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The education of children with impairments in South Africa: a capability approach

Mbhele, Sindisiwe P

2019
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/28011

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Abstract

This thesis explains and defends the capability approach articulated by Amartya Sen and applies the capability approach to evaluate South African education policy and its implementation in respect of children with impairments, with specific reference to the Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education 2001.

The 'introduction' presents evidence that children with impairments in South Africa continue to experience a lack of access to education, which the government has an obligation to address. Sen's capability approach is then defended as the best theory for framing what this obligation involves. In chapter one, the key terms of Sen's capability approach are analysed, including: functionings and capability, agency and well-being, and basic capability equality. The distinction between impairment and disability drawn by the social model of disability is then used to enhance Sen's capability approach.

Chapter two applies this enhanced capability approach to education. In the case of children, a capability approach requires public policy to prioritise the functionings that make up the personal well-being of the child. It should prioritise basic pedagogical and non-pedagogical functionings for all children. However, because these functionings takes place in schools, the capability approach to education must consider more than just a child's functionings. It must consider the capability of parents to participate in how a school is run, and so ensure public accountability, as well as the capability of teachers to teach inclusively.

In chapters three and four, the Education White Paper 6 and its implementation are analysed, focusing on the pedagogical functionings of children with impairments. This White Paper contains some comments in line with Sen's approach, and the social model of disability. But its general vision is modest. As it contains specific targets for 2021, assessment can focus on whether or not these targets are likely to be achieved. Sadly, none are likely to be achieved. A large number of children with impairments remain out of school. Data collection is poor. The rate of school conversions is too slow. The quality of education for learners with impairments remains low. Attitudes in government reports about the accommodation of children with impaired intellectual development are concerning. The problem of fees is not mentioned.

Finally, chapter four offers some policy recommendations - on data collection, admissions, funding and training - to improve the education of children with impairments. More reliable data is needed on the numbers of out-of-school children and children who transfer between different types of school, and academic achievement. Services could be used to collect data, and weighting systems introduced. Provincial education departments should make more use of the 1996 Schools Act to ensure governing bodies carry out admission policy. Additional funding is needed to promote equality across a range of pedagogical and non-pedagogical functionings, and more training in inclusive education is recommended for teachers and officials.

Keywords: inclusive education, disability, impairment, capability approach, functionings, capabilities and social model.