

Commentary on Rumble's "Social Justice, Economics, and Distance Education"

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In "Social Justice, Economics, and Distance Education," Rumble (2007) asserts that it is the responsibility of societies and governments to save people from "bad lives" and that education is a primary way of accomplishing this. Thus, he argues that libertarian and neoliberal policies that put the cost of education on the people are immoral, and instead advocates a redistributive tax system to fund education as a public good. He believes that distance education will be the most cost-effective way of increasing public access to education, and emphasizes the need to keep costs as low as possible. Rumble's argument, rooted in the values of social justice, makes a strong case for the inadequacy of libertarian/neoliberal policies to meet the moral obligations of society, but raises many questions about whether and how publicly funded education can save people from bad lives.

#### **Values of the Social Justice Movement**

Rumble (2007) is clear about the values that underlie his argument. He opens the paper by stating his conception of social justice: "that education, along with other things that define a 'good life' (Honderich, 2002), is a fundamental human right" (p. 167). This premise guides the argument of the paper. Like Honderich, Rumble believes that it is the responsibility of all to save people from living bad lives.

Rumble roundly criticizes the libertarian view that government should maximize individual choice while keeping taxes low, citing Honderich's attack on this as a "vicious" outlook (as cited in Rumble, 2007, p. 171) because it denies people's moral right to necessities like food, healthcare, and education. Even the liberal advocacy for equality of opportunity is insufficient, Rumble argues, because it is the economically advantaged who set policies that affect all. These people cannot truly operate under Rawls' "veil of ignorance" (Freeman, 2014), and will therefore tend to set policies for their own benefit. These arguments against libertarian and liberal economic policy are grounded in Rumble's commitment to facilitating good living for all, which he believes is accomplished in part through education.

### **Strength of Rumble's Argument Against Libertarian/Neoliberal Policies**

Rumble contrasts the nation-state, with responsibility for its citizens, to the libertarian market-state. He quotes Bobbitt's explanation of the market-state's primary responsibility to ensure that individuals have the maximum possible number of choices available to them. Thus, instead of state-provided education, the libertarian/neoliberal market-state encourages privatized education, which theoretically maximizes choices, and requires individuals to share in the costs of the choices they make.

The problem, Rumble notes, is that inequality severely curtails the choices available to portions of the population. In a libertarian system, the costs of privatized services are offset by lowered tax rates. However, Rumble notes, lower tax rates do nothing to help those too poor to pay taxes to begin with, and they are left without equal access to education. Further, he observes that privatization of education in the name of individual choice is counter to equality of opportunity in that it tends to offer the most and best choices to those who are the most privileged. Rumble (2007) also rejects the notion that charitable giving can fill the role of pulling people out of bad lives, calling it "at best an inadequate palliative" (p. 171).

Rumble's arguments are strong in this area, and are supported by evidence of increasing economic inequality in the United States following years of neoliberal policies. For example, Jacobs & Myers (2014) found that inequality in the U.S. increased by 4.53% from 1970 to 1981, and then by a much larger 11.2% in the neoliberal Reagan-Bush years of 1982-1993. Although they focus on the interplay of neoliberal policy, inequality, and union strength, they surmise that it is "the combined influence of ... many quite specific [neoliberal] policies" that together increase inequality (Jacobs & Myers, 2014, p. 769).

### **Will Public Education Really Save People from Bad Lives?**

Rumble's argument is built on the premise that more education, or more equal provision of education, will help save people from "bad lives." There may be some truth to this, but we

cannot overlook the many interrelated factors that will affect the ability of education to help the disadvantaged.

### **Educational Environment**

One factor to consider is the educational environment, which contributes to educational effectiveness through, for example, a positive social environment and high-quality teachers. These dimensions of effectiveness can pose challenges in low-income areas. For example, Simon and Moore Johnson (2015) discuss the high rate of teacher turnover in high-poverty U.S. public schools. Providing government funding for education as Rumble advocates does not necessarily provide disadvantaged students with the supportive and stable educational environment necessary for success.

We can consider distance education as a possible solution to inequities in educational environment: Through distance education, students from disadvantaged localities and their more advantaged peers can potentially be desegregated. In practice, though, even distance education poses challenges for low-income students who may not have access to the technology required for online courses, a common – though certainly not the only – type of distance education. We can also ask whether providing distance education as a subsidized option means that students who have the means to do so will attend traditional schools, while disadvantaged students will remain segregated in distance education programs.

### **Academic Preparedness**

While the issue of educational environment for the disadvantaged may be most prominent at the primary and secondary levels, the post-secondary level also presents low-income students with obstacles beyond paying tuition. These students “often arrive on campus not as prepared for college-level work as their wealthier peers,” even as they have competing demands on their time such as the need to work or care for family (Pierce, 2016, p. 14). While providing access to higher education through government funding is helpful, further steps are needed to promote equal opportunity for success (Gidley & Hampson, 2010).

### **The Benefits of Education**

Rumble states a priori, and it seems to be widely accepted, that education enriches lives. Rumble's argument would be enhanced by discussion of how this enrichment takes place, both economically and otherwise.

There is good evidence that higher levels of education carry economic benefits for individuals when they are compared to individuals with lower levels of education (Wolf, 2002). However, this is a relative measurement. According to a "credentialist" view of education, the wealthy use educational credentials to get the best jobs (Groot & Hartog, 1995). If government provides secondary education to all, then those with the financial means can turn to post-secondary education to distinguish themselves from other job applicants. If government provides post-secondary education, then they can turn to advanced degrees. In other words, to the extent that education is a positional good, the advantaged can always seek more to maintain their relative position.

### **Global Inequality**

As Rumble acknowledges, inequalities are rampant both among and within nations. As an example of inequality between nations, he cites the U.S. average life expectancy of 77 years, compared to 39 years in Malawi. As an example of intra-national inequality, he notes that the poorest 10% of the population in Sierra Leone brings in 0.5% of the country's income, while the richest 10% brings in 43.6%.

Rumble proposes that governments take responsibility for the education of their citizens. To the extent that public funding of education within a country may help redistribute opportunity, success, and the "good life" among that country's citizens, it still does not address the issue of international inequality. The United States still has far more of the "material well-being, freedom, safety, access to culture and enjoyment" (Rumble, 2007, p. 171) that characterize the good life than does Malawi. Furthermore, redistributive taxes may be more effective at lowering inequality in rich countries than in poor countries (Kenny, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

If one accepts Rumble's (2007) premises – that society has a responsibility to reduce the number and impact of bad lives, and that education is a way to do this – then his argument is a strong indictment of libertarian and neoliberal policies of cost-sharing. If the state is to fund education for everyone, then cost become a serious concern, and Rumble posits distance education as the most cost-effective approach. This is consistent with Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalic-Trumbic's (2009) proposal that distance education could be one element of breaking education's "iron triangle" of access, cost, and quality. However, Rumble's argument raises a number of questions about just how much publicly funded education can do to save people from bad lives, and how it will do this. Various factors beyond money affect individuals' ability to succeed in education and to be enriched by it.

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