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A Critical Evaluation of Educational Tracking under the Capability Theory: the Instrumental Rationality of Subject-based Banding System in Singapore and the Freedom Paradox of the A-level System in the United Kingdom

Ronger Huang

University Of Manchester, The United Kingdom

Abstract

In contemporary educational reforms, educational differentiation has emerged as a global response to students' diverse learning needs. However, national systems interpret this goal through different logic. This article compares Singapore's Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system with the UK's A-Level system to explore how institutional design achieve the goals of individual and social development. SBB, focused on ability alignment and efficiency, enhances educational options and learning adaptability through dynamic diversion, but potential implicit stratification still constrains equity. A-Level emphasizes interest-driven and free subject selection, expanding students' personalized development space. However, the disparity in socioeconomic resources and the biases in college admissions result in inequitable access to genuine opportunities. Drawing on Sen's capability theory, the study examines how freedom of opportunity, process, and outcome are expressed within each system and their implications for students' capabilities and social mobility. The analysis reveals that Singapore faces a contradiction between the efficiency dominance of selection and the diverse development of students, whilst the UK perpetuates inequality under the pretext of freedom. This article advocates that educational reform should strike a balance between instrumental rationality and humanism, providing a new perspective for global educational policy research.

Keywords: Comparison of Education System, Educational Differentiation, Subject-Based Banding, A-Level, International Education Reform