

Article

Unpacking the Shortcomings of “College and Career Readiness” as an Educative Approach in Urban Schools as Preparation for Tomorrow’s Economy

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Abstract: As the language of “college and career readiness” continues to permeate American public education, the fixation on preparing students for college and careers is potentially harmful for students, particularly urban students of color. In promoting “college and career readiness”, certain assumptions are taken for granted: that American schools are sites of egalitarian meritocracy and not spaces of social reproduction; that tomorrow’s job market desires more individuals with formal education, and that the jobs market will be viable for tomorrow’s willing workers. Here, we argue that as “college and career readiness” continues to be the dominant approach in American schools, it ignores the realities that the workplace of tomorrow is growing harsher as corporations continue their efforts to maximize profits by keeping labor costs low by reducing worker participation and seeking cheaper labor. Simultaneously, American students of color are more vulnerable to tomorrow’s workplace in that they continue to experience racial discrimination coupled with the growing tenuous nature of the future domestic job market. Thus, students who are being schooled in “college and career readiness” have to contend with the possibility that, though they are more formally educated, the economy of tomorrow may still deem them expendable.



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1. Introduction

Since the days when Dewey critiqued industrial-centric public education and mandated school desegregation, Bowles and Gintis’ [1] and subsequently Kozol’s [2] comparative examinations of affluent and economically depressed classrooms, the acknowledgment of disparities in American public education depending on race, class, geographic location, religion, and gender has been a mainstay within education literature for over a century. Research identifying disparities in school spending, facilities, curriculum, student discipline, and teacher experience, and further comparisons documenting the disparate experiences of lower-income students generally, and lower-income students of color to their affluent counterparts, abounded. And, while returns on a post-secondary investment toward earning bachelor’s degrees are growing more uncertain, the disparity in wealth between “haves and have nots” has never been greater. The impact of mechanization and offshoring across occupations for corporations to access cheaper labor and higher profits, the central questions here becomes: is the focus on “college and career readiness” in the best interest of American students generally, and particularly students of color from urban, low-income environments? And, is the focus of schooling within urban America to become “college and career ready”, potentially harmful?

Here, we argue that in ignoring tomorrow’s economic realities negatively impacting workers’ future earnings and career potential, coupled with persistent racialized discrimination in hiring, the correlation between social class, career earnings and social trajectory for urban schools that have adopted the ideology of teaching to yield “college and career

“ready” students may be leaving swaths of students ill-prepared for the realities they will likely face in the future. Further, we contend that, while there are persistent structural barriers that prevent people from lower-income backgrounds and ethnic minorities from accessing a level playing field occupationally, regardless of educational attainment or schooling generally, but urban education specifically, ought not to focus on “college and career readiness”, as the implication can lead students to believe that simply attaining more formal education is sufficient to securing meaningful employment while ignoring numerous warning signs that such employment, as we know it presently, may be much less accessible for all American workers in the future.

First, we will do a brief survey on schools as centers of sociocultural reproduction within America’s capitalist system, where unequal access and empowerment within schools is not an aberration. Next, we will discuss “college and career readiness”, its origins as an educational approach, and what it means for students and schools during an economy of increasing globalization. Finally, we convey that, despite the focus in urban schools on “college and career readiness” for students of color, this approach ignores the hostile occupational and economic outlook they are likely to face due to persistent discrimination. That, along with the increasingly contentious environment for tomorrow’s job seekers, today’s students of color who are drilled within the “college and career readiness” paradigm, may be more unprepared for the realities of their work world despite being more educated and, presumably, career-ready than prior generations. And while the need for students, regardless of background, to have access to authentic, critical education that prepares them to contribute to a democratic society is without debate here, however, contemporary methods and mandates employed to provide poor minority students, with an education that focuses primarily on “college and career readiness” are.

2. Schools as Sites of Social Reproduction

Since the days of the early progressives, educational theorists have questioned the purpose and intent of schooling for our American public, which was increasingly becoming more urban and heterogeneous with increasing numbers of southern Blacks and European immigrant children within American public schools [3]. John Dewey, throughout his career, noted the disparities in educational experiences between students of higher income, which was more inquiry-based, and student-centered, in comparison to the education of their lower-income counterparts, which was more rote, teacher-driven, and disciplinarian [4]. Dewey noted that some students’ educational experiences prepared them for a future in upper-income management, while the other prepared students for labor on the factory floor.

The view of educational theorists that schools are locations where societal norms are reproduced and legitimized gained prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s through the works of theorists, such as Paulo Freire, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Pierre Bourdieu [5,6]. Though schools are viewed as neutral spaces that support the development of youth civic participation and participation [7], ample literature identifies schools as biased reproducers of inequality serving to benefit the elite and white middle class while negatively impacting how students from lower-income backgrounds view themselves within and their surrounding society. Armed with the appearance of objectivity, schools, according to Pierre Bourdieu in *What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups* [5], are one systemic institution (of many) in society that “seemingly objectively affirms the dominant classes’ own dominant position” by “establishing a theodicy of their privilege” [5] (p. 4) which helps to maintain a persistent power imbalance between those with agency and capital and those without it; all the while maintaining the illusion of equal opportunity and access while obscuring the unequal distribution of resources and outcomes [6].

Further, schools are government institutions where students are exposed daily to society’s social norms, cultural values, and popular discourses while also learning how society views and categorizes them; commonly influenced by their racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic identities. The constant exposure and eventual acceptance of such sorting

will eventually impact the way the students, especially of minority, low-income students of color, view themselves and their future in the world [8].

3. Schools Reproducing Sociocultural Inequity

Although the increased presence of racially and economically segregated communities frequently assure that schools deemed “failing” are situated within urban areas with high concentrations of minority, low-income residents, Glenna Colclough and E.M. Beck sought to highlight practices in America’s educational structure that mostly contribute to class reproduction and the mental–manual division of labor. Colclough and Beck, in the American Educational Structure and Reproduction of Social Class (1986) concluded that the existence of segregated class-based school systems and a public-private schooling divide that justifies certain students having more educational privilege and opportunity than others contribute to social reproduction in the lives of graduating seniors. But ultimately, the study concluded that tracking, which sustains the division of mental-manual labor within curriculum and class assignments [9] was the most significant factor in sustaining educational and social inequality among students studied [10]. Tracking was shown to impact both students’ educational expectations and future employment aspirations. And, while tracking gives the appearance of meritocracy that is widely accepted among students, teachers, and parents, it is often found to be subjective with little criteria indicating, objectively, why students are tracked where they are in the first place. What has been found is that students with parents deemed to be active and visible in their students’ education, as well as students from higher SES backgrounds, are most frequently tracked at higher levels [10–12].

Further, oppression of low SES minority students occurs within the language-laden culture of the classroom. Classrooms are spaces that are governed by both written and spoken language conventions that affirm and empower a specific brand of communication that reflects the social and cultural expectations of middle-class whiteness [10,13]. In today’s American classrooms, teachers are increasingly being encouraged to optimize student engagement through dialogue and discussion. And while classroom best practices implore educators to enhance student participation, teachers often promote communicative norms deemed “safe” and “antiseptic”, yet un-acknowledging of students’ varying sociocultural, and historical backgrounds [13]. The establishing of in-class conversational ground rules aimed at promoting effective classroom discussion practices is a form of “cultural capital” [14], that is often culturally disconnected from students of low SES minority backgrounds; thereby offering an advantage to students from mainstream cultures.

Lev Vygotsky [15] asserts that cultural legacies are transmitted through language and other informal sources in addition to formal schooling. Language usage and literacy, then, is “a social practice” [7]; and “culturally bound in that culture affects language and language effects culture”; and students’ communicative patterns often serve as a reflection of students’ non-school sociocultural identities [13,15]. Annette Lareau [16], in *Unequal Childhoods*, wrote of the differences in communicative practices between households of low SES, and those of higher SES, concluding that children of low SES backgrounds are spoken to in a more authoritarian form void of options, while the parents of higher SES reason with, and explain concepts to their children, often giving them the possibility to question and negotiate, thereby affording their child a sense of agency [16] that other students rarely experience in similar contexts. Andrew Lambirth, in *Challenging the Laws of Talk: Ground Rules, Social Reproduction, and the Curriculum* writes that “language is not neutral” [13] (p. 17). Thus, power, in expression, whether written or verbal, is afforded or diminished by the communicator’s ability to be heard and recognized; even while value judgments are formed about the communicator’s ability to express their ideas [13]. Within a classroom context, language itself serves to legitimize or marginalize a student’s sense of agency and inclusion.

Traditional classroom behavioral practices, school discipline policies, and course curriculum further contribute to social reproduction by affirming some students’ sense of

agency while diminishing others. Paulo Freire, in working to educate Brazilian peasants, expressed the concept that though his constituents lacked formal education, “they too know things” and ought to feel empowered to take the lead in their own education, creating an atmosphere where the “student learns from teacher, and teacher learns from student” [17] (p. 65). But often, standard educational practice in urban areas is to silence not only students, but parents and community members as well, limiting talk that is deemed “undesirable” or inconvenient by official power. Silencing of students and communities and determining who gets to speak and participate is a process that takes place between the powerful and powerless [6]. Though commonly communicated in low SES districts for the need of parental engagement and community involvement, within urban school districts, however, parents and community members are routinely shown their participation is unwanted through administrative tactics, such as limiting public speech at local board meetings, scheduling public board meetings at inconvenient times, and through various forms of governmental takeover of public school districts [6,18–22]. Such silencing and marginalization create “quiet” as the norm and frames those willing to speak up to challenge the status quo, as dangerous and troublemakers [6].

America’s contemporary education reform movement, with its reliance on standardization of curriculum and assessments, serves to afford agency and privilege for those of higher SES backgrounds at the expense of other students as well. Long documented shortcomings of minority and low SES students in comparison to white students in test scores, school completion, course selection, and college attainment coalesce to form what is popularly referred to as the “achievement gap” [23]. The oft-referred to “achievement gap”, despite consistently narrowing, has remained and was a central rationale for the establishing of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the subsequent Race to the Top legislation that calls for more standardization in curriculum and assessment, increased student and school accountability through testing, and higher standards for teachers, the establishing of charter schools, in addition to school closure [23]. Offering an alternative understanding of the “achievement gap”, the concept of a lingering “Education Debt”, introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings, describes how of centuries of racial segregation, in addition to historic economic and occupational discrimination endured by blacks specifically, accumulated over time to explain the disparity in educational performance between low SES minority and white students [24].

The increased movement toward standardization, however, not only ignores the “Education Debt” Ladson-Billings describes, but instead has led to an erosion in graduation rates among minority students in states where assessments are required for grade promotion [25]. Inherently, students who linguistically identify with language on such standardized exams, which reflect sociocultural expectations of middle-class whiteness [10], are afforded an advantage over other students, particularly those who speak non-English languages, and in alternative speech patterns outside of school [26].

Additionally, the standards-based movement continues the curricular traditions in schools that generally neglect to substantively include students’ varying cultures, histories, and communities in a way that makes non-mainstream students feel affirmed within schools and literature shows improved education outcomes. Students of low SES minority backgrounds, specifically, need to feel their culture and community are understood as “it may serve as an alternative entry point for enhancing the educational experience of minority students” [27]; as low SES minority students’ academic performance is strongly correlated to students’ sense of inclusion and community congruence in school [28]; and where students feel teachers “authentically care” about their lives as people outside of the classroom context, in addition to caring about content mastery [29].

Further, as teaching in America has been, and still is, a profession overwhelmingly staffed by white women, students of low SES minority backgrounds are often taught in schools by individuals with little connection to their cultures or community [30–32]. Predictably, spawning from cultural unfamiliarity, urban minority students, especially black

boys and girls, are often subject to harsher classroom and school discipline; specifically, suspension, expulsion, and special education classification [8,33].

While schools are routinely cast as objective meritocracies where hard work and dedication are rewarded with expanded opportunities, for too many students, the same inequities and injustices faced inside urban schools, likely, will be awaiting them occupationally and economically. Despite the assumed objectivity in the language of aiming to yield students who are “college and career ready”, many of today’s students in today’s classrooms, especially students from economically depressed and minority backgrounds, will still be ill-prepared to face the economic and occupational realities of tomorrow.

4. College and Career Readiness as a (Non) Answer for Tomorrow’s Neoliberal Economy

Over the past 30 years, since the publishing of *A Nation at Risk*, the landscape of American public education and the economy has been altered dramatically by the rise of neoliberal corporate influence in education, particularly within urban public education, and globalization [34,35]. America’s responsibility to educate its public to become independent critical thinkers is at odds with capitalism’s insatiable demand for a workforce consisting of low-wage, compliant, order-taking workers. Educationally, it appears the desires of business and ideologically driven policymakers supersede the responsibility of educating the public for problem solving and democratic participation; and as such, many pro-business and corporate-supported education legislation have been passed since the 1980s [36]. Contemporary neoliberal education reforms, reliant on standardized assessments, accountability, consequences, and market analytics, are contributing to the deterioration of urban public education systems tasked with developing the next generation of progressive critical thinkers, in order to fulfill the desires of big business: to have a legion of compliant, non-thinking order takers [37].

Today, from both conservative and liberal politicians, and pro-business and education think-tanks, such as the American Legislative Exchange Council, Fordham Foundation and Democrats for Education Reform, it is increasingly common for the verbiage of equity and civil rights to be implemented when discussing and legislating education reform policy. Politicians and policymakers at all levels of government have adopted the mantra that “education is the civil rights issue of our time” and that “zip code should not prevent children to access to a good education.” Too often, in poor minority areas, the very language of educational equity is being used to marginalize students and disenfranchise communities, plunder urban public school resources, and ultimately colonize urban space itself.

Consistent with the stated goals of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), recent federal education policies have placed greater emphasis on all students regardless of race and income background [38], especially the urban minorities, to become “career and college ready” [39]. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind was marketed as a necessary step to combat the “soft bigotry of low expectations” for specifically disenfranchised urban minority children; and Race to the Top stressed the need for all of America’s students to be prepared for life after high school and included a bevy of accountability measures for schools to ensure “quality education for all students.” But as the stated necessity for students to become “career and college ready” has increasingly become the drumbeat to which public school districts march (as dictated by corporate lobbyist-influenced laws and initiatives), the measure of a school’s success in delivering education, even among urban schools with students from the most challenging of backgrounds, has come to encompass values imposed by those furthest removed from the challenging backgrounds of low-income minority students [35,37,39,40]. Indeed, the ideology of “college and career readiness” in public education has been defined overwhelmingly by affluent whites strongly affiliated with corporations and the business communities, for today’s middle-class white and non-white students alike, as well as America’s low-income students of color disregarding their disparate schooling, living experiences and historical experiences with racism.

In the current “college and career readiness” climate, schooling has become narrowed to encompass increased standardized testing indicating a mastery of core academic subjects,

principally math, literacy, and sciences. At the same time, there is a concentrated rolling back of creative subject offerings in the arts and music; less offered in the way of civic-oriented and potentially critical subjects of world history and ethnic histories in favor of traditional capitalist-affirming US history. Further, there has also been a rolling back of courses offering the trades within traditional high schools, isolating those classes to be offered at entire vocational schools, leaving vast swaths of students unexposed to various trades and occupational opportunities.

And as the pursuit of “college and career readiness” has increasingly become the determinant of “successful” schooling, in cases where standardized assessment scores are low (in many instances, deriving from a bevy of non-education related reasons), punitive actions result almost exclusively in urban centers inhabited by poor minorities—ironically, under the narrative of protecting students’ civil rights to greater occupational opportunities as students from whiter, more affluent areas [35,40,41]. Such punitive actions are commonly manifest in the forms of forced public school closures commonly staffed by minorities with ties to the community coupled with the establishment of both university-affiliated and nationally franchised charter schools staffed by young white people with little connection to the local community [39]. And often, in cities, such as Camden (NJ), Chicago, and New Orleans, corporate-operated charters are forced upon poor minority communities without community input, democratic participation, and despite community opposition.

Similar to how current neoliberal education reform manifested in minority urban districts are initiated in a “top-down” fashion, reducing communities of color to objects to be manipulated and dictated to, as opposed to fostering partnership in improving the delivery of quality education [36], the “college and career” approach though implemented locally, has been instituted by those even further removed from traditional education. Lakes, in “Neoliberal Rhetoric of Workforce Readiness” [42], argues that not only are high schools specifically adopting the existing education reform tactics of championing standardized scholastic exit exams and accelerating course offerings in academic competencies, but this approach has been seized upon by business leaders and neoliberals alike who believe today’s graduating students are unprepared for global competition.

Comprised of global business executives, policymakers, and education consultants, the original Commission on Skills of the American Workforce was formed in 1988, and according to their website, is a consultancy dedicated to “analyze(ing) the implications of changes in the international economy for American education, and to formulate an agenda for American education based on that analysis and seek wherever possible to accomplish that agenda through policy change and development of the resources educators who would need to carry it out.” In 2007, the New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce, following decades of globalization and offshoring, funded by the Casey Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education issued their report, *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The report of the “New” Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. The Commission’s report lamented the decline of education in America, warning that with a prolonged loss of ground to international countries vying for similar jobs and industries within education, there will be a correlating loss of America’s comparative standard of living. While acknowledging the American education system was designed for the previous industrial and manufacturing age, thus outdated, the Commission advocated the following recommendations: (1) greater efficiency of education resources and funding; (2) recruit students from the upper academic echelons to college who specifically intend to become teachers; (3) increased standardization in curriculum and course offerings relating to the current global economy and restricting course options; (4) create more high performing schools in every district; (5) increase the availability of early childhood education; (6) give greater support to America’s most needy students; (7) re-engage adults educationally and in skills development for the new economy (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

The Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) in 2012, defined a college and career ready young person as someone who can “qualify for and succeed in entry level,

credit bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework". EPIC's report on college and career readiness identifies four components of the college and career readiness curriculum: building cognitive strategies that include hypothesizing, analysis, synthesis, and problem solving; building students' existing skills and techniques through goal setting, self-awareness, and motivation; strengthening content knowledge by focusing on core subjects and their applications within students' desired career trajectory; growing transition knowledge and skills which enables students to navigate life between high school and college or their chosen career path.

The Career Readiness Partner Council (CRPC), a consortium consisting of business leaders, education groups, leaders in the education reform community, and political and civic groups which includes Ford Motor Company, the American Federation of Teachers, the Broad Foundation, and National Council of La Raza, issued their brief in 2012 also, *Building Blocks for Change: What it Means to be Career Ready* (2012). In their report, the need to develop more alignment between education systems and the desires of the business community so that students can be better prepared for career life was documented. CRPC's report concludes that there needs to be improved communication and greater partnership between policymakers, high school staff, including teachers and guidance counselors, industry leaders, post-secondary institutions, parents, and schools' communities with the same of working to increase students' academic and technical knowledge and skills as well as bolster their employability knowledge and workplace skills and attitudes [43].

The amplified call for "college and career readiness" is posited as a means to boost academic proficiency, with college attainment being the means by which students gain access to occupational opportunities. The rationale undergirding "college and career readiness", though simplistic hinges on historic assumptions and observations of the inequities within American schooling. Schools are identified as sites of social reproduction, tracking, and sorting where some students are prepared for labor-intensive, menial work, while others were tracked for a future in white-collar executive work. Kolluri and Tierney [44] argue the "College for All" and the "College for Some" approaches, though differing, are rife with their own distinct set of problems. While "College for Some", in essence, reinforces tracking and sorting of generations' past, with some high school students being deemed destined for low-paying, unskilled work based on their academic performance, others would presumably be headed for the greener pastures of academia—but not without its own set of problems. The "College for All" paradigm ignores the reality that capitalism demands a robust underclass of citizenry and worker, regardless of one's educational attainment, and particularly for the historically marginalized, the increase in education has not coincided with substantive advancement occupationally or in wealth. Additionally, they contend, that such a heavy focus on earning a bachelor's degree as the benchmark separating those with economic and occupational opportunities, and those without, reinforces the concept of America and the global economy as meritocratic, where we are all equally positioned to achieve future success based on our work ethic.

Finally, as referenced by Giroux and Saltman, the increased call for college attendance among America's K-12 students also benefits the corporate interests of banks and universities. With the sustained whittling down of Pell grants available to America's students for college, to bridge financial gaps, more students are taking out private loans from lenders like Sallie Mae and Navient. At present American student loan debt, at USD 1.4 trillion, is America outpacing every other type of consumer debt as more students see college as a necessary avenue to achieve career success, yielding this generation of college students to belong to "generation debt". At the same time, post-secondary institutions, both public and private, are increasingly corporatized by global neoliberal interests finding more ways to profit off American college students' ambitions for a brighter future. From corporate campus center restaurants like Wendy's, Subway, and Taco Bell, to custodial services provided by global giants Aramark and the Compass Group, and with credit card and telecommuni-

cations companies afforded unfettered access to post-secondary institutions, the American student is now a new and growing consumer base, even while on campus [45].

Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg [46] posits the universal “college and career readiness” in response to globalization is not only potentially harmful to America’s students but also is antithetical to the needs of tomorrow’s economy. He argues that US public education curriculum, with its emphasis on assessment and curriculum standardization and less creativity, yields increased implementation of technology-based curriculum and personalized learning, where the workplaces of tomorrow are becoming more collaborative, communicative, and reliant on networking.

Perhaps most concerning is the critique that the “college and career readiness” approach ignores the operational reality of global capitalism that seeks to maximize profits through reducing production and labor costs. As David Backer identifies in *The False Promise of Education*, “about 3.5 M students will graduate from high school during the 2016–2017 school year” with most attending at least some college after and during that same year; “1.01 M associate’s degrees, 1.9 M bachelor’s, 800,000 master’s, and 181,000 doctoral degrees will be awarded”, but continues, “having a degree will do nothing to protect you against the sometimes violent and unpredictable patterns of market activity in a capitalist economy” [47] (p. 3). With the increase in domestic automation in manufacturing, coupled with corporate offshoring due to growing and extended international trade agreements, the sustained erosion of factory jobs has continued for nearly fifty years with no signs of slowing down.

Additionally, with the expansion of neoliberal corporatism impacting the American public sector and civil service jobs, the reliability of securing middle-class wages and benefits through public sector employment is increasingly under threat. The growth of Federal Express and the United Parcel Service, for example, continues to put an even greater financial strain on the public United States Postal Service and its workers. With Amazon expanding operations to include the delivery of electronics, goods of all kinds, and even food, their usage of individual citizens working as independent contractors emblematic of the growing “gig economy” depresses expansion and salary and benefits expectations for parcel carriers in both the traditional private and public sectors. The uptick in usage of temporary work agencies nationwide, and across sectors, allows corporations and businesses access to labor, but at a fraction of the cost of a directly hired, unionized employee.

The effort to find the cheapest labor is not only apparent in manufacturing and public sector service jobs, but also apparent in the technology sector as well. It is increasingly common for American customers experiencing difficulty with their computer or telecommunications device to contact customer service and be connected with a call center based in India or Bangladesh. Not only are these call center workers able to field, chart, and register complaints, but oftentimes can aid a caller in finding solutions to their concern remotely, demonstrating an apparent proficiency in software manipulation. Lakes points out that a tech worker in Silicon Valley, CA, was paid on average USD 78,000 in 2013, whereas someone in India is paid USD 8000 to do the same work. Such a disparity in labor costs is blamed for the shedding of nearly three million white-collar jobs since 2002 [42].

Further, as fewer and fewer electronics are manufactured in America, the expectation between the promise of educational attainment and career or wage potential, especially within the tech industry, does not equate to the reality of the capitalist economy. Technicians working domestic Apple retail stores, according to the New York Times, in 2012, earn USD 12 an hour on average, or USD 25,000 per year without health benefits or a pension, are college educated, and earners of bachelor’s degrees [48]. Add to that, as the bulk of good-paying jobs and their correlating benefits become less and less available, the occupational outlook in America is increasingly turning toward service sector jobs that are non-unionized and for which no college degree is required. Industries like food service, health care, and maintenance are the growth industries for the next generation of American workers, but such industries also do not pay well enough to survive on one income.

As incomes across sectors in America have stagnated; housing, food, and health care costs continue to rise—even in areas once considered undesirable; union affiliation is down to roughly 10% from 40% in the 1960s—yet more formal education is demanded by education and business leaders. This is the American economic future; how the increased focus on “college and career readiness” for America’s students prepares students for tomorrow’s economy is anyone’s guess. In the next section, we will explore the discriminatory workplace realities for employees of color that are persistent yet frequently unaddressed in the approach to get all students “college and career ready”, thus leaving students of color additionally unprepared for the work world that awaits.

5. Racial Discrimination in Hiring

Since the 1970s and 1980s, structural changes within the American economy transitioned the urban job market from industry-based to service-based, and along with globalization and automation in factories, has led to a subsequent concentration of male joblessness within urban areas [49,50]. The stark shift in American employment coincided with the precipitous decline of unionized, middle-class paying manufacturing jobs requiring little formal education, to today’s post-industrial reality where more jobs within city centers are white-collar, service sector jobs requiring post-secondary education. This new normal in the American work world negatively impacted men of all racial backgrounds, but urban unemployment has disproportionately impacted urban black men [51]. Indeed, as of 2010, nearly 50% of all black men of working age in urban areas were unemployed and the roles of working black men have persistently lagged in employment rates compared to white men since 1980 [52,53]. Black and Hispanic male urban joblessness had dire effects on communities, contributing significantly to growing single-family households, incarceration, poverty, increased juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, and increased crime [50]. Multiple arguments sought to explain chronic male unemployment within the black community.

The skills-mismatch theory [54] posits that with the erosion of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, where higher levels of formal education were not a requirement for employment, black men, who typically do not receive as many years of formal education as their white counterparts, were left at a competitive disadvantage when competing for service sector jobs that advantaged educated urban white men. Waldinger and Bailey [55] write, “The mismatch argument is essentially a story about the passing of the city of production and its consequences for the urban poor: the industrial city grew because it possessed labor and technical expertise. Neither literacy, language, nor technical ability counted for much in the eyes of urban employers since the few necessary skills could be acquired in ‘hands-on’ fashion on the job”. However, researchers have argued against this skills-mismatch theory as early as the late 1970s. Charles Brecher’s mismatch misunderstanding [56] argued the disparity in skills training and/or formal education does not account for the high levels of black male unemployment. Discrimination, Brecher concludes, is likely a dominant factor in persistent black male joblessness.

Another argument put forth regarding black joblessness within cities is that once readily available factory jobs in urban areas relocated overseas through free-trade agreements and to residential suburbs [57] which created “spatial inaccessibility” to potential employment [51]. The “spatial mismatch” theory, articulated by Kain [58] argued that the suburbanization of the manufacturing sector, along with residential segregation in suburban areas, physically kept urban minorities from industry jobs, thus benefitting their white counterparts in employment availability and occupational opportunity. Additionally, Skinner argued that central city black men confront informational and transportation disadvantages that prevent them from entering entry-level manufacturing and service sector jobs that have relocated to the suburbs [59]. Rogers found that the more immediate access black men in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan area had to job opportunities, the shorter their periods of joblessness were—thus lending credence to the theory that if jobs are physically out of reach for urban black men, who are less likely to own a car or possess a driver’s license,

and more likely to rely on public transportation, the higher their periods of unemployment will be [60].

Subsequent research puts forward that in addition to a skills and spatial mismatch that contributed to urban minority unemployment or underemployment in post-industrial America, the lack of access through social networks is an additional barrier sustaining underemployment among minorities. According to a 2019 report by the Economic Policy Institute, as of late 2018, black unemployment sits at 6.5%, and Latino unemployment at 4.5%, white unemployment is half that of blacks at 3.1% (Williams & Wilson, 2019). That black unemployment is double that of white Americans is not unsurprising as blacks still have struggled to reach pre-Great Recession levels in wealth, homeownership, and employment [61]. One likely contributor to lagging employment rates, as identified by researcher Nancy DiTomaso, is that privilege tends to be hoarded by those who have it, and is out of reach from those who do not. The American Non-Dilemma: Racial Inequality Without Racism (2013) posits that if employment or access is itself a privilege, such a privilege is kept in white circles, among other white people. Where simply referencing a job to an acquaintance or a neighbor, ensuring resumes submitted are viewed by specific decision makers, or “putting in a good word” for a family member, most races have little substantive interaction, which has an adverse impact on employment opportunities for non-whites specifically, though not specifically discriminatory [62].

Another argument posited to explain black unemployment or underemployment is the legacy and lingering pervasiveness of racial discrimination. Blacks have been shown to experience “high employment disadvantage,” specifically because of race when compared to other racial demographics [51]. More than any other ethnic subgroup, black men experience direct racial discrimination in the job market. Although many white people in mainstream America believe discrimination to be rare and isolated occurrences, blacks by employers, are widely to be perceived as “less productive”, “lazy”, “dishonest”, and “belligerent”, especially if their job application indicates they reside in a poor urban neighborhood [62]. Over the last twenty-five years, due to persistent discrimination in hiring, unemployment for blacks has remained roughly double that of whites [52]. Indeed, Quillian, et al. conducted a meta-analysis for the National Academy of Sciences in 2017 and found that even when accounting for education, gender, and study methodologies, white people still get 36% more callbacks than black applicants, and 25% more callbacks than Latino job seekers, indicating very little progress has been made in leveling the playing field in occupational attainment.

Perhaps the most glaring indicator of racial discrimination in hiring is the propensity for employers to deny callbacks and follow up correspondence based on an applicant’s name. In “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal”, Bertrand and Mullainathan concluded that across industries and occupations, applicants with “white names” receive 50% more callbacks for interviews than names that sound black [63]—a sentiment repeated most unabashedly by the View’s Raven-Symone who exclaimed in 2015, “I’m not going to hire you if your name is Watermelondrea. That’s just not going to happen. I’m not going to hire you.” Such entrenched discrimination is not without obvious consequences: fewer callbacks mean fewer job opportunities, fewer job offers, fewer job options, and less leverage in negotiations [64]. Additionally, black employees, both men, and women, typically are the first to be fired from their jobs in economic downturns, thus contributing to lingering rates of comparative black unemployment [65].

Where common explanations for the persistent disparity in employment rates between blacks and whites are a comparative lack of formal education or higher likelihood of possessing a criminal record, a 2005 Princeton study showed that black men in New York City with a high school diploma, and no criminal record, were less likely to receive a second phone call from a prospective employer than a white man who had just left prison [66]. Alexander [67] conducted a longitudinal study on low-income and working-class families of all races in West Baltimore. He found that “at 28, 54 percent of white men with a criminal record were employed full time making an average of \$20 an hour; among black men with

similar records, just 33 percent were employed by 28, making just over \$10 an hour, or half that of their white peers” [67]. Further, employed blacks and Hispanics are much more likely to work for, at, or near, poverty wages. Even earning a two-year or bachelor’s degree does not provide a buffer from the negative dual reality of racism, and the low geographic availability of, yet high demand for, low-paying jobs [68].

Though black and Hispanic women do find employment at higher rates than minority men, they are also more likely to work for wages at or below minimum wage [69]. And while women nationally earn about 82 cents for every dollar a white man makes, black women earn an average of 65 cents for every single dollar a white man earns; black men earn 73 cents, and Latino men and women 69 cents and 58 cents, respectively. In hourly wages, pay disparities still exist, with men earning USD 21 per hour on average, compared to USD 15 for black men, and USD 14 for Latino men [70]. In that women head over four million black households, this earning disparity contributes to over 1.5 million black households deemed to be “working poor” [71]. Poverty plagues low-income families in ways beyond household economics. Isaacs [72] suggests poverty itself becomes a risk factor for children as mothers in poorer households are more likely to experience bouts with depression, are less educated, more likely to smoke during pregnancy, give birth to low-weight babies and are in, overall, poorer health. He adds that such familial, economic stress can yield to abusive and apathetic behaviors from parent to child and that poverty negatively impacts children’s school readiness and attendance [72].

Contrary to popular beliefs in American lore, also among the black community, educational attainment for students of color is an insufficient antidote against employment discrimination. In 2018, in 50 Years After the Kerner Commission, the Economic Policy Institute found that legacy of employment discrimination persists at roughly the same levels as 1968 when the Civil Rights Act was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson—despite the fact that “more than 90 percent of younger African Americans (ages 25 to 29) have graduated from high school, compared with just over half in 1968”, and black college graduation rates are at an all-time high [73]. The National Center for Educational Statistics [74] reported that black college attendance has increased overall 15% from 1976 to 2012, while white college enrollment fell by 24%, from 84 to 60 percent during that same period. Additionally, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016, experiences of workplace discrimination based on race worsen and become more frequent the more formally educated black people become [75]. And while black women, the most educated subgroup in America, over thirty years have increased rates of both college enrollment and graduation comparatively, black women make up only “8% of private sector jobs and 1.5% of private sector leadership positions” [75] (p. 1).

The surge in both black men’s and women’s attendance in post-secondary institutions is not without consequences. Due to the lack of generational wealth to help fund college and the lack of college exposure thus the navigational knowledge of the financial aid process from parents, black students generally, but black women specifically, end up finishing college with more debt—USD 30,400 on average as of 2018, according to the American Association of University Women. The higher amount of debt coupled with pay disparities based on race and gender leaves black women in a uniquely disadvantaged position economically and occupationally following their college education.

Finally, for black students who graduate with a bachelor’s degree, according to Brookings, such educational attainment does not cure wealth gaps nor provides the same economic stability when compared to white counterparts. A report conducted by the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development, Why Studying and Working Hard Isn’t Enough for Black Americans, conveys households where the primary breadwinner is white and not college educated, still have more wealth than households where the primary earner is black with a bachelor’s degree [76].

Such a sustained focus on “college and career readiness” for urban students of color is particularly risky in that the approach ignores the labor market and economic realities of tomorrow: that corporations continuously and persistently seeking mechanisms to

lower human participation at work through increased automation and computerization; and reduce the wages of human beings fortunate enough to secure employment through globalization, offshoring, dismantling unions and with it, collective bargaining, in addition to the greater implementation of the “gig economy”—all in efforts to maximize profit. For America’s students of color today, the aforementioned does not represent the only threat they are certain to face, as the lingering legacy of racial discrimination in hiring remains. This contemporary nationwide approach to schooling, to educate for “college and career readiness”, does not account for the specific realities today’s students of color will likely face.

6. Conclusions

As we look around, there are signs that drastic changes in the American workplace are afoot. With more jobs continuing to move across shores and borders, mergers between multinational corporate giants, coupled with a growing presence of technology supplanting human participation in the workforce, i.e., self-driving cars and computer-operated self-checkout lines, and other jobs humans once received formal training; all serves to reduce labor costs and maximize corporate profits.

At the same time, jobs that seemed safe, where it is unthinkable that humans will someday be deemed less essential, are also, through neoliberal corporatization, under attack. As the corporate control of public services grows in our education, public safety, and social services sectors, the same corporate blueprint is applied to reduce the number of workers, and if human beings cannot be removed from the workforce, dismantle workplace protections while continue privatizing, which will invariably reduce worker wages. We see this in the infiltration of charter schools in urban areas where teachers are commonly less credentialed, less certificated, less experienced, and often without unions and the ability to collectively bargain. This is exhibited with the influx of private prisons where rather than corrections officers being paid a middle-class salary and owed a pension at retirement, the private prison industry continues to boom where officers are paid a fraction of the salary of unionized public corrections officers. The same holds true within the social services where smaller private organizations are replacing state workers who performed similar duties just a generation before.

The erosion of opportunity in the American workforce is worsening with the “uberization” of the economy through the growth of the “gig economy” where people looking to earn some extra money work as free agents, where global employers act as one-time middlemen paying out a portion of the price of the service provided. There is less loyalty to the “gig” worker, nor is their job now secure. The gig economy, which continues to grow, squeezes American workers, particularly those most vulnerable and who are already poorly compensated, but in many cases still have union protections and workplace rights; hotel housekeepers, taxi drivers, and parcel delivery drivers face losing the most.

Today’s grim economic reality drives the narrative that if students continue to educate themselves certainly through high school and college, they are putting themselves in the best position to succeed occupationally and thus, economically in the future. As such, the call to yield “college and career ready” students resonates as it speaks to America’s traditional values of individual hard work yielding reward and reinforcing the ideals of American meritocracy. As a result, more Americans than ever are flooding university and college campuses desperately doing all they have been advised with the hopes of securing a good-paying job and their version of the American Dream. The trope that increased formal education yields a good-paying job has been repeated for years to students by parents, teachers, and counselors, especially within the black community—and so, students seek to earn a collegiate degree, and are incurring enormous debt in doing so.

The most troubling concern about the “college and career readiness” approach so widely deployed in our nation’s schools over the past decade is that it ignores the realities that America’s schools are still sites of social reproduction, where opportunity and access are not equitably distributed and disregards the hostile corporate environment that is

continuously working to limit human participation in the workplace while limiting workers' compensation. These economic realities are happening as students of all races are becoming more educated than ever before. These unfortunate occupational realities will be awaiting today's students tomorrow, and a curriculum centered on "college and career readiness" only furthers the illusion that as long as one receives an acceptable level of formal education, a job will be waiting. Sadly, over the past decade, we see that likelihood becoming more of a wish than a reality.

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