



Opinion

Volume 10 Issue 3 - July 2022
DOI: 10.19080/GJIDD.2022.10.555786

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Eight Reasons Why the Lack of the Ability to Imagine is a Disability



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Submission: June 28, 2022 **Published:** July 21, 2022

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Keywords: Disability; Social justice; Limitations; Environment

Opinion

Following Sassen's [1] argument about the limitations of the existing analytical categories in capturing hybrid forms of disadvantage, Konidari [2,3] argues that behind the long-standing challenges of addressing underachievement and school dropout are hybrid forms of disadvantage that are not captured by the existing analytical categories. In this article, I argue for the need to consider the lack of the ability to imagine as a disability.

In terms of definitions of disability, it should be noted that there is no consensus on what constitutes disability [4], as disability is a complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested concept subject to a variety of conceptual frameworks [5,6]. Recently, the European Parliament [7] acknowledged that not only is there no definition of disability in the European Union, but definitions vary from one Member State to another and even within a single Member State. In this context, the definitions of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) have become a common reference.

The WHO [6] follows the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps [8] and categorizes problems in human functioning in three interrelated domains: impairments (problems in body function or alterations in body structure), activity limitations (difficulties in performing activities), and participation restrictions (problems in participating in all aspects of life). Consistent with the ICF [8], the UN adopted a similar definition in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [9], according to which "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which,

in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

Central to both definitions is the presence of an impairment that results in a lack of the resources necessary to achieve the functioning's required for full access and equal participation in a given environment. The concept of the environment is fundamental to the definition of disability because disability does not result from the impairment itself, but from the social, economic, and physical environment in which people with impairments find themselves [10]. This impairment, by limiting the individual's agency to act in relation to the environment in question, raises issues of social justice. When we consider the above eight elements in relation to imagination, we see that its absence is also a disability.

Imagination is a resource because of its role in the process of individuation and self-knowledge [11] and in the perception of alternative possibilities for existence [12,13]. As a mode of functioning, imagination describes the ability to represent something that does not exist [14], to project oneself in the world through a new category of identity [15], to perceive present and future possibilities [13], to think and act differently [16]. Under this prism, imagination provides access to and participation in a perceived "third space" [17] where "the physical, the mental, the social ... are simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical" [17]. The element of agency emerges when we consider that individuals in this "third space" [17] are both "inhabitants and users," that "the world as lived and the world as imagined ... turn out to be the same world" [18], that for a world to be possible, it must be connected to the actual world

through a relationship of accessibility [19]. The element of agency is even more pronounced in the radical form of imagination, as radical imagination involves “the ability to question reality” [20] and to establish its own rules of acting and being-for-itself [20] in the world.

The ability to imagine is even more important in the current environment, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity [21], where the future is not only unknown and unknowable [22], but also beyond human prediction and control [23]. Indeed, scholarship on the skills and competencies students need to develop increasingly relies on imagination. Imagination is seen as fundamental not only to improving students’ learning skills [24], but also to developing students’ creative agency, which is one of the three forms of agency that students need to develop, along with moral agency and economic agency [25]. Imagination is also among the five thinking habits of mind that students need to develop for creative thinking [26], and along with curiosity, self-regulation, and resilience, is among the four skills needed to cope with uncertainty [27]. More recently, UNESCO [28] has emphasized that students must be able to “transcend disciplinary boundaries to find viable and imaginative solutions.”

The issue of social justice arises in two ways. First, in the proper sense of the term, under the prism of the activities that the imagination can perform. Secondly, if seen under the capability approach, imagination is a functioning depending on the opportunities and freedoms the environment provides for the individuals to be able to freely decide on their beings and doings. In the second case, the lack of imagination becomes a disability that is not due to a mental, intellectual or physical impairment, but to a social impairment caused by the limitations of the environment. The lack of imagination as a social impairment was first introduced by Aristotle [29], who argued that it is impossible to think without the necessary mental images (phantasmata) because “never does the soul think without phantasm” (De Anima 433b29) ... (“οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἀνευ φαντάσματος ἢ ψυχῆ”, (43TM 17-18, 432a 12-14)). In the same vein, [30] emphasized that our vision of what could be is often limited and defined by the horizon of what we already know. Similarly, Mann et al. [31] stated in a recent OECD report that “students cannot be what they cannot see.”

Like any other form of disability, the lack of the ability to imagine is detrimental at both the individual and societal levels. On the individual level, it leads to “narrowly defined identities” [32] by imposing an impoverished view that limits one’s perceived sense of opportunity and potential to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life [33]. On a societal level, Miller [34] highlights that our ability to imagine the future is relatively weak, while UNESCO [28] by relating the need to reimagine our futures together with the need for a new social contract, highlights the role of imagination in social justice, social cohesion, and social inclusion [35].

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DOI: [10.19080/GJIDD.2022.10.555786](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJIDD.2022.10.555786)

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