Equality, Capability and Social Justice in Education for Disabled Learners: Elements of a Fundamental Educational Entitlement: Handout

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1. Educational Equality and Justice

The importance of educational equality: primarily educational equality matters because it is a fundamental value of justice.

Two important considerations:

1. Reasons for supporting egalitarianism: intrinsic and instrumental value of equality.
   ‘Equality is the sovereign virtue of political communities’ (Dworkin, 2000:1).
2. Important normative role of equality in education at two interconnected levels:
   • The theoretical level, concerned with conceptualisations of values and aims in education
   • The level of provision, related to the enactment of these values into policies and practice.

The importance of conceptualising educational equality for disabled learners: widespread inequalities in the funding of special and inclusive education.

2. The Capability Approach: Equality in Capabilities

The capability approach is a normative framework for the assessment of inequalities and poverty.

Sen’s Capability Approach – Key concepts:
- Space of capability/functionings
- ‘Metric’ for interpersonal comparisons sensitive to human diversity
- Democratic decision process of choice of capabilities

3. Equality in the Space of Educational Capabilities: Elements of a Fundamental Educational Entitlement

- Education a basic capability: within the capability approach education is conceptualised as a basic, fundamental capability, and hence essential to people’s well-being and to their freedoms. Education thus conceived consists in basic educational capabilities for functionings that enable people to participate effectively and independently in the dominant social framework.
- Reasons in support of equality in the fundamental educational capabilities:
• Equal consideration due to individuals.
• Fundamental importance of education for people’s freedoms.
• Future-oriented dimension of education as basic capability.

What does equality in educational capabilities consist in? I maintain that the capability approach suggests an understanding of educational equality in terms of equal opportunities to those fundamental educational capabilities that are necessary to function effectively and to participate as an independent person in society.

• Opportunity dimension of capability: opportunities to achieve fundamental educational functionings.
• Opportunity understood in the broad sense of educational resources, both in terms of physical and human resources; settings, like school buildings and facilities; and external conditions, like policies and regulations that are necessary to promote educational achievement.

The idea of educational equality presented constitutes a fundamental educational entitlement.

4. Elements of a Fundamental Educational Entitlement for Disabled Learners

Two levels:

1. A capability perspective on impairment, disability and special educational needs;
2. A level of provision: additional resources.

1. Conceptualising impairment, disability and special educational needs in capability terms.

The capability approach sees disability as inherently relational, or, more specifically, as emerging from the interlocking of individual characteristics with social and circumstantial elements. Within this approach, disability and special educational needs are conceptualised as functionings and capabilities limitations and hence evaluated in terms of vertical inequalities.

Example: moderate learning difficulties, dyslexia.

Dyslexia is considered a difference, which, in affecting functionings, constitutes an identifiable disadvantage. It is relational to both the impairment and the design of educational institutions. The capability metric evaluates dyslexia as vertical inequality and highlights how additional and appropriate provision in any case of restriction of functioning and capability becomes a matter of justice.

2. A fundamental educational entitlement for disabled learners consists in levels of opportunities and resources required to allow learners to achieve those basic educational functionings that are prerequisites for an effective participation in the dominant framework.

In this sense, therefore, a dyslexic child is entitled to additional opportunities/resources that will allow her to achieve reading and writing functionings appropriate to participate effectively in her social framework.

3. Problems:

• Possible elements of ‘reductionism’
• Possible discriminatory use of threshold level of capabilities.

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