



What is the Jeffersonian paradigm?

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Abstract

In non-academic language, this post unpacks what the author means by the term "Jeffersonian paradigm" as a way of thinking about schooling that threads its ways through American history and political economy.

Keywords/Tags

Jeffersonian Paradigm, education, meritocracy

As they went about attempting to lay out the new social landscape of American democracy and society, the founding fathers debated how society might best be structured. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were among the most prolific of thinkers to participate in such debate, and have left a rich treasure of their thoughts for us to examine. One particular such debate became deeply influential in how we have come to think about education and meritocracy today. In [my new book](#) I refer to a particular bundle of philosophical positions about education, which emerged directly from this debate, as the "Jeffersonian paradigm." Although it has radically changed over time and does not belong to Jefferson alone, this paradigm has endured across the breadth of American history.

THE DEBATE

In this debate, Jefferson argued that the old, European model for social hierarchy was both deeply problematic and unsuited to their goals in the New World. The problem was that in the old aristocracy, position was passed on along bloodlines instead of based upon the virtues and talents of individuals. He felt that there existed, invisible to the eye, a 'natural' aristocracy of talented persons who needed to be located and groomed for leadership. He felt that this talent should supersede wealth or birthrights. But, we may ask, how could we locate and groom the natural aristocrat? In one of his letters to John Adams, he suggests that the state ought to:

establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools who might receive at the public expense a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects to be completed at a university, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.

This notion is at the heart of what I am referring to by this paradigm. In essence, this paradigm for schooling sees schools less as a place for individuals to flourish and more as a tool for revealing “natural talents” or merit. Jefferson’s work is the foundation for a strand of thinking that has come to dominate how we handle higher education (in ways that Jefferson himself could never have imagined). And, as we have become obsessed with college education (see the Credentials Arms Race – coming soon), it has also deeply infiltrated K-12 thinking. Although quite complex, there are three main reasons why I find this paradigm problematic.

Problem 1: which talents count?

Now, to be clear, individual teachers and principals may have very student-centered philosophies that shape educational experience. But, systematically, the first problem with this approach is that it turns our attention away from improving the lives of the kids we teach, and toward the process of sorting. So much of the larger infrastructure we have built is not there to improve their lives, but rather to sort kids into like piles. Much of what schools do is centered in the identifying, evaluating, and measuring of some sorts of talent, and so we privilege everything that leads to those very narrow sets of abilities. Aside from being broadly dehumanizing, we also need to think about who built that infrastructure and to what ends. We also need to think about what other sorts of talents, knowledges, and ways of being are left out (and in turn, which kids and families have been systematically left out).

Problem 2: is this really “natural” talent?

This paradigm was certainly revolutionary and progressive in its time, and in many ways it stands up to our principles of meritocracy over time. But, when we look at how we have structured schooling, we can also identify some troubling things that get attached to it. The first is the assumption that wealth or privilege will not influence how talent gets cultivated. What we have seen is that, quite logically, wealthy parents do everything they can to cultivate the “right” sorts of talents. If Jefferson’s talents of reading, writing, math and science are to be valued, then we can easily work to cultivate those things in our children if we have the time and money to do it. And a tremendous amount of educational research shows us today that affluent parents engage in what [Lareau \(2003\)](#) calls “concerted cultivation.” That is they spend endless hours and resources helping their kids to acquire the talents that count – and without resources, time, and networks it can be challenging to acquire those things (at least to the same degree that those affluent kids are able to). This is why we see that the majority of kids in [elite universities come from wealth](#) – because their parents spent a lot of time helping them to cultivate those talents.

Although it is problematic, this is not really an indictment of these parents or a call for some sort of conspiracy theory. Hell, I do it with my kids. I want them to have a good quality of life, I know that the system requires that they have certain talents to get that quality of life,

and so my partner and I dedicate our resources to ensure that they have it. I also want my kids to be exposed to a world of possibility. I want my kid to experience some camp where they can explore something in a deep way and make friends with other kids from around the country, or to travel to another country themselves, so I will try to make sure that we can afford to send them there even if it means sacrificing other things. So it certainly makes sense that parents secure these opportunities for these kids, but it does not defeat the advantage of wealth and birth that Jefferson was aiming for.

Problem 3: why am I so stressed out about this?

Because we think of schooling as revealing what is inherent it makes us think that schools can and should be weighing our whole self – and that is stressful. [De Botton](#) has argued that tensions about meritocracy are real; they are internalized as status anxiety which has emerged under the conditions of (post)modernity, fueled by media broadly and increasingly social media. In other words our hyper-awareness of others' lives and the expectation that anyone can "make" it, leads us to wonder "why not me?" In the Medieval era, for example, there was no expectation that the masses could or should do anything other than toil for the benefit of their "betters" whose position in the hierarchy was ordained by God. But, he argues, although it was deeply unequal it also did not fuel this open-ended question about how we are spending out lives and whether there is greener grass right around the corner. And spaces like FaceBook, where we are busy pretending that our lives are perfect, reinforces this sense.

Or, said another way, our cultural interpretation of hierarchy made a big shift. Rather than the invisible persons at the bottom being "unfortunate" in God's plan, they came instead to be seen as the producers of their own misfortune: failures. Today, though, despite the near impossible odds of any particular individual achieving the material wealth of Bill Gates (and the impossibility of many individuals achieving such wealth, since its concentration produces inequality that makes that impossible), his story reinforces the notion that with some hard work, a garage, and innate ability anyone can. The odds of anyone one of us achieving Gates' "success" is about the same as it was for a peasant becoming a landed nobleman. But within a meritocracy, inability to achieve material success points to personal incompetence or moral failings (such as laziness), even when such success is statistically implausible.

And this is stressful. We beat ourselves up for not being something greater, and the Jeffersonian Paradigm fuels this.

CONCLUSIONS

The "Jeffersonian paradigm" does not belong only to Thomas Jefferson, so it may be unfair to label this enduring philosophical tradition in educational thought in the U.S with his name. But clearly Adams thought it was problematic, and suggested that democracy should not have any kind of aristocracy – based on either "blood" or "talent." Nonetheless, although it is largely premised on his initial propositions, it is certainly unclear what Jefferson himself

would make of the Jeffersonian paradigm as it manifests in the 21st century. And yet it is a powerful force built into our educational infrastructure; one which brings with it a whole set of assumptions about the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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