



PARTICIPATION CAPITAL: A NEW THEORETICAL LENS FOR UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION AMONG LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

Despite three decades of policy commitment to inclusive education, many learners with disabilities continue to experience presence without participation: they are seated in mainstream classrooms while remaining peripheral to the academic and social life that unfolds within them. Existing theoretical resources in special and inclusive education — the social model of disability, the capability approach, and the International Classification of Functioning — each illuminate part of this problem, but none was built to explain why some learners with disabilities convert structural access into deepening engagement over time while others, under near-identical structural conditions, do not. This paper proposes Participation Capital as an integrative theoretical construct: the accumulated stock of relational, agentic, recognitional, and procedural resources that a learner with disability, together with family and support networks, can mobilize to convert formally available access into sustained, self-directed, valued engagement in an educational setting. Drawing on Bourdieu's and Coleman's theorizations of capital, Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach, Yosso's community cultural wealth framework, Lundy's model of child participation, self-determination theory, and belonging research, the paper synthesizes five interlocking dimensions of Participation Capital and proposes a working conceptual model together with six theoretical propositions intended to guide future empirical inquiry. Implications for teacher preparation, individualized education planning, and disability policy — including India's National Education Policy 2020 and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 — are discussed, along with the construct's limitations and an agenda for its empirical operationalization.

Keywords: Participation Capital; Inclusive Education; Disability; Capability Approach; Social Capital; Belonging; Self-Determination

Introduction

Inclusive education has, over the last three decades, moved from the margins of educational discourse to the center of international and national policy. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) obliges signatory states to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels, and the World Report on Disability (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011) documented the scale of exclusion that made such a commitment necessary. In India, this global architecture has been translated into domestic instruments: the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 mandates reasonable accommodation and individualized supports in general schools, and the National Education Policy 2020 reiterates equity and inclusion as foundational commitments of the school system (Government of India, 2016; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Enrolment figures for children with disabilities in mainstream schools have accordingly improved in many jurisdictions.

Yet a persistent and uncomfortable finding recurs across the international literature on inclusive classrooms: physical co-location does not reliably produce participation. Learners with disabilities are frequently present in the room without being present in its academic and social life — seated at the back, paired with an aide rather than a peer, called upon less often, and excluded from the informal exchanges through which classroom belonging is built (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Scholars of belonging distinguish precisely along this line: inclusion can describe a learner's location, while belonging describes whether that learner is treated as a full member of the community occupying that location. The distance between the two is where much of the lived experience of disability in mainstream classrooms is concentrated.

The theoretical resources available to explain this gap are each partial. The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) relocates the source of disablement from individual impairment to disabling social and physical barriers, and has been indispensable



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in shifting policy attention toward the removal of structural obstacles. But, as Shakespeare (2006) has argued, an exclusively environmental account struggles to explain variation among learners who face broadly similar barriers yet experience markedly different degrees of participation; it also risks underplaying the ways impairment itself can shape a learner's preferred means of engaging. The capability approach, developed by Sen (1999) and extended by Nussbaum (2006, 2011), reframes disability as a mismatch between an individual's circumstances and the capabilities — substantive freedoms to achieve valued functionings — that education ought to expand, and Terzi (2005, 2014) has applied this framework directly to special and inclusive education. This is a powerful normative yardstick, yet it remains largely silent on the moment-to-moment classroom mechanisms through which capability is built up or eroded. The World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001) supplies an internationally standardized taxonomy that distinguishes participation restriction from activity limitation, but it is a descriptive and classificatory system rather than an explanatory one: it names the presence or absence of participation without theorizing how participation accumulates, is distributed, or is converted into further opportunity.

A further body of scholarship addresses pieces of the puzzle from other angles. Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) explains how relationships and networks convert into advantage in general populations, but was not developed with impairment-specific relational dynamics or institutional gatekeeping in mind. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework offers an important precedent by reframing the resources of marginalized communities as assets rather than deficits, though it was developed in relation to race and ethnicity rather than disability. Lundy's (2007) model of child participation, built around the sequential elements of space, voice, audience, and influence, offers a granular process account of what genuine participation requires, but does not theorize participation as an accumulable, convertible resource in the way that capital theories do. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 1992, 2005) explains the psychological drivers — autonomy, competence, relatedness — that dispose an individual learner toward active engagement, but has less to say about why the opportunity structure of a given classroom affords some learners more chances to exercise that disposition than others.

No existing framework, in other words, combines a structural account of unequal distribution, a psychological account of individual agency, a relational account of belonging, and a rights-based account of process into a single construct that treats participation itself as an unevenly distributed, accumulable, and convertible resource specific to the educational experience of learners with disabilities. This paper proposes such a construct: Participation Capital. The remainder of the paper proceeds in five parts. It first reviews the theoretical lineages from which Participation Capital is synthesized. It then identifies the conceptual gap those lineages leave open and offers a working definition of the new construct, elaborating its five interlocking dimensions. It presents a working conceptual model and six theoretical propositions intended to orient future empirical work. It then discusses implications for teacher preparation, individualized planning, and policy, with particular reference to the Indian inclusive education landscape, before closing with the construct's limitations and an agenda for its operationalization.

Theoretical Foundations

From Economic to Social Capital: Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam

The word “capital” entered educational theory principally through Bourdieu's (1986) account of the forms of capital, in which he distinguished economic capital from cultural and social capital and argued that social capital consists of the durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition that can, under the right conditions, be converted into other forms of advantage. For Bourdieu, capital is inseparable from habitus and field: an individual's dispositions interact with the rules of a given social arena to determine how much of their capital can actually be “played.” Coleman (1988) offered a related but distinct, more functionalist account, treating social capital as whatever inheres in relations among persons that facilitates productive action, and emphasizing the closure of networks — the overlapping ties among parents, schools, and communities — as a key mechanism producing favorable educational outcomes. Putnam (2000) extended the concept to the level of communities and nations, distinguishing bonding capital, which reinforces ties within



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a homogeneous group, from bridging capital, which connects across difference, and linking both to norms of trust and reciprocity.

None of these three foundational accounts was developed with disability in mind. Yet their shared insight — that relationships are not merely a backdrop to opportunity but a resource that can be accumulated, distributed unequally, and converted into further advantage — transfers directly to the situation of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Disability can be read, within a Bourdieusian frame, as a categorization that shapes which forms of communication, movement, or cognition are recognized as legitimate currency within the field of the classroom; a learner who communicates through augmentative and alternative communication, for instance, brings a different relational “playing card” into that field than a peer who communicates verbally, regardless of the substantive content of what each is trying to say.

Community Cultural Wealth: A Strength-Based Precedent

A second, closely related lineage comes from critical race theory in education. Yosso (2005) challenged deficit accounts of marginalized communities by proposing community cultural wealth, an array of forms of capital — aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant — nurtured within communities of color that are too often rendered invisible by dominant, white, middle-class definitions of what counts as valuable capital. The theoretical move Yosso makes is significant for the present argument: rather than asking how a marginalized group can acquire the capital already recognized by dominant institutions, she asks what capital that group already possesses on its own terms, and how institutions might be redesigned to recognize it. Applied to disability, this move suggests that the knowledge disabled learners and their families accumulate through navigating an often inaccessible education system — for example, the practical expertise required to negotiate an individualized education plan, or a learner's own embodied knowledge of their communication and sensory needs — constitutes a form of wealth rather than a deficit to be remediated, even though mainstream classrooms rarely recognize it as such.

The Capability Approach: Sen, Nussbaum, and Terzi

Sen (1999) proposed that development and justice should be evaluated not by resources or utility alone but by capabilities — the substantive freedoms a person has to achieve the functionings, or beings and doings, that they have reason to value. Nussbaum (2006, 2011) extended this framework with a list of central capabilities, including affiliation, play, and practical reason, and argued explicitly that a just society must design its basic institutions from the outset with disabled citizens in view, rather than treating disability as an afterthought to be accommodated once institutions are already built. Terzi (2005, 2014) brought this apparatus directly into special and inclusive education, reframing what had traditionally been labeled “special educational needs” as the outcome of an unequal relationship between individual impairment and insufficient environmental and institutional resources, and arguing that the purpose of inclusion should be understood as the equalization of capability rather than the equalization of access alone.

The capability approach supplies Participation Capital with its normative horizon: participation matters because it expands the range of functionings a learner with disability can actually achieve, not merely because it satisfies a procedural requirement. Its limitation, for present purposes, is one of grain: the approach operates at the level of the person's overall freedom to achieve valued functionings and offers comparatively little guidance on the specific, repeated, small-scale classroom interactions — whose hand is called on, whose contribution is written on the board, who is invited into a group project — through which that freedom is, in practice, built up or worn away.

Participation as a Classificatory Construct: The WHO-ICF

The World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001) offers the field's most widely used vocabulary for participation, defining it as an individual's involvement in a life situation and distinguishing it from activity, which refers to the execution of a task by an individual. The ICF's bio-psycho-social model explicitly locates disability at the intersection of health condition, body structures and functions, activity, participation, and



environmental and personal factors, and its distinction between activity limitation and participation restriction has allowed researchers to separate what a learner can do from what a learner is actually permitted or supported to do in a given context. This distinction is analytically valuable, and Participation Capital borrows it directly. However, the ICF remains, by design, a classification system: it provides codes for describing the presence or degree of participation restriction, not a theory of the mechanism by which participation accumulates, is unequally distributed among learners with similar impairments, or converts into further opportunity over the course of a school career.

Rights-Based Participation: The Lundy Model

Working from Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Lundy (2007) developed an influential model that disaggregates participation into four sequential and interrelated elements: space, the opportunity to express a view; voice, the facilitation of that expression in a form appropriate to the child; audience, the assurance that the view is communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen; and influence, the assurance that the view is acted upon as appropriate. The model's granularity is precisely what makes it valuable here. It makes visible the many ways in which participation can fail even when it appears, on the surface, to be present: a learner may be given space to speak without being given the communicative means, or voice without an audience willing to attend to it, or an attentive audience without any resulting influence on decisions. This decomposition of participation into distinguishable sub-processes is a direct conceptual ancestor of the multidimensional structure proposed for Participation Capital below.

Self-Determination Theory and the Psychology of Engagement

A further lineage addresses the individual psychological conditions for engagement. Deci and Ryan's (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) self-determination theory holds that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs whose satisfaction predicts intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. Wehmeyer (1992, 2005) developed a functional model of self-determination specific to people with disabilities, identifying autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization as the defining characteristics of self-determined behavior, and subsequent research by Wehmeyer and Schalock (2001) has linked self-determination to broader quality-of-life and post-school outcomes. This literature clarifies why an individual learner might be disposed to participate given the opportunity. It is comparatively silent, however, on why the opportunity structure of a particular classroom or school differentially affords that disposition room to act for different learners facing similar impairments.

Belonging as Relational Infrastructure

Goodenow (1993) and Goodenow and Grady (1993) defined school belonging as the extent to which a student feels personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others within the school's social environment, and demonstrated its association with academic motivation. Subsequent research on disability specifically has distinguished belonging from mere inclusion, arguing that inclusion can describe where a student is placed while belonging describes whether that student is treated as a valued member of the community in that place. Belonging, on this account, functions as a form of relational infrastructure: it is not itself an achievement or a functioning in Sen's sense, but a precondition that makes other functionings — academic engagement, friendship, self-advocacy — more likely to be pursued and sustained.

Models of Disability: From Medical to Relational Accounts

Finally, any construct built around disability and participation must take a position on how disability itself is theorized. Oliver's (1990) social model relocated the source of disablement from individual impairment to the disabling barriers, practices, and attitudes constructed by society, and this reframing underwrites the entire policy architecture of contemporary inclusive education. Shakespeare (2006), while affirming the social model's historical importance, argued that an exclusively environmental account risks externalizing the entirety of disabled people's experience onto social barriers, at the cost of acknowledging that impairment itself can carry real effects — pain, fatigue, communication difference — that are not reducible to social construction, and proposed instead a more relational or interactional understanding that holds



impairment effects and social barriers together. This debate matters directly for the construct developed below: Participation Capital is deliberately built to avoid both an individualizing account that locates participation deficits solely within the learner, and a purely environmental account that treats every learner's relationship to a given barrier as identical.

The Conceptual Gap and Rationale for a New Construct

Read together, these eight lineages supply the field with a critique of disabling structures (the social model), a normative target against which inclusion can be measured (the capability approach), an internationally standardized taxonomy of outcomes (the ICF), a granular process account of rights-based participation (the Lundy model), an account of the individual psychological mechanism that disposes a learner toward engagement (self-determination theory), an account of the relational infrastructure that makes engagement sustainable (belonging research), a template for reframing marginalized resources as wealth rather than deficit (community cultural wealth), and a general account of how relationships convert into advantage (social capital theory). What none of them offers, individually or in combination, is a single construct that treats participation itself — for a learner with disability, specifically — as an unevenly distributed, accumulable, and convertible resource in the way that Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam treated social capital for populations more generally.

This distinction between capability, participation, and capital is not merely terminological. A capability is a freedom to achieve a valued functioning; a participation restriction, in ICF terms, is the classified gap between that freedom and its exercise; capital, by contrast, is the resource whose accumulation, distribution, and convertibility explain why that gap opens for some learners and closes for others under superficially similar conditions. Four properties in particular distinguish a capital account from the constructs reviewed above. First, capital is unevenly distributed by structural position: two learners with the same diagnosis, in the same school, may hold very different stocks depending on their family's navigational knowledge, their teachers' expectations, or the peer networks available to them. Second, capital is accumulable and depletable through repeated interaction over time, rather than fixed at the point of diagnosis or placement. Third, capital is convertible — gains in one form (for instance, a trusting relationship with one teacher) can be mobilized to build gains in another (confidence to communicate in a new setting), and participation gains in one domain can convert into capability gains in another. Fourth, capital can be transmitted, particularly through family and community navigational knowledge, in ways that extend beyond any single learner's individual psychology or any single classroom's environmental features. It is this combination of properties, absent from the frameworks reviewed above, that motivates the construct proposed in the following section.

Distinguishing Participation Capital from Existing Theoretical Frameworks

Participation Capital builds on, but is not reducible to, existing theories of disability, participation, and educational inclusion. Social capital theory explains how relationships generate opportunity but does not account for disability-specific processes such as recognition, accessible participation, or learner influence in educational decision-making (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The Capability Approach provides a normative account of what learners should be able to achieve (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006), while the ICF offers a descriptive framework for understanding participation and disability (WHO, 2001). Lundy's (2007) model identifies the conditions for meaningful participation, and self-determination theory explains the motivational foundations of learner agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 2005). Each contributes an important part of the picture, yet none explains how participation develops, accumulates, and translates into further educational opportunities over time.

Participation Capital addresses this gap by conceptualizing participation as a multidimensional resource that is accumulated through everyday interactions, shaped by relationships and institutional structures, and converted into deeper engagement and educational inclusion. Rather than replacing existing theories, it integrates their complementary insights into a single explanatory framework for understanding why learners with disabilities experience different levels of participation even under similar structural conditions.



Table 1. Comparison of Participation Capital with Existing Theoretical Frameworks

Framework	Main Contribution	Key Limitation	How Participation Capital Extends It
Social Capital (Bourdieu; Coleman; Putnam)	Explains how relationships and networks create educational opportunities.	Does not address disability-specific participation or learner influence.	Treats participation itself as a resource that develops through relationships, recognition, and institutional support.
Capability Approach (Sen; Nussbaum)	Emphasizes learners' freedoms to achieve valued outcomes.	Explains <i>what</i> learners should be able to achieve, but not <i>how</i> participation develops in classrooms.	Explains the processes through which participation contributes to capability development.
ICF (WHO)	Provides a common framework for describing functioning and participation.	Describes participation rather than explaining how it is built or sustained.	Conceptualizes participation as dynamic, accumulative, and convertible over time.
Lundy's Model	Identifies the conditions for meaningful participation (space, voice, audience, influence).	Focuses on participation processes rather than long-term accumulation.	Explains how repeated participatory experiences build enduring participation capacity.
Self-Determination Theory	Explains learner motivation, autonomy, and agency.	Focuses mainly on individual psychological processes.	Integrates learner agency with structural, relational, recognition, and procedural factors.
Participation Capital	Integrates structural, relational, psychological, recognition, and procedural resources into one explanatory framework.	—	Explains why learners with similar access may experience different levels of meaningful participation over time.

Introducing Participation Capital

Participation Capital is defined here as the accumulated stock of relational, agentic, recognition, and procedural resources that a learner with disability, together with family and support networks, can mobilize to convert structurally available access into sustained, self-directed, and valued engagement in the academic and social life of an educational setting. The definition deliberately separates access — the presence of ramps, assistive technology, accessible curriculum materials, or communication supports — from participation capital itself, on the grounds that access is a necessary but insufficient condition: a learner may have full physical and communicative access to a classroom and still hold little capital to convert that access into actual engagement, if the relationships, recognition, and decision-making pathways required to make use of it are absent. Five interlocking dimensions are proposed.



Figure 1 illustrates Participation Capital as an ecological and multidimensional construct. Educational policies and institutional contexts shape the conditions under which five interrelated dimensions—access, agentic, relational, recognitional, and procedural capital—develop. These dimensions interact dynamically to support meaningful classroom participation, which in turn strengthens learners' belonging, self-determination, and capability development, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes.

Access Capital

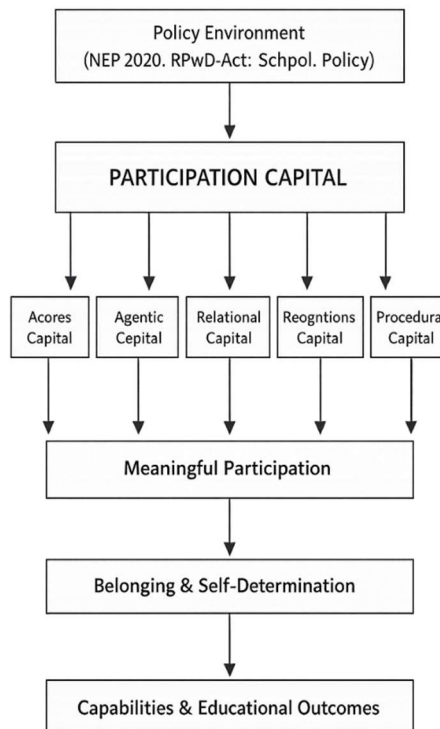


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Participation Capital.

Access capital refers to the baseline structural, curricular, and communicative conditions that make a learner's presence and participation physically and cognitively possible: architectural accessibility, assistive and augmentative technology, curriculum materials designed according to Universal Design for Learning principles, and the availability of preferred communication modes. It corresponds most directly to the environmental factors component of the ICF (WHO, 2001) and to the "space" element of Lundy's (2007) model. Access capital is the most visible dimension, the one most readily audited through compliance checklists, and consequently the one most likely to be mistaken for participation itself.

Agentic Capital

Agentic capital refers to a learner's internalized capacity and disposition to act as an initiator within the classroom: skills and habits of choice-making, self-advocacy, goal-setting, and communicative initiative. It draws directly on Wehmeyer's (1992, 2005) functional model of self-determination and on self-determination theory's account of autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Agentic capital is built through repeated, low-stakes opportunities to exercise choice and see that choice matter, and it is correspondingly eroded when a learner's initiatives are consistently overridden or ignored — a pattern that can, over time, produce a passivity that is easily misread as evidence of the learner's underlying incapacity rather than as the accumulated residue of foreclosed opportunity.



Relational Capital

Relational capital refers to the density, quality, and reciprocity of a learner's relationships with peers, teachers, and family members, and to the trust and mutual expectation embedded within those relationships. It draws on Bourdieu's (1986), Coleman's (1988), and Putnam's (2000) accounts of social capital and on belonging research (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Within the classroom, relational capital determines whether a learner is invited into informal peer exchange, paired for collaborative work on the basis of shared interest rather than assigned proximity to an aide, and known by teachers as an individual with preferences and strengths rather than primarily as a diagnostic label. Because relationships are reciprocal, relational capital cannot be built by the learner alone; it depends on the willingness of peers and adults in the setting to extend trust and initiate contact.

Recognitional Capital

Recognitional capital refers to the degree to which a learner's communicative acts, preferences, and forms of expression are treated as legitimate and meaningful by others in the setting. It draws on Fraser's (1995) theory of recognition, on Yosso's (2005) reframing of marginalized communities' knowledge as wealth rather than deficit, and on Nussbaum's (2006, 2011) insistence on the dignity owed to disabled persons as equals from the outset of institutional design. A learner who communicates through augmentative and alternative communication, atypical vocalization, or behavior possesses recognitional capital only to the extent that those around them treat such communication as speech rather than as noise to be managed; the same physical act of communicating can therefore carry very different participatory weight depending entirely on whether it is recognized.

Procedural Capital

Procedural capital refers to the extent to which a learner's voice, once expressed and recognized, is actually able to shape decisions that affect their education — curricular choices, individualized education plan goals, classroom rules, or peer grouping arrangements. It corresponds directly to the “influence” element of Lundy's (2007) model and to Nussbaum's (2006) capability of practical reason, the freedom to form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection about one's own life plan. Procedural capital is the dimension most tightly bound to institutional structure: however strong a learner's agentic, relational, and recognitional capital, its conversion into genuine influence depends on whether the school has built durable channels — structured pupil-voice mechanisms in individualized planning meetings, for example — through which that influence can travel.

The five dimensions are proposed as interlocking rather than additive. A learner may possess strong agentic capital — a well-developed capacity for self-advocacy — yet see little of it converted into participation if relational capital is weak and no one in the setting is disposed to listen; a learner may hold ample access capital in the form of a fully resourced communication device yet still be marginalized if recognitional capital is absent and that device's output is not treated as legitimate speech by staff and peers. This interlocking structure implies a bottleneck logic: the dimension in shortest supply constrains the return available from strength in the others, a property elaborated further in the propositions below. The construct also carries an explicit family and community dimension, echoing Yosso's (2005) familial and navigational capital: families who have accumulated practical knowledge of how to navigate individualized education planning processes, disability rights procedures, and school bureaucracies pass that navigational knowledge to their children and to other families, functioning as an intergenerational reservoir of capital that exists alongside, and interacts with, what happens inside any single classroom.

The Bottleneck Principle of Participation Capital

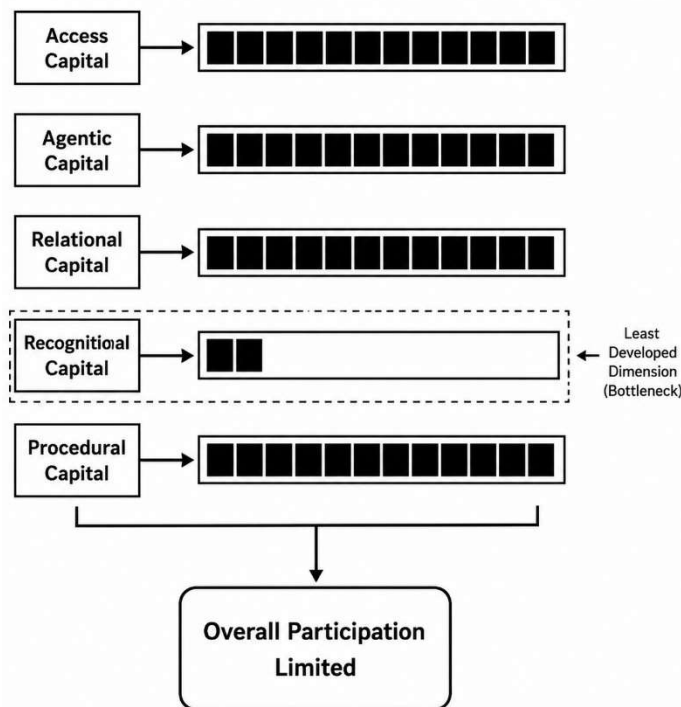
The five dimensions of Participation Capital should not be understood as independent resources that simply add together. Rather, they operate as an interdependent system in which weakness in one dimension can limit the contribution of strengths



in the others. This **bottleneck principle** suggests that meaningful participation is constrained by the least-developed dimension of Participation Capital rather than determined by the sum of all five dimensions.

For example, a learner may have excellent physical access to learning, appropriate assistive technology, and strong self-advocacy skills. However, if teachers or peers do not recognise the learner's preferred mode of communication, opportunities for meaningful participation remain limited. Likewise, a learner may enjoy positive relationships with classmates but still have little influence over educational decisions if schools provide no mechanisms for incorporating student voice into planning processes. In both cases, strengths in some dimensions cannot fully compensate for deficiencies in another.

The bottleneck principle has important implications for research and practice. It suggests that interventions targeting only one dimension—for example, improving physical accessibility—may have limited effects unless accompanied by efforts to strengthen relational, recognitional, and procedural conditions. Consequently, improving participation requires identifying



and addressing the dimension that most constrains meaningful engagement in a particular educational context.

Figure 2. The Bottleneck Principle of Participation Capital.

Description: The five dimensions of Participation Capital operate as an interdependent system. The least-developed dimension acts as a bottleneck, constraining overall participation despite strengths in the remaining dimensions. This illustrates that meaningful participation depends on balanced development across all five dimensions rather than excellence in only a few.

Illustrative Application of the Bottleneck Principle

The bottleneck principle can be illustrated through a hypothetical classroom example. Consider two learners with similar disabilities who are educated in the same inclusive classroom and receive comparable accommodations, assistive



technology, and curriculum access. Although both learners possess similar levels of access and agentic capital, one learner's communication is consistently acknowledged by teachers and peers, while the other's communicative attempts are frequently overlooked or not acted upon. Consequently, the first learner develops stronger peer relationships, greater confidence to participate, and increased influence over classroom activities, whereas the second remains only nominally included despite comparable structural supports. From the perspective of Participation Capital, this difference arises because limited recognitional capital constrains the conversion of other forms of capital into meaningful participation. The example illustrates the central proposition of the bottleneck principle: strengthening individual dimensions in isolation is unlikely to produce sustained participation unless the weakest dimension is also addressed.

A Working Model of Participation Capital

Participation Capital can be represented as a nested, ecological structure. Agentic capital operates primarily at the level of the individual learner; relational and recognitional capital operate primarily at the level of the classroom and peer group; access and procedural capital operate primarily at the level of the institution; and all four are bounded, enabled, or constrained by a macro, policy-level layer — national and state legislative frameworks, teacher-preparation standards, and curricular policy — that determines how much capital-building is even structurally possible within a given system. Table 1 summarizes the five dimensions, their core diagnostic question, their principal theoretical ancestry, and an indicative classroom-level indicator that could inform future measurement.

Dimension	Core Diagnostic Question	Principal Theoretical Ancestry	Indicative Classroom Indicator
Access Capital	Can the learner physically and communicatively reach the activity?	WHO-ICF (2001); Lundy (2007) – space	Availability and functional use of assistive/AAC technology and UDL materials
Agentic Capital	Does the learner initiate choices and self-advocate?	Wehmeyer (1992, 2005); Deci & Ryan (1985)	Frequency of learner-initiated (vs. adult-prompted) contributions
Relational Capital	Does the learner hold reciprocal relationships with peers and staff?	Bourdieu (1986); Coleman (1988); Goodenow (1993)	Peer-nominated friendship and unprompted peer interaction counts
Recognitional Capital	Is the learner's mode of communication treated as legitimate?	Fraser (1995); Yosso (2005); Nussbaum (2006)	Staff response latency and uptake of non-normative communicative acts
Procedural Capital	Does the learner's expressed view shape actual decisions?	Lundy (2007) – influence; Nussbaum (2006) – practical reason	Proportion of IEP goals traceable to learner-expressed preference

Table 1. Dimensions of Participation Capital.

The model implies that interventions targeting a single dimension — for example, procuring an assistive device without also building recognitional capital among staff — are likely to yield limited returns, because the bottleneck dimension continues to cap overall participation regardless of gains elsewhere. It also implies that Participation Capital audits, as



distinct from access audits, would need to gather evidence across all five dimensions rather than relying on any single proxy such as physical placement or attendance.

Theoretical Propositions

Six propositions are offered to render Participation Capital testable and to orient an empirical research agenda.

Proposition 1. Participation Capital, rather than formal placement or attendance alone, predicts the depth of a disabled learner's academic and social engagement over the course of a school year. Two learners placed in the same inclusive classroom, with equivalent access provisions, are expected to show divergent participation trajectories to the extent that their relational, agentic, recognitional, and procedural capital diverge.

Proposition 2. The five dimensions of Participation Capital are interdependent rather than additive, such that the dimension in shortest supply constrains the participatory return available from strength in the remaining dimensions. This bottleneck property distinguishes Participation Capital from simple checklist models of inclusion, in which access provisions alone are taken as a proxy for participation.

Proposition 3. Participation Capital is dynamically accumulable and depletable through everyday micro-interactions — the recognition or dismissal of a learner's communicative acts, the extension or withholding of choice — rather than fixed by diagnosis, impairment severity, or initial placement decision. Repeated experiences of being heard and acted upon are expected to build agentic and relational capital over time, while repeated experiences of being overridden or ignored are expected to erode them, independent of the learner's underlying skill level.

Proposition 4. Family and community navigational knowledge functions as an intergenerational transmission mechanism for Participation Capital, analogous to the familial and navigational capital described by Yosso (2005). Families with greater accumulated experience of negotiating individualized education planning processes and disability rights procedures are expected to transmit strategies that measurably increase their children's procedural capital in subsequent school transitions.

Proposition 5. Institutional and policy-level architecture — curricular flexibility, teacher-preparation standards, and the formal procedural rights embedded in individualized education planning — sets the outer bound on how much of a learner's agentic and relational capital can be converted into actual procedural influence, regardless of the learner's individual-level capacity. A highly self-determined learner in a system without structured pupil-voice mechanisms is expected to convert agentic capital into influence at a lower rate than an equally self-determined learner in a system that embeds such mechanisms.

Proposition 6. Because Participation Capital is convertible across domains, gains achieved in one participatory context — for instance, a structured peer-mediated activity — are expected to transfer into gains in adjacent domains, including academic self-efficacy and, over the longer term, the post-school self-determination and quality-of-life outcomes documented by Wehmeyer and Schalock (2001). This proposition positions Participation Capital not only as a within-classroom construct but as a resource with plausible longitudinal, cross-domain consequences.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Teacher Preparation

A Participation Capital lens implies a shift in teacher preparation away from a near-exclusive focus on differentiating academic content and toward the explicit cultivation of relational, recognitional, and procedural capital as teachable competencies in their own right. This includes training teachers to notice and legitimize non-normative communication, including behavior that functions communicatively; to structure peer partnerships around shared interest rather than



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proximity to a paraprofessional; and to build recurring, low-stakes opportunities for learner choice into ordinary instructional routines rather than treating self-determination as a discrete curricular unit. Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) account of inclusive pedagogy, which reframes differentiation as an extension of what is ordinarily available to all learners rather than something additional provided to some, offers a compatible pedagogical language for this shift, and Ainscow's (2005) emphasis on building the internal capacity of schools rather than relying solely on external specialist support aligns with the institutional layer of the model proposed above.

Individualized Education Planning

The construct suggests a concrete instrument-level recommendation: individualized education plans could incorporate a Participation Capital audit alongside the conventional Present Level of Performance, assessing access, agentic, relational, recognition, and procedural capital as distinct, separately reportable data points rather than collapsing them into a single undifferentiated “participation” checkbox. Such an audit would make visible precisely the kind of bottleneck this paper has emphasized — for example, a learner with strong access and agentic capital but weak recognition capital — in a way that a generic participation rating could not, and would direct intervention toward the dimension actually constraining engagement rather than toward the dimension easiest to document.

Implications for the Indian Inclusive Education Context

India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 establishes a legal entitlement to reasonable accommodation and individualized support, and the National Education Policy 2020 restates equity and inclusion as foundational commitments, while the Rehabilitation Council of India sets professional standards for the preparation of special educators. Participation Capital offers these policy instruments a complementary diagnostic lens: it provides a way of asking not only whether the legal and procedural entitlements set out in such frameworks have been formally satisfied, but whether they have been converted into the relational, recognition, and procedural conditions that make lived classroom participation possible. A school might, for instance, fully satisfy an access-oriented compliance audit — ramps installed, an aide assigned, an individualized education plan filed — while a Participation Capital audit reveals that the learner in question is rarely called upon, has no reciprocal peer relationship, and has never had a personally expressed goal incorporated into that plan. Framed this way, the construct is offered as a tool for closing the recognized gap between inclusion in principle and inclusion in everyday classroom practice, a gap to which teacher educators, curriculum planners, and school leaders preparing learners for participation under India's evolving policy architecture may find it useful to attend.

School Leadership

At the institutional level, the model implies that school leaders concerned with inclusion should treat procedural capital as an infrastructure to be deliberately built rather than an incidental byproduct of good teaching — for example, by embedding structured, recurring mechanisms through which disabled learners can influence decisions that affect them, from accessible school council representation to structured preference elicitation ahead of individualized planning meetings. The model also cautions leaders against allowing documentation of access provisions to substitute for evidence of relational, recognition, and procedural capital, since the former is considerably easier to audit than the latter and is therefore at persistent risk of being mistaken for it.

Limitations and Future Research

Participation Capital is proposed here as a theoretical and conceptual contribution; it has not yet been empirically validated, and its central task for the immediate future is operationalization. A measurable instrument would need to combine adapted items from established scales — for instance, belonging items drawing on the Psychological Sense of School Membership tradition initiated by Goodenow (1993), self-determination items drawing on Wehmeyer's (2005) functional model, and



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influence items drawing on Lundy's (2007) framework — into a single multidimensional measure capable of detecting the bottleneck dynamics proposed in Proposition 2.

A second limitation concerns the capital metaphor itself. Economic metaphors carry a risk of reducing relationships, recognition, and dignity to instrumental, transactional terms, a risk that sits uneasily alongside the Nussbaum-derived emphasis on unconditional dignity underlying the recognitional dimension. The construct attempts to mitigate this tension by treating relational and recognitional capital as grounded in dignity and reciprocity rather than in exchange value, but the adequacy of this move is itself a question for further conceptual and empirical scrutiny rather than one this paper can resolve on its own.

A third limitation concerns differential applicability across the heterogeneity of disability. The relative weighting of the five dimensions plausibly varies for a learner with a specific learning disability, whose access barriers may be largely curricular, compared with a learner with multiple and severe disabilities, for whom access and recognitional capital may dominate. Future research should examine whether the five-dimension structure holds, and with what relative weighting, across different disability categories rather than assuming uniform applicability.

Finally, the theoretical lineages synthesized here are drawn substantially from Euro-American and, in the case of the Indian policy discussion, South Asian sources, and the construct's cross-cultural generalizability has not been tested. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies, capable of tracking the accumulation and depletion dynamics proposed in Proposition 3 over time and across cultural and linguistic contexts, represent a necessary next step in establishing whether Participation Capital functions as this paper theorizes it to.

Conclusion

Three decades of inclusive education scholarship and policy have been considerably more successful at articulating what learners with disabilities are entitled to than at explaining why that entitlement so often stalls at the threshold of the classroom door. This paper has argued that the missing piece is not another rights framework, capability taxonomy, or classification system, but a construct that treats participation itself as an unevenly distributed, accumulable, and convertible resource — a form of capital in the tradition opened by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, but reconstructed around the specific relational, agentic, recognitional, and procedural dynamics that shape whether a learner with disability is merely present in a classroom or genuinely belongs to it. Participation Capital is offered in that spirit: as a generative lens and a set of testable propositions rather than a finished theory, intended to help researchers, teacher educators, and policymakers ask a more precise question than whether a learner with disability has been included, namely, what capital that learner currently holds, where its dimensions bottleneck, and what the adults and institutions around that learner are doing, each day, to build or deplete it. For the many learners with disabilities for whom presence in the classroom has not yet meant belonging within it, that more precise question is where the next phase of inclusive education research and practice might usefully begin.

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