on_education
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editorial: discrimination

On Education

This issue of on_education explores the multifaceted nature of discrimination in education across diverse national and institutional contexts. The contributions examine how discrimination manifests in school curricula, higher education structures, and everyday educational practices—often in ways shaped by race, gender, class, and language. Authors address the limitations of current anti-discrimination policies, the persistence of structural inequalities, and the tensions between policy intentions and lived experiences. Using empirical, historical, and theoretical approaches, the articles engage critically with topics such as affirmative action, the role of educators and parents in reproducing or challenging bias, and the potential of critical theory to uncover systemic exclusion. The issue brings together voices from various regions including the United States, India, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands, and invites readers to reflect on how educational institutions both reflect and shape broader societal dynamics of discrimination.

Keywords: discrimination, editorial, education

On January 21, 2025, the day after he was sworn in for his second term as President of the United States, Donald Trump signed an executive order titled: “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity” (Exec. Order no. 14,173, 2025). In it, Trump decreed that the “longstanding Federal civil-rights laws” that protect “individual Americans from discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin,” were actually causing “critical institutions of American society” to adopt “dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race- and sex- based preferences under the guise of ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)’” (Exec. Order no. 14,173, 2025). In effect, the Trump Administration argued that anti-discrimination laws were actually, themselves, discriminatory, turning many established ideas and perspectives on discrimination on their heads. The impacts of this order have already been felt in American education and research institutions, as DEI initiatives are being stripped from the very educational environments where many of those now-questioned civil rights protections were tested, hard fought, and won over decades of activism by people of color, women, people with disabilities, and linguistically diverse individuals (Song et al., 2024).

Most philosophical, political, and legal discussions of discrimination proceed on the premise that discrimination is morally wrong and ought to be legally prohibited in society, though this case clearly demonstrates that there is less consensus about the contours and targets of discrimination than initially meets the eye (Altman, 2020). While the finer points of what discrimination is (or isn’t) are still being debated, it’s undeniable that discrimination, as a phenomenon and idea, remains omnipresent in both public spheres and educational settings. This is in spite of the efforts of countless activists, policymakers, and practitioners over the last several decades to eliminate, or at the very least mitigate, the impacts of discrimination on individuals across the globe. In fact, some

studies and recent events seem to suggest that discrimination in contemporary societies is not only still pervasive, but it's also getting worse. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, a high proportion of people living in the European Union believe that discrimination based on the skin color (61%), sexual orientation (54%), disability (49%), socio-economic status (49%) or religious beliefs (42%) is widespread in their country (European Union, 2023, p. 8). Recent, highly publicized examples likely contribute to this feeling. Beyond the aforementioned executive order by President Trump, which is the culmination of far-right discourse and talking points over several decades, efforts across North America and Europe to roll back and question affirmative action and positive action policies–where differential treatment is given to underrepresented or oft-discriminated groups in university hiring or admissions to correct past inequities–have increasingly made their way into headlines and public discussion over the last few years (Gisselquist et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2023). In some countries, limited access to education remains an obvious indication of discrimination: In Afghanistan, for example, women and girls found themselves the direct targets of discrimination by the Taliban government in 2022 which continues to bar them from access to education beyond the age of 11 (Kumar, 2023). According to UNESCO (2020, p. 68), the chance that poor rural young women complete upper secondary education is less than 1% in at least 20 countries and a world bank report analyzing census data of 19 countries concluded that children with disabilities had a high chance of never enrolling in school (Male & Wodon, 2017, p. 5-6).

Discrimination is defined by the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations (OHCHR) as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms" (OHCHR, 1989). Discrimination can be direct or indirect, but almost always has its origin in institutional or systemic structures which reinforce discriminatory processes (Feagin, 1977; Hasse & Schmidt, 2012). Talking about discrimination in education often refers to policies or actions which disadvantage members of certain social groups and impact their access to education, educational experiences, well-being in educational institutions, and/or educational outcomes such as self-esteem, skills, and qualifications. Given the importance of education for personal development and professional trajectories, discrimination in education is likely to affect life chances, reproduce power structures, and reinforce social inequalities (e.g., Gomolla, 2021).

Inspired by the events and shifting ideas about discrimination which we've observed over the last several years, this issue invited scholars to reconsider fundamental questions about discrimination in education. As evident from the definitions and examples listed previously, discrimination is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon that is rooted in specific historical and social contexts and cannot be understood solely as a consequence of individual attitudes or collective mentalities (Scherr, 2016). Thus, the authors in this special issue try to account for the complexity of educational discrimination (as both a phenomenon and practice) by employing complex and heterogenous approaches to research. In doing so, they collectively work to identify, define, deconstruct, and challenge discrimination in education in different national contexts and time periods, and on different theoretical and practical levels.

From Australia to the United States, to India, Germany, and The Netherlands, the articles in this issue engage with questions that open up possibilities for serious debate and discussion, such as: the challenges (and limitations) of identifying and eliminating discriminatory practices in school

environments; the potential (and restraints) of different strategies to combat discrimination in school history curriculums and in racialized structures of higher education; the disconnects between anti-discriminatory educational policies, structures, and practices in schools and daycare centers; and the use of critical theory to identify structural discrimination. Articles emphasize perspectives from teachers, students, parents, racialized scholars, and utilize textual, theoretical, historical, and empirical approaches to grapple with different iterations of discrimination, while also opening space for critical reflection.

We welcome you not only to read the compelling submissions for this issue, but to also directly engage, consider, and comment on their arguments and findings in light of the political, social, and educational realities we find ourselves in today.

The Editorial Team

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