

Front of the Class: The Capabilities Approach to Disability

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Abstract

The right of disabled people is always neglected in Education. Not only can they be provided with equal education opportunities, but also seldom can they participate in teaching and training. The film Front of the class told a story of a boy with a disability who struggled in his own educational experience and became a teacher in the end. His example is used to analyse the right of disabled people and the doubts they encounter using the Capability Approach. This paper highlights the right of the disabled in education and also discussed an equal view to treat the disabled suggested by the Capability Approach.

Keywords

Education; Capabilities Approach; Disability; Inequality of disability in Education; Disability and capability.

1. Introduction

In the film, we can see that Bradley was questioned in all aspects because of his disability. Others questioned his ability to be an independent person and a teacher because of his disability. Nussbaum's Capability Theory offers a more equal view of seeing the problem. Not like Rawls' Theory of Justice, the approach provides a good starting point to analyze disability because it presumes that society does not consist of independent citizens with the same needs and abilities (Harnacke, 2013). It recognizes that all people have different abilities in transforming resources into functions. Accordingly, their demand for resources is also different, which is not only a special characteristic of disabled people. The main focus of the analysis is to discuss the doubts that Brad got and match them to the 10 capabilities, specifying the advantage of the theory in disability problems. Brad's case told us when one of our capabilities were suspected by others, we should struggle to prove ourselves.

2. The Film Front of the Class

The film Front of the class is chosen to be analyzed in this essay. It is selected as an exemplar of Capability Theory to disability. In the essay, the theory is used to link capabilities with disabilities. The focus of the analysis is to match the influence of disability and the doubts Brad gets to the 10 capabilities and then use the capability approach to explain the attitude to treat anybody at an equal level.

Front of the Class tells the story of one man's lifelong struggle with Tourette's disease from childhood to adulthood and his success in realizing his dream. The story started with a boy named Bradley Cohen. He constantly got into trouble with his father Norman and his teachers at school due to his tics. Determined to find out what is wrong with her son, his mom kept seeking medical help and finally found the disease name is Tourette syndrome (TS) in a medical book but there was no cure. Tourette's disease is a rare condition that is one of those unusual disorders that have significant neurological and psychiatric effects. However, Bradley decided never to give in to his illness and to become successful. He kept pursuing his dream to become a teacher. Although finding every people around seem to try to stop him, he managed to find a

job in Georgia as an elementary school teacher. Brad explained his TS to the children, helped a troublesome student with reading, and became the aspiration of a girl with terminal cancer. In the end, he was chosen to receive the Teacher of the Year award.

The film does a good job of revealing the physical symptoms of the disease, as well as the psychological and social impact on individuals and entire families. Also, it helps both normal people and some professionals to understand the personal experience of Tourette's and is a reference to understand the impact of the disease on mental health and neurology, patients and families throughout the lifetime.

3. Capabilities and Disability: Evidence from Bradley

Nussbaum's capability theory is used to analyze the film. She advocates human dignity requires access to 10 capabilities which are: 1. Life, 2. Bodily health, 3. Bodily integrity, 4. Senses, imagination, thought, 5. Emotions, 6. Practical reason, 7. Affiliation, 8. Other species, 9. Play, 10. Control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2011). These capabilities specify the minimum requirements of justice, and everyone should be capable, at least to this extent, must be entitled to each of these capabilities which must be guaranteed by governments and relevant international institutions. For disabled people, some of the capabilities will be influenced. But a life without any of these, whether by external deprivation or personal choice, is not any less than human life. However, there is a difference between choice and deprivation.

It is widely acknowledged that disability is considered to be body disabled. There will be some loss or unable for their body, but not unhealthy and no emotional disease. However, some of the 10 capabilities have been deprived by the disease and some have been deprived by other people.

In the case of Bradley, Tourette syndrome itself only affected his Senses, Imagination and Thought. Due to the disease, Brad cannot concentrate on reading and learning or other activities demanding attention:

Bradley: Now, somehow I don't know how, I made okay grades. But, what would take a normal person an hour, took me two. Or three. I mean, I loved learning, but I hated, hated reading. Trying to concentrate brought out the worst in my Constant Companion.

With the unavoidable companion, just like other disabled Brad's way to catch up with others is paying much more time and effort on really easy things for others. These are the capabilities that can't control to be deprived of.

The deprivation above is caused by the symptoms of the disease but there are more deprivations caused by the people around. These obstacles are because he cannot be understood by others. The capability of Emotion, Senses, imagination, thought and affiliation is deprived of Brad by others.

People used to make fun of Bradley and give him funny nicknames which cause emotional harm to Tourette syndrome patients, violating the capability of Emotions. At the beginning of the film, he described his experience of being made fun of by other kids:

My name is Bradley Cohen. But when I was a kid, people called me by lots of names. My brother, Jeff, called me Dr. Bobo. My mom called me honey. And the kids at school? Well, they called me everything from spaz to freak. I didn't have many friends actually.

Teachers kicked Brad out of the class. Regardless of his effort and inconvenience, people somehow cared more about others and their benefits. And the teacher deprived his right to study with others instead of trying to find a way to help him. When he was trying to read or learn, the Senses, imagination, and thought capability was hard for Brad himself. He tried hard to focus on learning but can't help to affect other students in the classroom. Some teachers didn't understand and blamed him for disturbing others' studies:

Teacher: Brad? Come up here, please. I know you think you're the class clown, but I've had it with you.

Bradley: I can't help help it.

Teacher: That's what you always say. I don't want to hear any more excuses. Your classmates are trying to study.....and your clowning makes it impossible.

Shouldering all the difficulties, he still managed to have the certification to be a teacher in the end. For him, it was a process much harder than for normal people. Instead of praising him for his effort, he still got suspensions and doubts. The suspicion had nothing to do with competence and everything to do with disrespect for his illness.

Another one of the People with Tourette syndrome: The Americans with Disabilities Act gives us the right to do anything or go anyplace that we want to. But try going to a movie. Or a concert or a restaurant. That law doesn't mean anything when people are yelling at you to shut up.

Even if in life out of school, his right was ignored that where the capability of Affiliation is deprived. Friends didn't want to play with him, and he got kicked out of cinemas and theatres because of symptoms of tics and making noises consistently which affect his access to cultural experiences and art:

Affiliation is considered by Nussbaum as one of the two most important capabilities which means being able 'to engage in various forms of social interactions and being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others'. With his disease Bradley was not understood so that not allowed to be in those places, this is somehow discrimination against the disabled.

Any lack of these abilities reflects society's disregard for and disrespect for human dignity. Facing people with disabilities, we should understand their deprivation of certain capabilities and not deprive more capabilities of them. Even for regular people, respect should be paid to a person's opportunity to choose not to use some of her abilities which is an aspect of respecting that person's dignity.

4. The Equal View to Take the Disabled People Into Account

In the film, there were two kinds of unequal views on Brad - distrust and doubt. The first kind was about his symptoms which others don't believe he can't help to do it. When he was a child, the teachers believed that he was making noises on purpose. His teachers didn't believe that he has the disease but thought that his behaviour was being naughty and trying to attract attention. Even his father didn't believe him:

Norman (Bradley's father): Hey, listen. I mean it! OK? Quit the clowning. Your brother may think it's funny, but I don't.

Bradley: I can't help it.

Norman (Bradley's father): Yes, you can. There's nothing wrong with you that a little self-control wouldn't fix. Now, stop it.

I couldn't imagine how harmful it was for Brad that his father didn't want to believe him. He tried to get medical help, but even the doctor thought it was him who is making fun of himself. The second kind is doubt that his ability is affected by the disease. From the plot of the film, we can see that Brad was questioned in all aspects because of his disability, even if the only difference between him and ordinary people was that he would just twitch and makes strange noises from time to time. They questioned his ability to be not only a teacher but even an independent person. The disease did not affect any of his other abilities and life. But the symptoms caused others to doubt him and don't get him the same opportunity as normal people. For instance, in the worst interview, Brad had a humiliating experience:

The interviewer: Listen. They did not tell me that you were going to be handicapped. How do you expect to handle a bunch of wild students with a handicap like that?

Bradley: Well. By educating them. By letting them know it's okay to talk about it. It's okay to ask questions...

The interviewer: These students would laugh at you.

Bradley: Not...not when they understand

The interviewer: it's simply a matter of ...OK. I have seen teachers with disabilities beforebut never with what you've got. I just don't see how you could ever teach a class.

Bradley: I can teach! Look at my resume. Look at it! Ok? I was very successful as a student teacher my Tourette's never posed a problem! I can teach!

The interviewer: OK. Bottom line: I need somebody now for fifth grade. You want to teach here, you're gonna have to refrain from making these noises in class.

Bradley: You know what? Thank you very much for the interview.

The interviewer: But, don't you want the job ?

Bradley: Yes. I want it really bad. But I would never ever work for a man who doesn't care about his students. So, I'll take my portfolio and take no more of your time.

With all evidence on Brad's resume, the interviewer still didn't believe that Brad can teach with his Tourette. These are nothing like empathy or worrying it is too much for him to bear. When people doubt Brad, the result was that he was not treated equally and lost the opportunity that normal people have.

Seeing the unequal experiences of Brad in the film, I keep thinking about where the attitude of those comes from. If we want to change people's attitudes, we need to find the root. And I find the answer in his middle school principal's words. He said "What's a school for? To educate, isn't it? To use knowledge to wipe out ignorance?" Ignorance, that where the problem is.

Ignorance of people leads them to distrust and doubt Bradley. The most important thing is to let people know about the disability and then they can try to understand others.

Bradley: Maybe we should talk about the elephant?

The interviewer: Elephant?

Bradley: In the room - my Tourette's.

The interviewer: No. The Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't allow me to ask you.

Bradley: I know, but I'd like to tell you just like I tell the kids in my classes. See, I explain to them that it's a brain thing that causes me to make strange noises, they're like sneezes, irrepensible. When you have to you have to.

The interviewer: How do they react?

Bradley: Once they understand, they're fine with it. It's never caused any problems in a classroom. All I want is a chance. Just get me the interviews and let me prove to them that I can do the job. The Americans with Disabilities Act says I'm entitled to a chance.

And understanding means that the problem can be discussed. What Brad need is not being polite on the surface, but the willingness to get to know him. For example, The Americans with Disabilities Act is one way to guarantee the capabilities of governments but not all parts of it are reasonable. It forced people not to talk about the disease but there is nothing helpful for the disabled by doing so. When Brad was interviewed for a job, this becomes an obstacle for him:

Ignoring the elephant in the room doesn't mean that it is gone. What Brad needs is understanding which demands knowing. Like Brad did with the kids, when they truly understand that it is his brain's problem to force him to do that but not on purpose, they will be fine with it. Brad was inspired by the principal to be brave to talk about the problem because disability is not a thing to be ashamed of.

To estimate distrust and doubt and establish understanding, Nussbaum's Capability Theory gives a view to see the disabled as everyone else. The theory advocates that society does not consist of independent citizens with the same needs and abilities (Harnacke, 2013). It takes disabled people into account by acknowledging that all people differ in their abilities to convert resources into functioning. Correspondingly, they vary in their needs for resources which is not a special characteristic of only disabled people, but simply a description of how human beings are. All persons have different conversion factors which are the degree to which someone can transform a resource into a functioning. Conversion factors consist of personal factors that are internal to the person (physical condition, age, sex, intelligence, etc.), social factors depending on the society in which one lives and environmental factors that reflect the physical living environment. In the movie, Brad had trouble concentrating on learning, and so did one of his students. Disease cause results but just changing the conversion factors. According to the theory, no one is a completely independent person, we all demand help from others so we should all offer help and understanding to others. We all have advantages and disadvantages. Disability is just like a little disadvantage to people.

So, the theory gives us an equal way to treat the disabled, caring instead of ignoring. The principal in Brad's middle also offered the best example to use the theory. He gave Brad the chance to explain himself in front of others for the first time in his life. He invited Brad to a school concert and let everyone in the school hear him making the noise throughout the process. After the concert, he stopped everyone from leaving and let Brad come up to the stage:

The principle: Did you hear any noises during the quiet parts?

The students: YES!

The principle: Yeah. So did I. They're pretty annoying, aren't they? The person making those noises is Brad Cohen. Come on up here, Brad.

(Brad come up to the stage)

The principle: Do you like making noises and upsetting people, Brad?

Bradley: No, sir.

The principle: Then why do you do it?

Bradley: Because I have Tourette Syndrome.

The principle: What's that?

Bradley: It's a thing in my brain that causes me to make weird noises.

The principle: But you could control it if you wanted to, right?

Bradley: No, sir. It's a sickness.

The principle: Well, why can't you just get cured?

Bradley: There isn't any cure. I don't like making noises any more than you like hearing them. They're even worse when I get stressed, when you don't accept that I can't stop them. But when I feel accepted, then they're not so bad.

The principle: What can we do? And I mean everyone in this school. What can we do to help you, Brad?

Bradley: I just want to be treated like everybody else.

The principle: Good job. Go sit down.

The principal was the first one to let Brad know what he needs - understanding. Understanding includes the understanding of the condition and needs. The condition was that Brad had a disease, he didn't want to have it and there was no cure. The needs of Bradley were to be treated like normal people and be offered equal opportunities. For Brad, none like other teachers before, his way of education not only gave Brad equal opportunities for education but also helped him to integrate into the school. For other students, he broadened their views and educated them to understand others.

Brad was a talented teacher and he could be the teacher who changes a kid's life. Although he was qualified, understanding and help from others was the only way to give him the chance to reach his achievement. What society needs to do is to bear in mind that everyone has different needs and abilities, we are all on the same and equal level.

5. Conclusion

As suggested by Nussbaum's Capability Theory, all people have different conversion factors which are the degree to which someone can transform a resource into a functioning. An equal way to treat the disabled is caring instead of ignoring their needs. The chance of explanation just as anyone else should be provided. The disabled are not asking for help but to be treated like normal people and be offered equal opportunities. What we need to do is to start paying attention to the problem of ignoring the needs of the disabled and try to listen to them so we are all on the same and equal level.

6. Limitations

There are limitations to the Capabilities Approach that cannot be ignored. For instance, some researchers express that Nussbaum has yet to develop the Capabilities Approach with the degree of theoretical sophistication and complexity that is needed, and she begs far too many questions in her presentation of her theory (Clark, 2008). The list of capabilities does not include how to achieve the capabilities since some of those are not born with. Nussbaum offers an incomplete and minimum account of the good, which aims to ensure that institutions are consistent with enabling individuals to live a dignified life. How the capabilities are achieved or understood is partly a question of how they are understood within societies given diverse histories and cultures (Nussbaum, 2006). For example, like the case in the essay, for the disabled, the way to help them is to create institutions to help their life and study and educate citizens to understand the difficulties of the disabled.

Another limitation is that Nussbaum mistakenly accepts Rawls' answer to the problem of future generations. Nussbaum overlooks this problem and so the complexities future generations create. By putting the next generation aside, Nussbaum does not map the resources that a competent approach must have to deal with one of the most important problems we face. The unique insights and challenges that this approach might bring to this important discussion are unknown. Second, Nussbaum also ignores the interactions between the cases she considers and subsequent generations, weakening her theory of competence. She further claims that her "competency approach" offers us a way forward on these issues -- offering us "true global justice" (Nussbaum, 2006). However, Nussbaum does not consider how future generations will deal with these issues. There is no discussion of how our obligations apply over time or our reproductive choices. In so doing, Nussbaum loses sight of the real impact that these problems have on her theory, and she is unable to provide us with clear guidance on the questions that the problems raise.

In the case of Bradley, he is not a typical example of the disabled. With an actual physical disability, more capabilities will be deprived, for example, Bodily health, Bodily integrity and Practical reason and Play. In those cases, the deprivation from others and the difficulties they face will be different. The theory can also be applied in these terms. The disabled are also different and demand different kinds of resources to help them.

However, it is undeniable that Capabilities Theory is a very valuable theoretical project and has made great contributions to ethical theory. The theory discussed in this paper which takes the disabled into account is one of its undoubted advantages because the theory is based on that not everyone in society has the same needs and abilities. This part is not affected by the immaturity and incompleteness of his theory, so these criticisms are not harmful in this term. It will promote the further development and improvement of the theory, but it will not affect applying it to analysis and research now.

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