

Economic Literacy and Disability Rights

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It Is About Us

How much money should the government spend on people with disabilities? Should not disabled people pull our own weight rather than soaking up other people's hard-earned tax dollars? How can we demand equality while asking for costly "special treatment" such as Medicaid coverage, SSI payments, and access modifications? Does society have an obligation to take care of the "less fortunate"? Where does that obligation end? Should the needs of people with disabilities be met by government programs or by charities? What categories of disabled people deserve help and what categories do not?

These are the kinds of questions that frame much current debate about disability programs. Even some disability-rights advocates attempt to align and/or explain themselves with reference to these either/or positions. We as a community must learn to address these issues more effectively with clear, critical economic analyses. To do that, we must make economic education a higher priority.

It is essential that the disability rights movement develop a more sophisticated understanding and a more radical critique of the economic structures that shape our lives. And I do not mean just the scholars among us. I am a writer, not an economist, yet over the past few years, I have come to understand that economics is not some esoteric science (as many economists might like us to believe), but a dialogue about who gets what and why. We need to enter this dialogue because more and more it is about us.

Peer Training for Economic Literacy

To do so, we need to develop economic literacy training programs to present throughout the disability community. We should develop books, magazine articles, and flyers that analyze economic phenomena in language understandable to a wide range of participants. Every Independent Living Center should teach economic literacy along with the usual classes in assertiveness and cooking.

Such education would transform discussion about disability programs. Disability rights campaigns would begin to include explicit demands related to economic justice. Political debate would become more critical and more

constructive. Instead of asking how much is too much for disabled people, we might start asking new questions such as: Who really controls and benefits from disability program resources? Who pays the price for the continuing dependency of people with disabilities? And who profits from that dependency?

Economic concepts need not be weighty or abstract. Training should follow the "popular education" model advanced by the revolutionary Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. In his ground-breaking work, Freire (1970) demonstrated that ordinary workers, even lacking basic education, could become not only students, but teachers, of economics. By sharing their family histories and personal experiences, participants gained a keen understanding of the role of economics in their own lives. Learning did not have to be directed by "experts," Freire insisted. Knowledge could come from oneself and one's peers.

In the disability community, we already value peer interaction and skills training as keys to our empowerment. Within these strategies of organizing and learning we could develop critical analyses of such economic issues as health care financing; benefits vs. earned income; and how federal "disability dollars" are spent.

Accessible Economics

The key is to convey facts and concepts that enable participants to see their own circumstances more clearly in the context of major economic forces. Participants should have opportunities to explore the global economy, the relationship between wealth and poverty, changing patterns of resource distribution, the respective roles of capital and labor, the nature of transfer payments, and the effects of corporate influences in a democratic society.

These concepts should be presented in accessible ways. This means more than physical accommodations - offering written materials in Braille and taped formats, sign language interpreting, and wheelchair accessibility at the training site. The goal of popular education is to offer economic literacy skills to anyone, regardless of education, background, or cognitive ability. Indeed, the popular education concept is most germane to those at the lower end of the income/education scale. People who have been denied access to the tools of economic literacy - poor people and disabled people, for example - are most in need of such tools in order to understand and confront the material conditions that shape their lives.

Recently, while facilitating a series of discussions for consumers of

attendant services, I observed the potential power of peer-based economics education. We were talking about attendant management and the tasks it entails - training, negotiation, time management, conflict resolution, etc. Someone pointed out that, in addition, most of us must manage issues like: avoiding architectural barriers, navigating Social Security rules, arranging accessible transportation, and maneuvering through increasingly complex health care and social service systems.

One participant summed up: "It's hard work being disabled!" Nods of recognition went around the room. The discussion grew animated. We spent the next 45 minutes talking about the work that disabled people do - work for which we are rarely if ever paid, recognized, or valued. I offered a comparison: the unwaged, uncounted work performed by women around the world. This parallel stirred further discussion about work and worth.

For a group of disabled adults, most on fixed incomes such as Supplemental Security Income, this was a liberating exchange. Disability is often equated with inability to work. Receiving benefits (being "on the dole") is often seen, consciously or unconsciously, as getting something for doing nothing. By contrast, this conversation highlighted participants' competence and diligence. Equally importantly, it raised critical questions about the fairness of a system that overlooks disabled people's unpaid work and that also denies paid work opportunities to many disabled people (for example, cutting payments and medical coverage when people become employed).

Our dialogue about the nature of productivity, work, and income happened spontaneously and led to new way of thinking about economics. It merely hinted at the range of topics related to economic literacy.

Getting Specific

I foresee opportunities to co-facilitate more in-depth economics discussions with groups of disabled people. I am currently working with the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-based social justice organization, to develop such a training program.

Crucial to the idea of popular education is development of an action plan. Participants translate knowledge they have gained into strategies for change. Action plans are most often tactics for collective action such as a demonstration, a campaign, or a peer-education activity.

An economic literacy curriculum designed for the disability community might include the following sessions:

"Disability and Social Class." Exercise: Signs in braille and print, with

pictures for sighted non-readers, are posted on the walls defining the characteristics of different economic classes, i.e., poor, working class, middle-class, affluent, etc. By moving from sign to sign, participants self-identify their changing class status during each decade of their lives. Participants discuss the impact of their disability on their economic situation, the impact of broader social and economic trends on their economic situation, and how their income, resources, and class status have affected their ability to cope with their disability.

"Follow the Disability Dollars." Exercise: Each participant is assigned to play the part of a person involved in a service agency. Some are directors and managers of the agency, some are workers employed by it, some are disabled individuals served by it, etc. Using play money, \$100 is put into circulation to provide services to people with disabilities. As it "trickles down" through the agency hierarchy, a certain amount is kept by each person. Meanwhile, the facilitator reads from a script which talks about what percentage each person gets, what they do for their money, how much power they have with regard to resources and services, etc. Afterward, participants discuss the distribution of resources, and possible alternatives.

Re-Setting Priority Questions

Every group should take stock of its priority issues, concerns, and needs and on that basis, develop its own topics and exercises. That is the empowering nature of popular education.

The questions at the beginning of this article make for provocative, contentious talk radio - but they are the wrong questions, both misleading and dangerous. They scapegoat disabled people. Among conservative politicians, for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act is one of the most frequently named examples of an "unfunded federal mandate." Furthermore, given the social and economic realities of having a disability in late 20th-century America, such questions cannot lead to clear understanding much less to meaningful debate. They completely ignore powerful factors such as employment discrimination, corporate control of health care resources, powerful corporate lobbies, class disparities, and other features of profit-driven capitalism. Furthermore, they ignore deep-seated cultural norms that devalue people with disabilities.

REFERENCE

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Seabury Press, 1970.

Economic Consequences of Partnership with Service Dogs

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An interesting, widely-heralded article appeared in a seemingly unlikely outlet given the article's distinctly "non-medical model" message. "The Value of Service Dogs for People with Severe Ambulatory Disabilities: A Randomized Control Trial" by Allen and Blascovich appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* of April 3, 1996. It instantly became national news, picked up by the Associated Press, CNN and other TV networks, and magazines ranging from *Journal of Nursing* to *Off Lead*, a dog training publication.

The article concludes that partnership with service dogs saves more than \$60,000 per dog over a reported "average eight year working life." It claims the saving results from decreased expenditure for personal assistant services for individuals whose disability-related needs are met by canine assistants.

As advocates, we welcome re-affirmation of the efficacy and effectiveness of assistance dogs, recognizing JAMA as a strategic citation for our cause. But as social scientists and practitioners, we must postpone relying on these results, awaiting satisfactory answers to important methodological and procedural questions that follow.

Preliminary Rumblings

We initially read with interest about Dr. Allen's study in 1994 in a *Delta Society* publication. Our deeper curiosity was piqued at the 1995 conference of Assistance Dogs International (ADI), an organization of 30-plus hearing, service and guide dog training programs. Corey Hudson, CEO of Canine Companions for Independence (CCI - the oldest and one of the largest U.S. training programs), asked which attendees had participated in the study. All reported no information about the research although delight at hearing the results which they saw as ammunition in their continual struggle for a share of limited private (insurance) and public (state vocational rehabilitation) resources.