

“Special Needs” and Moral Education in an Ethical System

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Abstract

This article raises a number of interrelated issues. It first considers the need for a disability-aware education for everyone, including post-school leavers. This has both structural and curricular implications. At the structural level, it is argued that if we are to move towards a more ethical educational system, institutional discrimination must be dismantled. At the curricular level, the notion of a “culture of resistance”, with distinctive moral characteristics, is explored. The article next considers the moral education of disabled people, covering such issues as recognition of alternative perspectives, building on life-experience and the development of self-confidence and self-esteem. In conclusion, it is suggested that a moral education in an ethical system would integrate universalising understandings of the principle of justice, and its application, with the development of contextual thought which can take account of the value and uniqueness of individuals and the particularity of their educational needs.

Key words

Discriminação na educação. Deficientes - Educação. Educação - Aspectos morais e éticos.

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“Necessidades Especiais” e Educação Moral em um Sistema Ético

Resumo

Este artigo suscita uma série de questões inter-relacionadas. Primeiro, se considera a necessidade de uma consciência relacionada à “deficiência” de uma educação para todos, incluindo os egressos do Ensino Fundamental. Isso tem implicações tanto no nível estrutural como no nível curricular. No nível estrutural, é argumentado que se nós avançarmos em direção a um sistema educacional mais ético, a discriminação institucional deve ser desmantelada. No nível curricular, a noção de uma “cultura de resistência” com características de uma moral distintiva, é explorada. O próximo ponto do artigo considera a educação moral das pessoas com necessidades especiais, abrangendo questões tais como, reconhecimento de perspectivas alternativas pautada na experiência de vida e no desenvolvimento da auto-confiança e auto-estima. Em conclusão, se sugere que uma educação moral num sistema ético poderia integrar entendimentos universais sobre o princípio da justiça e sua aplicação, com o desenvolvimento do pensamento contextual no qual se considere o valor e singularidade dos indivíduos e a particularidade de suas necessidades educacionais.

Palavras chave

Educational discrimination. Disabled - Education. Education - Moral and ethical aspects.

Preliminary remarks

The British Government committee of inquiry into the education of black children recognised that the education of these pupils could not be fully considered in isolation from the need for a multicultural/antiracist education for *all* pupils. Indeed, they titled their report, 'Education For All.' (SWANN REPORT, 1985). Similarly, I suggest we cannot fully consider the education, including the moral education, of disabled children in isolation from the need for a disability-aware education for everyone. This comparison is more fully developed elsewhere. (LEICESTER, 1992). In the context of the current movement to lifelong learning (FIELD; LEICESTER, 2000) "everyone" includes post-school learners. There are personal and professional educational needs across the lifespan, and the case I shall make for providing a disability-aware education applies to adults as well as to children. (Arguably, it is mis-education in childhood that gives rise to the educational need to unlearn prejudice in adulthood.)

I shall begin, then, with this 'education for all' dimension. It has both structural aspects and curricular implications. At the structural level I shall argue that the current social and educational exclusion of disabled children and adults is such that we need to develop a more ethical (just) educational system. For how can we provide a *moral* education within a framework which implicitly endorses injustice? At the curricular level, and this is explicitly and directly part of moral education per se, we need to enable everyone to unlearn the endemic prejudices against disabled people which infect social attitudes and which stereotype groups of impaired individuals.

Questions about the curriculum also raise fundamental epistemological considerations. I will suggest that, like minority ethnic groups and women, disabled people, in their shared experience of oppression, may have developed a "culture of resistance" generating distinctive (moral) ways of knowing.

Only after these general explorations of the need, within a just system, for the moral education of everyone, will I focus on the moral education of disabled children, to consider some specific issues relevant to morally educating children who are considered to have special (different or additional) educational needs.

Before I begin, however, I want to point out that I think/write both as a professional continuing educator with a strong commitment to equal opportunities in education, (LEICESTER, 1996) and as the mother of a so-called "severely disabled" daughter who was educated in special schools.

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Moral education for all

Institutional Discrimination

Disabled people suffer and survive structural discrimination and endemic prejudices. Structural discrimination occurs through biased policies, practices and procedures which, sometimes intentionally, and more often unintentionally, operate against their interests. For example, post Warnock, (WARNOCK, 1978) we still have more educational apartheid than is necessary – children who could benefit from some or all of their education in ordinary schools are bused out of their neighbourhood, to be educated separately from their siblings and neighbourhood friends (HALL, 1997). And within mainstream schools and colleges there are still such basic and obvious barriers as lack of physical access. For example, no ramps, or badly designed ones, and lifts with operating buttons that cannot be reached from a wheelchair etc.

the toilets are half-way between floors, you could get a lift to the floor you wanted but the toilets were half-way through..... between the levels..... This was never solved..... It was the same with the coffee machine. (LEICESTER, 1999, p. 78)

Frequently there is a lack of relevant equipment such as large print lecture notes and books for the partially sighted, specialist computers, audiocassettes etc. In schools, even when statementing of a child's special educational needs has been completed, institutions are often not adequately resourced to meet the identified needs. (LEICESTER, 1999).

It could be seen as discrimination, too, that it is disabled students themselves who have to draw attention to these institutional deficits.

there is no policy for disability so it is always put upon the individual. So you can start to feel that you are just someone who is always demanding. It is always put on you to say what you need. (LEICESTER, 1999, p. 78)

The kinds of support and resources regularly and foreseeably required by impaired students should be part of the routine provision of mainstream schools and colleges.

This kind of discrimination, built into the very ways in which institutions function, is sometimes referred to as 'institutional discrimination' (SWANN, 1985). It leads to an unjust system of educational provision in which children and adults do not meet with fair and enabling policies and practices. To move towards a more ethical educational system will require the dismantling of such structural inequality.

Disability – Awareness

Endemic social prejudices against disabled people, prejudices which are reinforced by powerful stereotypes, constitute a widely shared attitudinal problem (McCONKEY, 1995) which both reinforces the structural discrimination described above and which represents a real challenge in moral education. The challenge is to enable all learners to unlearn these deep-seated prejudices about "the disabled" and to develop, instead, an ethical perspective on disability.

Prejudice and negative assumptions about disabled people often derive from the notion that they deviate from a norm – are not 'normal'. But should we teach people to value sameness and conformity? Within moral and legal boundaries, is it not more humane and more intelligent to value diversity of talents, interests, pursuits, ways of life, values, appearances and so on?

This attitudinal and values change is important for the successful integration of disabled children into mainstream schools. Without such attitudinal change and a disability-aware moral perspective on disability for both mainstream teachers and pupils, the integration of disabled children can never be fully successful; successful, that is, in terms of their happiness and well being. Without a disability-aware education for all, 'integrated' children will continue to meet rejection, misunderstanding, hostility and bullying in the mainstream (LEICESTER, 1999).

By a 'disabling-aware' education I mean an education which enables the learner to understand the ways in which disabled people are oppressed and which helps to develop the values, motivation and skills to change this oppression. Such a raising of awareness needs to be part of teacher education as well as part of schooling and would incorporate:

- An understanding of the nature and functioning of disability prejudice and discrimination.
- Increased awareness of one's own prejudiced thinking.
- An ethical commitment to justice – fairness to all children.
- A commitment to human rights for everyone.

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- A social perspective on disability.
- An understanding of strategies for securing ethical institutional change.

Thus, as with antiracist education, a disability-aware education has wide-ranging implications. For example, we need to eliminate bias in learning resources and in the curriculum, train teachers to have appropriate attitudes and expectations, liaise much more with parents and provide positive role models (eg black and disabled teachers) and so on.

Paul Abberley has set out a theory of disability as oppression (ABBERLEY, 1987). He emphasises the social origins of impairment and the disadvantages (social, financial, environmental, and psychological) inflicted on people with impairment. He believes that all citizens are entitled to adequate state health and welfare provision, and advocates the value of disabled modes of living. The opposing ideologies require a passive sub-class of welfare recipients to serve as a powerful warning against falling off the achievement ladder.

Of course there is a sense in which impairment involves real deficiency in a way in which being female or black does not. However, the deficiency is of a particular function, not as a human being, and the social responses to impairment determine the degree to which the condition handicaps a person's life. This is an important political insight which encourages an ethical concern at the material disadvantages which, as a result of a socially and educationally inadequate environment, as is well documented, (TOMLINSON; COLOQUHOUN, 1993) disproportionately affect 'the disabled.'

A disability-aware education will tend to move the learner from an 'individual' model of disability to a 'social' model. An individual model locates the problem of disability firmly with the individual. For example, the medical model sees disability as an illness, and thus pathologises many fit and healthy individuals. A social model, which underpins the developing disability civil rights movement, (HASLER, 1993) defines disability as 'socially imposed restriction.' The experiences of disabled people are of social restrictions in the world around them; the individual's experience of disability is created in interactions with a physical and social world designed for non-disabled living.

The social theory encourages social interaction based on notions of equal rights and social policy geared towards alleviating oppression; 'personal tragedy' theories, on the other hand, encourage a response of pity and social policy geared towards compensating individuals. Thus a social theory of disability encourages values, commitments and actions based on our conceptions of justice; clearly a

moral improvement on those based on unthinking oppression. However, as Gilligan has shown us, an enriched moral education would develop understandings and commitments not only related to justice, but also to care and compassion (GILLIGAN, 1982). I want to suggest (and have argued more fully elsewhere. See Leicester (1994) that a synthesis of the social model of disability with empathetic recognition that an individual's impairment **may** be associated with pain and frustration matches this enriched moral perspective, combining 'justice' and 'care.' Without a social perspective on disability, compassion and empathy may degenerate into pity and 'the disabled' are marginalised and pathologised. But without an understanding of the individual's experience of impairment we may fail to empathise with the actual individuals we meet. If through a disability-aware education pupils/students can learn to integrate these understandings they will both recognise the importance of justice, of ending discrimination, and yet retain a compassionate understanding of the sufferings of others and of the diversity and uniqueness of individual circumstances and needs. A disability-aware education is an enriched moral education – developing each learner's commitment to a caring justice combined with the development of her ability to practice a judicious care.

Enabled Ways of Knowing

Some "ways of knowing" are highly valued and therefore are developed through education – the logico-deductive mode for example (BONNETT, 2000). Other ways of knowing are undervalued, and, therefore, not developed through education – ways of knowing, such as those derived from personal experience, narrative, metaphor or emotion. By "ways of knowing" I refer both to *process* (the kinds of thinking by which we reach understanding) and *product* (forms of thought through which an individual can validly contribute to our collective knowledge.) I believe that the shared experience of oppression suffered by some social groups has produced distinctive ways of knowing. Some of these have been described by feminists ('women's ways of knowing') (BARR, 1999) and others have been described by members of minority ethnic groups and characterised as derived from a "culture of resistance." (MITCHELL; FEAGIN JR, 1995) Carol Gilligan's work could be seen as an instance of the epistemologically enriching power of recognising that an oppressed group tends to have a distinct, often unrecognised, perspective. Her research established that women are not deficient, relative to men, in their moral reasoning. Rather, women tend to think in terms of care and special relationships, rather than (or as well as) in terms of the abstract, universal principle

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of justice and its application. (GILLIGAN, 1982). I want to suggest that disabled people, like women (and members of minority ethnic groups), also tend to have access to non-mainstreamed ways of thinking. In what follows I briefly identify some characteristics of such non-mainstream 'ways of knowing' and their potential contribution to moral education.

The Personal

Feminists have long argued that the 'personal is political' and have emphasised autobiography and narrative in research. Given an oppressed groups' relative lack of formal education one might expect to find a value placed on learning from life experience which would encourage this emphasis on anecdote and on specificity of context. In moral terms this facilitates seeing an issue from another's point of view and not just 'how I would see it if I were in that position.'

Emotional Intelligence

Bonnett has identified an undervalued 'authentic' mode of thinking (BONNETT, 2000) which seeks to relate knowledge to one's own existence, providing subjective depth and valuing personal responsibility. This seems consonant with feminist contentions that women use intuition, metaphor and emotion in reaching understanding. There is some emphasis in schools today on the development of emotional intelligence, that is on developing children's understanding of their own emotions and their own emotional reactions and the ability to use this self knowledge to encourage better ways of behaving toward oneself and to others. In moral education we recognise the importance of the development of the capacity to make moral judgements but must also recognise the importance of the development of the capacity to care, to love, to have compassion, and to recognise and use less positive emotions in more productive ways.

Wholeness, Balance and Integration

It is in opposition to the mainstream emphasis on logico-deductive and abstract modes of thought that oppressed groups have tended to seek a counter-balance which integrates undervalued modes with the mainstream, and which emphasises the education of the whole person – affectively as well as cognitively for example. What I have said about the synthesis of individual/social models

of disability and of integrating an ethic of justice with an ethic of care is an instance of such an inclusive, integrating tendency. Similarly, in this journal, Hepburn (1994) argued that an inclusive moral framework, integrating Kohlberg's concern with justice and Gilligan's focus on care, is more satisfactory than either alone.

In order to acknowledge appropriately human capacities to identify with others and to appreciate a range of perspectives an integration of reason and sentiment in ethical analysis is required. Such a style of approach embodies a 'seeing' rather than a 'blind' justice because it depends upon giving attention to particularities as well as generalities (HEPBURN, 1994).

We should educate children not only to universalise the principle of justice but to recognise the special duties of justice which arise in close personal relationships. Friedman (1987) points out that motherhood tends to encourage recognition that the needs of weaker family members often have to take precedence over the interests of the stronger. Hepburn (1994) suggests that to successfully integrate an ethic of justice with an ethic of care requires that we seek the views of those about whom decisions are being made, be influenced by contextual detail, and consciously apply both perspectives sequentially in working towards an integrated decision.

Networks and Communalism

Groups with little economic and political power have often valued extended family networks. "Such practices recognise the importance of the collectivity in insuring the survival of the individual." (MITCHELL; FEAGIN, p.81). We see something similar in women's emphasis on family and networks. (Once more think of Gilligan's findings on the importance, to women, of care and special relationships). Individuals in relatively powerless groups have a measure of protection in this kind of group sharing and support. Moral education teaches children to be co-operative, and perhaps to seek the common good, but do we also teach them that there is value in sometimes being dependent, as well as value in independence – to recognise the value of human interdependence as well as of individual autonomy?

Valuing Values

Groups who struggle for emancipation clearly develop a strong moral commitment to such values as equality and justice and, as noted above, to

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furtherance of the common good. In addition to commitment to these particular values, such groups tend to place value on values per se - on an ethical or spiritual dimension to living one's life. For example, in my own research (LEICESTER, 1999, p.48) I found that my disabled respondents felt that they had developed an understanding of life's priorities, which tended to be of an ethical or spiritual nature. For example the mother of a disabled child said:

The thing is the pressure when mothers get together. They say, 'my son is doing such a degree' and 'I want my son, when he grows up, to be a doctor or a lawyer.' They never say, 'I want my son to be a good and happy person. (LEICESTER, 1991, p.49)

I have tried to indicate how distinctive undervalued 'ways of knowing' have the potential to contribute to our collective moral understanding and therefore to moral education (for all). In what follows I note, too, the implications of this for the moral education of disabled children. (In this sense the notion of (enabled) ways of knowing bridges both parts of this paper.)

Moral education and disabled people

As educators we should be aware of the possibility that another person may have perspectives that are different from mainstream perspectives but which are not, thereby, necessarily wrong. As a parent I have occasionally had the experience of thinking that my 'learning disabled' daughter was 'missing the point' in an ethical discussion, only to realise, as we continued to talk, that she had a different but valid perspective arising from her experience as a 'disabled' individual.

It is also because of my experience as a parent that I have always been unconvinced by accounts of moral education and development that put all the emphasis on the development of moral reasoning. My daughter, relatively unsophisticated in abstract thinking, is extremely able, through her emotional responses, in recognising moral issues and, almost always does what she believes that she ought. (It may well be that those with a greater ability to reason are also more prone to rationalisation! Could it not be the case that people such as those who write for and read this journal can and do often find persuasive arguments that what we want to do is what we ought to do?)

Many disabled individuals develop empathy for suffering as a result of difficulties that they have experienced at first hand. Such 'learning from life'

should be taken into account by learning programmes in school. For example, an Avon Special School head teacher wrote, in response to an LEA questionnaire on multicultural education:

All our pupils have to become aware of problems of discrimination, underprivilege, self-fulfilling restricted expectation, lack of employment prospects etc, etc, which affect minority groups, because they all suffer from them as a result of their physical and visual handicaps. Counselling to cope with these has always been a part of the life of the school and it is a natural extension of this to consider the problems of minority groups and other cultures (LEICESTER, 1992, p.89).

‘Special Needs’ and Moral Education

The notion, common in relation to disabled people, of meeting ‘special needs,’ is a problematic one. The Warnock report defined ‘special needs’ in terms of learning difficulties which call for special educational provision. (WARNOCK, 1978) ‘Learning difficulties’ meant either that the child has significantly greater difficulties in learning than the majority of children her age or has impairments which prevent or hinder her from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided in LEA schools for children of that age. Thus the notion of ‘learning difficulty’ (and therefore of ‘special needs’) locates a deficiency in the child – a deficiency in terms of being different from the majority of children. Being in a minority is seen in terms of ‘difficulty.’

Disabled children are no different from other children in having a right and a need to be educated, including morally educated. How well or otherwise the schools are equipped to meet this common educational need varies in relation to children, since children are not all the same. Thus one might say that schools have learning/teaching difficulties in relation to some children – rather than locating the difficulty with the child!

However, as long as schools and colleges fail to provide a disability-aware moral education for everyone, children labelled as having special needs will continue to be seen as deficient, and to meet with marginalisation, social/educational exclusion and failure. This being the case, it may be that the educator should be *particularly* careful not to damage the self-esteem of these children. The development of the child’s self-confidence, self knowledge, and self-respect is also part of her moral education.

Conclusion

I have argued that a more just education system would better serve disabled people and more successfully integrate disabled children into ordinary schools. It would include rather than exclude. A system or institution could, arguably, be assessed as ethical according to how well it treats its most vulnerable citizens/students and, indeed, by how few or how many citizens/students are *rendered* vulnerable through unjust and uncaring policy and practice. Such an ethical education system would educate us all not to value success in competing with each other (even with more genuine equality of opportunity to succeed) but to value individual educational development and progress.

I have also argued that a disability-aware education for everyone is a necessary pre-requisite for the successful integration of disabled children into ordinary schools and that such a disability-aware education is part of moral education; it involves the unlearning of prejudices about disabled people, the critique of harmful stereotypes and the valuing of diversity of abilities, disabilities and educational needs. We are not mass produced but “hand-knitted” human beings. (COHEN; LEICESTER, 2000 p.72).

A disability-aware education could integrate the great moral values of justice and compassion. Through moral education all children could learn to empathise with the experiences of others **and** learn to treat others fairly, recognising that ‘equality’ of treatment is not always equivalent to ‘sameness’ of treatment.

Such a moral education for everyone would integrate the development of universalising understandings about the principle of justice, and its application, with the development of contextual thought; thought, that is to say, which can take into account and value the uniqueness of individuals and the particularity of their educational needs.

Nota

- 1 Uma versão brevemente modificada deste artigo foi publicado numa edição especial do periódico *The Journal of Moral Education*, Volume 30 Number 03 September 2001 p. 251-260.

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