in an urban-school setting.

As Winfield clearly posits, “[...] [A]ctions in the present that preserve and promote oppression from the past are, in effect, paramount to depriving non-dominant group members from the influence, and thus the capacities therein [...]” (p. 27). The compositional inequities that exist in education originate from eugenic practices of the past; however, the actions or inactions of current educators and those in the field of education have the power to either perpetuate or end the inequities therein. For this very reason, eugenic-based labels were and continue to be used in the educational arena.

Eugenic Labels Used in the Past Within Education

There have been a broad array of eugenic labels used in the past within education. The model of education widely-used was the sorting, situating, and matching of students based upon preconceived and contrived presumptions. This can be summarized by the following quotation taken from Winfield's text:

Eugenicists believed ability was innate and that it was the job of education to successfully sort students and match them to the vocations for which they were

best suited. By matching inborn ability with the appropriate path society would achieve a system of meritocracy where income and ability were directly correlated. (p. 108)

The notion that an individual is born with a threshold of intelligence is preposterous, yet it was a salient and popular belief of eugenic proponents. While history reveals the high concentration and prevalence of eugenic labels in education in the past, the expression “history repeats itself” is credible in contemporary times.

Eugenic Labels Presently Used Within Education

The eugenic labels presently used in education vary in offensiveness. Albeit tacit at times, the following are a few eugenic-laden labels/practices widely used within the educational arena: (1) “at-risk” student; (2) “special needs” student; (3) No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, previously Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965; and (4) the ability tracking of students.

The term “at-risk” undermines objectivity and inaccurately labels children in education. What does “at-risk” mean? Furthermore, what is the purpose for its use in the educational arena? The same holds true for the term, “special needs” student. In terms of exceptionality and uniqueness, I would argue that all students are special in some form or fashion.

NCLB is eugenically contrived insofar as it causes division and a separation of races as it relates to the achievement gap and the acknowledgement that certain non-white students perform subordinately well when compared to white students. NCLB serves as an apparatus that assuages underrepresented, non-white populations of students’ academic growth/achievement.

The tracking of students is a eugenic-laden practice that is founded exclusively upon perceived ability level and, therefore, is not inclusive. Minority students are disserved when educators predetermine their abilities directly or indirectly. As Winfield testifies:

The fact that subsequent generations of educational policy makers have so enthusiastically embraced mechanisms of measurement (testing and dependence on IQ), techniques of *tracking and sorting* [italics added] (high school tracks, gifted and talented programs), and forms of content presentation (curriculum) that have their conceptual roots in eugenic ideology suggests that the aim of passing the imperative on to the younger generation was successful. (p. 132)

Non-whites are harmed and disserved through tracking. The continued use of ability tracking jeopardizes many non-white students and is a eugenic practice presently entertained in the educational corpus.

Conclusion

As one may ascertain from the facts presented in this succinct text analysis, the practice of eugenics finds itself deeply rooted in a pseudo-science framework/ideology. Eugenics is constructed upon not a hard-science, but rather an imitated science. This science many times is a shape-changer, escapable, and elusive. Many of the compositional inequities that exist in education originate in large part from following eugenic practices in previous decades, as they relate to education. The notion that an individual is born with a threshold of intelligence is preposterous, yet was a salient and popular belief of eugenic proponents. Eugenic labels presently used in education vary in offensiveness. Until eugenic-laden labels/practices that are widely used within the

educational arena are eliminated, there will be little change in underlying levels of bigotry and xenophobia. With the recent election of U.S. President-elect, Barack Obama, I am hopeful there will come a day when eugenic practices and labels within education will be torn down, just as the racial-divide was so beautifully destroyed on November 4, 2008. Time will only tell when this magical moment will be.

References

- Winfield, A. G. (2007). *Eugenics and Education in America: Institutionalized Racism and the Implications of History, Ideology, and Memory: Vol. 18. A Book Series of Curriculum Studies* (W. F. Pinar, Ed.). New York: Peter Lang.