

Addressing Ableism in Schooling and Society? The Capabilities Approach and Students with Disabilities

Ashley Taylor
Syracuse University

The capabilities approach (CA) is celebrated as offering a framework for educational equality that is aimed at responding to existing social injustices. It is in the spirit of this corrective that CA promises to inform philosophical and policy discussions on the education of students with disabilities. Recent work in this area emphasizes the normalcy of disability in human life and the need to include disability in any consideration of overall well-being and equality. However, the view of disability as a natural part of human diversity stands in stark contrast to the prevailing negative social and cultural regard for disability as an abnormal or atypical condition. In this essay, I ask whether the attempt to normalize disability may overlook the way that disability is actually viewed: Does the effort to normalize disability underestimate the force of cultural constructions of normalcy and normal ability? I discuss the role of education in preparing young people for political participation in order to show how the unjust social context of this participation complicates how we attend to the “atypical” functionings of children with disabilities. I argue that a CA-informed framework of educational justice for such children would need to balance the aim of *normalizing* disability with a sensitivity to the existing conditions of disability exclusion. This balance is necessary if we are to honor the aim of CA to truly respond to existing injustices.

CAPABILITY, DISABILITY, AND EDUCATION

The capabilities approach has been used to address many different facets of social equality, including most recently in theories of educational equality. As a framework of justice that attends to the actual differences among individuals in their capacity to convert material goods and resources into opportunities, CA focuses on capability or “the power to do something.” It is not simply what we have, but what we can *do* with what we have.¹ Capability is therefore defined as a person’s freedom to achieve valuable functionings, which are the beings and doings of life: having self-respect, being well nourished, being well educated, and participating in public life, for example. Because what matters is whether persons possess real opportunities to achieve their particular conceptions of well-being, they must have access to opportunities to exercise different functionings. CA therefore finds a justification for the distribution of those resources and opportunities that form “the social bases of certain *abilities* to be and do.”² In her prolific work on CA, Martha Nussbaum contends that education is at the heart of the approach as the social mechanism through which individuals form and develop the capabilities necessary for living a life of dignity and of equality.³ It is through education, both in school and in the family, that we learn the functionings — beings and doings — necessary for democratic participation.⁴ Thus, compulsory education is justified, as is the compulsory development of certain functionings, “as a necessary prelude to adult capability.”⁵ Under this scheme, children would be required to learn the functionings

deemed necessary for participation in adult society if they are to be considered adequately educated.

The approach has likewise had a significant influence in work on disability justice,⁶ where scholars emphasize how CA effectively normalizes disability by considering it as just one among many aspects of human diversity — like geographical location or gender difference, for example — to which any framework of justice must attend. Recently Lorella Terzi outlined the role of CA in addressing educational equality for children with disabilities. The approach, says Terzi, defines disability-related educational needs relationally and in terms of “restricted functionings resulting from the interrelation between specific characteristics of the learner and the design of the educational system.”⁷ She champions CA’s potential to respond to some of the theoretical and political problems she sees in existing models of inclusive education advanced within the disability studies field — models that, she says, “oversocialize” disability by locating it wholly or overwhelmingly in the environment or social context (*JE*, 63). These disability studies perspectives to which Terzi refers originated in the activism of disabled persons who saw their continuing oppression due in large part to a deep cultural misrepresentation of the experience and social phenomenon of disability. These “social model” proponents claimed that the social understanding of disability exceeds the individual experience of impairment: where disability has traditionally been regarded as a biological condition of non-normalcy, disability scholars and activists argue that the notion of a normal or average human is a cultural concept.⁸ They point to the cultural response to disability as key to understanding both the lived experience of disabled people and their exclusions from social institutions.

Many current models of inclusive education originate in this critique of concepts of normalcy and the medicalized understanding of disability. Historically, disabled students have been the objects of segregated, remedial, or corrective education, excluded from the mainstream of public schooling because of their perceived limitations in learning ability.⁹ Refocusing the attention to the *design* of educational structures — and the parallel design of social structures more generally — is therefore the response of a disability community that regards their exclusion as a societal rather than biological — and inevitable — problem. Impairment, according to this view, takes on a particular meaning within education that is socially and culturally contingent, that goes beyond the individual experience of bodily difference. Thus, if we can evaluate the organization of schools in light of these critiques, we might find that the exclusion of children with disabilities is based, to greater or lesser degrees, on arbitrary ideas about normal functioning and normal educational development. Further, many disabled individuals have called for their recognition as having disability identities that are formed out of their respective experiences of bodily difference and social exclusion. These identities “respond to natural and cultural factors, [and] make certain actions possible” by making them coherent;¹⁰ a recognition of disability identity can lead to increased cultural understanding of the different ways that people choose to live, making sense of otherwise potentially unintelligible life decisions and conceptions of well-being.

According to Terzi, however, these views face serious theoretical and political limitations because of their “underspecified and often confused” arguments regarding educational distribution (*JE*, 74). She argues that the social model of disability “over-socializes the reality of disability” by neglecting the lived reality of impairment (*JE*, 58), a concern that some disability scholars have come to share. Tom Shakespeare writes, “The simplicity which is the hallmark of the social model is also its fatal flaw”:¹¹ by neglecting impairment and the realities of resource distribution in society, the social model oversimplifies the problem of disability justice. How, for example, might the recognition of disability identity be translated into a concrete policy of educational entitlements for children with disabilities? Terzi calls it “a moral ideal that is politically problematic” (*JE*, 60). She claims, in short, that the social model of inclusive education provides a theoretically underdeveloped justification for the equal educational entitlements of children with disabilities. Clear principles for the distribution of resources and the recognition of differences are required if such theoretical frameworks of educational entitlement are to inform policy decisions. The social model perspective has, by contrast, “misinterpreted the importance of distributing opportunities and resources according to a principled framework,” thus relegating distributive matters to a secondary position relative to matters of recognition (*JE*, 82). CA is most promising, Terzi argues, in its emphasis on disability as simply one aspect of human diversity; it is an improved positioning of disability because it *normalizes* disability rather than treating it as an outsider condition. Thus, “no particular attention is given [in CA] to natural versus social origin of disability, since the latter is seen as pertaining to human variations, and as such it is comprehensively addressed within the metric.”¹² CA therefore both justifies and necessitates the distribution of educational entitlements to disabled students on the basis that society has an obligation to secure “the social bases of adequate capability to pursue valued ends” (*JE*, 100). The educational response to disabled students’ needs is no longer regarded as “special,” but rather as consistent with the duties of justice owed to all students. Terzi’s concern, then, with social-model approaches of “inclusive education” is not only that they offer an incoherent foundation upon which to build policy related to the educational needs of children with disabilities, but also that they unnecessarily differentiate disability from other matters relevant to the distribution of education.

Yet, as recent work in philosophy of education has shown, CA faces its own challenges as a framework of educational justice in providing clear principles for educational policy. These challenges relate directly to CA’s emphasis on education as enabling civic participation, notably through deliberation. Harry Brighouse and Elaine Unterhalter have argued that CA is not *on its own* sufficiently specific in giving an account of educational opportunities, and that, in order to guide policy-making, it would need to be more specific about what capabilities are valuable, which ones we have *reason* to value, and *how* they are valuable relative to one another.¹³ This “indexing” problem emerges most clearly in a comparison between Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s differing versions of CA.¹⁴ Sen argues that the value-neutrality of the approach demands that a listing of relevant or valued

capabilities comes as a result of the cultural and context-specific process of public deliberation.¹⁵ By contrast, Nussbaum defends a list of ten basic capabilities that are required for a life worthy of human dignity and argues that deliberation take place as an evaluation of this list.¹⁶ For Nussbaum, the process of public deliberation on capabilities will always involve a prior understanding of what is valued and this list merely acts as a starting point from which to engage in debate. Whatever view one defends, there is a clear need *at some stage* to list those capabilities that are held to be most valuable or basic. Because educational provision always involves judgments about what is most important for a child to learn, CA's application to policy decisions would require that we have a clearer sense of which capabilities will not be neglected during the pursuit of others.¹⁷ Perhaps under ideal conditions, such decisions could fairly take place within public discussions. But we do not live under ideal conditions. So even, and perhaps especially, if we abide by Sen's approach of yielding to the process of culturally contextualized list-making, we are not only very likely to confront the challenges that can arise within any deliberative process — notably, possible imbalances in power replicated through deliberation and the resulting inequalities in whose voices are heard — but we also potentially ignore implicit and unexamined ideas about what capabilities are valuable. Brighouse and Unterhalter therefore do call for a list specific to education, a list that would form the basis for further deliberations regarding valuable capabilities.

Further, because functionings enable the development of capabilities, a consideration of functionings would need to accompany this listing of capabilities to inform the establishment of what Brighouse and Unterhalter call a “standard for responsible deliberation.”¹⁸ The particular functionings that are valued within political participation will be informed by existing social norms and will further govern which functionings are emphasized in the schooling of disabled children. Brighouse and Unterhalter emphasize the role of education in redressing existing inequalities and forms of discrimination and misrecognition in decision making, arguing that this “positional value” of education consists both in the social advancements of individual children and in the way that schools address these injustices.¹⁹ As I will elaborate below, for children with disabilities this would mean attending not only to their development of particular capabilities, but also to the differential ways in which they express and realize the functionings necessary for developing them. Importantly, it is this attention to, and defence of, functioning differences that has been at the heart of social-model approaches to inclusive education.

It seems, then, that we must not move too quickly away from the moral and political dimensions of inclusive education and oversimplify the role of the *existing* social and cultural context in which inclusive education is intended to take place, even as we aspire to emphasize the statistical normalcy of disability. As CA itself is meant to recognize, changing the terrain of unjust educational policy and practices involves serious attention to existing social conditions. The theoretical move away from existing non-ideal social conditions is identified by Charles W. Mills as a tendency in political theory and ethics to focus on ideal social conditions in theorizing about justice and equality to the neglect of actual historical and ongoing

oppression.²⁰ He says that this tendency is counterproductive to the goal of political theorizing as it neglects the consequences of oppression on social cognition, as well as the role of group-specific experience and the perspectives of the oppressed on existing social order.²¹ So, although Terzi maintains that the understanding of disability as one aspect of human diversity amounts to a “positive recognition of differences” (*JE*, 121), it is not clear how such a normalization of disability can adequately respond to the actual and continual experience of oppression that many disabled individuals, including children, face. We can argue that disability is a normal part of human life, but this may be profoundly *unconvincing* in a society that continues to regard disability as a distinctly abnormal condition that calls for corrective or segregated schooling. This is precisely the reason behind the call for a positive recognition of difference that underlies the social model approach, a call to recognize disabled people as *positively* participating in society, as different from, not *less than*. While these efforts may appear counterproductive, and possibly divisive (*JE*, 79), we must examine them as tools of disruption in a world that ignores, dismisses, and marginalizes disabled people. In short, there appears to be a gap between the regard for disability to which CA aspires and the existing social regard for disability as deficiency rather than diversity.²² What I am questioning, then, is whether a capabilities approach to education can afford to minimize the significance of these social realities in its efforts to attend to disabled students’ needs and to their capabilities for democratic participation.

CAPABILITIES AND “ATYPICAL” FUNCTIONINGS

As a framework that emerged in response to existing injustices, CA is perfectly poised to resist an idealizing tendency in its application to the education of children with disabilities. However, as I have argued, a too-quick dismissal of social models of inclusive education risks reinstating the existing social context of disability oppression and exclusion. The argument that disability is part of the normal experience of being human, while it calls attention to the prevalence of human differences in ability, distracts from how disability is *actually* viewed in society. In fact, it might even serve to mask existing structures of power by concealing the fact that disability is not included in public consciousness of diversity and difference.

Importantly, CA leaves room for schools to recognize that encouraging the development of alternative functionings in children with disability labels could contribute positively to their educational development by giving “due consideration to the different and atypical ways in which people can indeed function, and ultimately lead valuable lives.”²³ The approach therefore offers a more promising regard for functioning differences in considering equal educational entitlements for children with disabilities because it is interested in “basic enabling conditions” for effective participation in society and for forming individual life plans (*JE*, 149). CA “suggests a conception of a fundamental educational entitlement in terms of the equal opportunities and access levels of educational functionings necessary to function and to participate effectively in society” (*JE*, 155). This approach to education is consistent, then, with an adequacy view that implies a threshold level of educational achievement. Indeed, says Nussbaum, the goal of education *should*

be to bring people with cognitive disabilities (for example) up to the same capabilities as so-called “normal” people.²⁴ This should not, however, be interpreted as a claim that they must develop the same functionings as so-called “normal” or “typical” individuals; rather, it is precisely to underscore the importance of encouraging alternative and diverse forms of functioning that would facilitate the achievement of educational adequacy.

But the recognition of diverse functionings in schools would have to be mirrored by their recognition in broader society, and certainly within the political and deliberative spheres. However, as Tobin Siebers argues, despite increasing the theoretical understanding of impairment, disability identity, and the role of the disabled in society, “the ideology of ability remains largely unquestioned.” We do not have an accepted term for what Siebers calls “the prejudicial reduction of a body to its disability,” the way that social expectations of ability define who is inside and who is outside the realm of social participation. Disability activists have attempted to introduce the term “ableism” to describe such prejudice and marginalization of disabled people, but “[i]ts use elicits scowls and smirks, even in progressive society.”²⁵ While the *term* ableism may not be part of common parlance, the phenomenon to which it refers is well documented.²⁶ Disability scholars cite not only the overt discrimination and prejudicial treatment of disabled people, but the long-standing acceptance and defence of particular norms of behaviour, performance, and communication that dictate who and what is recognized and heard. Thomas Hehir argues that these norms — or “ableist preferences” — are particularly apparent in schooling:

From an ableist perspective, the devaluation of disability results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids, etc. In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids. (EA, 39)

These ableist preferences in functioning lead schools to expressly or tacitly steer disabled children into developing functionings that resemble what is deemed “normal” or “typical.” Hehir argues that this raises ethical as well as practical questions, as in many cases much class time is spent trying to change the disability — normalize functioning — rather than focusing on academic learning, possibly compounding educational deficits that children experience (EA, 4–5). Importantly, this critique does not deny the existence of functioning differences, or different beings and doings of children in approaching the same educational goal, but rather emphasizes schools’ responses to these different functionings. So, for example, although children with low vision who learn to read Braille are less likely to have low literacy, efforts to discourage Braille literacy prevail (EA, 10).

Citing the long history of oralism in the education of deaf children, the emphasis on educational aides rather than independent mobility training for blind students, and the resistance to modified reading practices for students with learning disabilities, Hehir demonstrates how schools are influenced by the communication norms

of broader society. The norms of effective communication that exist in the public sphere have a significant influence on what functionings-development schools emphasize. If using sign language is not the preferred or accepted means of communication in the political, economic, or other domains of society, deaf students are likely to be encouraged to develop oral speech and read lips, a relatively inefficient means of communication for many deaf students and possibly damaging to them academically (EA, 7). If children are steered away from non-normative functionings like sign language, or indeed from understanding sign language as contributing to their capability for participation in society, then they may struggle to achieve the standard of effective communication that has been perhaps arbitrarily imposed. In this instance, the standard reflects existing social norms and this may limit the extent to which all children can participate when they develop into adulthood. In continuing to steer children away from developing “alternative” functionings like sign language, schools may actually limit children’s development of the capabilities necessary for achieving educational adequacy.

The argument that “‘intervention’ on the impaired individual proves not only more efficient, but also enables a broader range of opportunities for functionings than the actual possible changes to social and institutional arrangements” (JE, 101) may only be true given current social norms. For example, cochlear implants significantly improve children’s development of spoken language, even though the implants simultaneously limit their ability to learn sign language, something that raises concern for children’s communication development, as I have argued above, as well as their cultural development, as it may undermine their connection with the Deaf Community (JE, 101). That is, these efforts to steer kids away from normatively undesirable functionings may be both academically and culturally inefficient, even as they *appear* to better facilitate children’s inclusion in society. So, even as schools evolve their understanding of and openness to non-normative functionings such as reading Braille, using sign language, and listening to taped readings, for example, these may not facilitate children’s best chances of participating in deliberation or other civic practices because of existing standards of communication. Perhaps enabling children to participate in *existing* social contexts would involve their being proficient in oral language and this would seem to justify the mandatory use of hearing implants. But are we justified in requiring certain functionings in children that they will need to achieve adult capability even when this entails an imposition of communicative functioning norms? Can existing, often unjust social arrangements justifiably dictate what functionings children should develop? As I argued earlier, the potential non-inclusivity of the deliberative sphere can undermine the project of democratically developing or evaluating a list of capabilities by perpetuating existing exclusions. The dilemma, then, is that we cannot comfortably depend on the process of deliberation to provide us with an answer to these problems that is not, to some degree, complicit with existing exclusions. If people with disabilities are to be fully included in political decision making, their differential means of expression and communication would need to be recognized both within schools and in broader society.

The role of education in social progress is, of course, a complicated matter. What is clear, and important for the purposes of my argument, is that a capabilities approach to education should be aimed at increasing all children's opportunities for democratic participation as well as redressing existing injustice. A CA version of educational justice for students with disabilities therefore needs to remain open to the reality of the non-ideal conditions under which schooling and democratic deliberation take place. Because deliberating occurs within social structures that reflect differences in power, sometimes what is called for is a disruption of public discourse in the form of social activism. Emily Robertson argues that "when conflict is generated by injustice, especially injustice that is difficult to recognize by those who perpetuate it because it is embedded within major social institutions, a reorientation of thinking is required, not simply creative accommodations of interests. Thus activism oriented to social justice has its distinct claim on democratic life."²⁷ This "reorientation of thinking" is what can expose the inequalities masked by existing social norms, but it comes about through a *disruption* of the public sphere. This is precisely the climate out of which social model approaches to inclusive education have emerged and been defended as *necessary* disruptions of received ideas about ability, normalcy, and citizenship. And there is certainly a place for this in CA: "campaigns to change commonly assumed views about disability and to modify norms and perceptions can be considered part of the equalization of disabled people's capability suggested by the approach."²⁸ The balance is what is key and what is, as I have argued, potentially absent from calls to dismiss disability identity politics as divisive and confused (*JE*, 79). Simply put, we are not ready to minimize the disruptive power of disability activism that can help make disabled people's functionings and choices intelligible and that reminds us where we have yet to go. So, efforts to modify norms — and to *normalize* disability — would need to account for the ways in which the cultural meanings of disability and prevailing ableism find residence in our everyday schooling practices. And this would be done by continually, and perhaps with difficulty, balancing the focus on *including* disability as an aspect of human diversity with an eye to the reality of existing exclusion of individuals with disabilities and their "atypical" functionings.

1. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 19 and 232.

2. Serene Khader, "Cognitive Disability, Capabilities, and Justice," *Essays in Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2009): 3.

3. Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 152.

4. See Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

5. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 26.

6. See Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*; see also Khader, "Cognitive Disability," and Lorella Terzi, *Justice and Equality in Education: A Capability Perspective on Disability and Special Educational Needs* (London: Continuum Press, 2008).

7. Terzi, *Justice and Equality*, 180. This work will be cited as *JE* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. See also Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
9. Thomas Hehir, "Eliminating Ableism in Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 1 (2002). This work will be cited as *EA* in the text for all subsequent references.
10. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 83.
11. Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennerd Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 200.
12. Lorella Terzi, "What Metric of Justice for Disabled People? Capability and Disability," in *Measuring Justice*, eds. Harry Brighouse and Ingrid Robeyns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 165–166.
13. Harry Brighouse and Elaine Unterhalter, "Education for Primary Goods or for Capabilities?," in *Measuring Justice*, eds. Brighouse and Robeyns, 211.
14. See Tony DeCesare, "Two Versions of the Capability Approach and Their Respective Implications for Democratic Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed. Robert Kunzman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012), 226–234.
15. See Sen, "Capabilities, Lists, and Public Reasoning: Continuing the Conversation," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (2004).
16. See Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*.
17. Brighouse and Unterhalter, "Education for Primary Goods," 202.
18. *Ibid.*, 203.
19. *Ibid.*, 210.
20. Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 168.
21. *Ibid.*, 169.
22. See Lennard J. Davis, "Why Is Disability Missing from the Discourse on Diversity?," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 2011).
23. Terzi, "What Metric," 167.
24. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 24.
25. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 81.
26. See Siebers, *Disability Theory*; Hehir, "Eliminating Ableism"; and James I. Charlton, "The Dimensions of Disability Oppression" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Davis.
27. Emily Robertson, "Public Reason and the Education of Democratic Citizens: The Role of Higher Education," in *Education, Democracy and the Moral Life*, eds. Michael Katz, Susan Verducci, and Gert Biesta (New York: Springer, 2009), 123.
28. Terzi, "What Metric," 167.