

The Capability Approach and Education

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Evaluating Education

The capability approach provides a general normative framework for the assessment of human development. Yet it is also possible to consider what it has to offer to evaluations of specific areas of social policy, such as education. In recent years there has been growing international interest from people working in diverse sectors and fields of formal, informal and non-formal education in the potential of the capability approach to contribute ideas, policies and practices. This introductory article is concerned with how the capability approach might be used in educational settings and thinking about educational inequalities.

The key idea of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities – their freedom to promote or achieve 'functionings' which are important to them. 'Functionings' are defined as the valuable activities and states that make up people's well-being, such as having a healthy body, being safe, or having a good job. They are related to goods and income, but they describe what a person is able to do or be as a result – for example, when a person's need for food (a commodity) is met, they enjoy the functioning of being well-nourished. Capabilities are 'the alternative combination of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve'; they are 'the substantive freedom' a person has 'to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen, 1999: 87).

It has only been in the last few years that a number of education researchers have turned to the capability approach, so it is very much a developing area of theory and practice. Consequently, many themes are still open to debate. Although engagement with the concept of capability features in the work of both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, there are some significant differences between their approaches. Aspects of both have been considered important by education researchers so far. Sen's work has tended to be used in general discussions of policy and critiques of theories regarding education and the economy. Nussbaum's work, on the other hand, has been of considerable interest because of her concern with the content and process of education. A number of writers draw on the overlap between both concerns.

Some of the reasons why the concept of capability is useful in general assessments of equality between individuals relate to the very broad scope of what is meant by education. Firstly, the capability approach was a response to the limitations of assessments that measure only desire satisfaction, resources, or outcomes. In education, most standard evaluation tools are based on what people say they want from their schooling; resources, for example spending per child; or outcomes in the form of examination results. There are, however, problems relating to each of these. In terms of desire satisfaction, imagine a situation in which children from low income groups receive only primary education, and children from high earning families attend primary and secondary school. If both groups say they are satisfied, because this is what each has come to expect, then there is no problem in terms of utility or desire satisfaction, as both groups are

apparently equally content. Yet there is something uncomfortable about this kind of conclusion, however widespread the practice that supports it. A focus on capabilities would require us to evaluate not just satisfaction with individual learning outcomes, but to question the range of real educational choices that have been available to people; whether they had the genuine capability to achieve a valued educational functioning. We would need to ask whether people's educational aspirations (what they hoped for now and in the future, see Appadurai, 2004) had become adapted to their circumstances, and whether the low income group had a range of valued learning opportunities to choose from out of which they then selected just minimal primary education. The capability approach therefore invites a range of more searching questions with regard to equality than just a focus on desire satisfaction.

Thinking in terms of capabilities also raises a wider range of issues than simply looking at the amount of resources or commodities people have, because people have different needs. In the case of education, one might argue, the education provided by one type of school may not be suitable or accessible for all children, because some children will have different educational needs. Thus, for example, five years of basic schooling in a class with a 40:1 pupil teacher ratio with lessons delivered in the majority language in a region, might suit quick and confident learners, who talk the majority language at home, always sit in the front of the class and have high levels of concentration because they have good nutrition. The same level of resources may be quite inadequate for children who are shy, hungry, with poor concentration, always sit at the back of the class and talk a minority language. The capability approach alerts us that we cannot simply evaluate resources and inputs (such as teachers, or years of schooling) and that we must look at whether learners are able to *convert* resources into capabilities, and thereafter potentially into functionings. Another basic example would be how formal schooling can provide literacy – the capability to read and write – which can then be used to convert a resource such as a newspaper into a source of information for an individual. If we evaluate only inputs, each child in the class appears to have access to equal amounts of resources. If we evaluate the link between resources and capabilities, it is evident that there are considerable inequalities that standard evaluation methodologies tend to overlook.

These are just a couple of examples of how the general nature of the capability approach can highlight inequalities. But if we look at current debates in education research, what can the concept of capabilities add?

Mainstream approaches to education evaluation and their limitations

Evaluation in education is a fiercely contested terrain, with a lack of consensus over what should be measured, and how educational equality should be defined. For example, in the UK there are ongoing debates over how school outcomes should be assessed (according to raw exam results, or 'value-added' measures that take account of how far a child has progressed from her or his last assessment), and whether gender equality in education is worthy of attention, as many girls achieve better test scores than boys. International educational targets, associated with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) have been scrutinised because the indicators rest on basic measures of participation without addressing how the content and experiences of schooling relate to gender equality. At the centre of discussions about the appropriate indicator for education evaluation are sharply divergent views about what education is for, and why educational equality is important. The capability approach has been particularly useful in trying to disentangle some of these issues.

There are a number of limitations in some of existing positions. *Human capital theory*, which argues that the value of education is in increasing private and social rates of return, generally measured in terms of increased incomes to individuals, families and states, has been widely employed in national and international policy. It concentrates primarily on the instrumental value of education and on individual and collective returns from education (usually in terms of economic growth). Human capital theory, however, invites the criticism that its vision of what people value from education is too narrow. Individuals and societies are not only interested in education because it will earn them more money or because it will make them 'fit into' their societies better. They may be interested in education because it is pleasant in its own right, or because it allows them to challenge existing structures of power, or because it develops an understanding of non-economic values, possibly care or equality or connection. The capability approach, in stressing the importance of evaluating capabilities and not outcomes alone, suggests that dimensions of education other than rates of return should be considered.

Structuralist accounts of schooling have been an important feature of sociological analyses of the way that schools reproduce inequalities in societies divided by race, ethnicity, class or gender. But these analyses, while generally paying much more attention to power and conditions in schools than those associated with human capital theory, are not able to take into account individual experiences, values and differences within groups. Thus structural inequalities might be very different for differently racialised or gendered groups and individuals within the working class. It is this concern with typical human diversity within unjust structures that the capability approach tries to grasp.

Post-structuralist work and ethnographic studies tend to focus on local situations and negotiated meanings, with particular interest in discursive formations and their boundaries. Yet while these studies can be useful for exploring power relations, difference, and individual engagements with contested meanings, they lack an overarching normative framework which can assist an evaluative study to investigate issues of distribution, justice and equality. The capability approach, in contrast, derives from a particular clearly articulated normative framework and is situated within well-developed debates about justice and equality that go beyond simply personal or collective processes of meaning making.

All the mainstream approaches to education evaluation outlined above fail to deal with questions of rights, needs, and how one might develop a more complex idea of disadvantage in education settings.

What the capability approach can offer

Thinking in terms of capabilities may enable us to overcome some of the limitations of existing approaches. There are a number of ways in which the concept of capabilities can be useful in addressing some of the shortcomings outlined above.

First, at the heart of the notion of a capability is a conception that a person is able to develop a reasoned understanding of valued beings and doings. This in itself is a powerful argument for forms of education, through which an individual can explore her own conception of what it is she has reason to value. If an important normative goal is capability expansion, then developing education is a part of expanding the capacity to make valued choices in other spheres of life.

Seeing education as linked to expanding learning and valued choices entails an evaluation of education that goes considerably beyond those based solely on outcome measures, such as numbers enrolled, test scores, or income. These indicators tend to aim at maximising specific educational outcomes (or 'achieved functionings' relating to education) but do not provide a means to evaluate the overall purpose of education in relation to human well-being.

Thinking about the capability approach opens a space in which we can be critical of school processes within a normative framework with a sense of universality. Is school education always beneficial to an individual's overall capabilities in life? Sen's capability approach does not explicitly allow that formal education may not always operate as an unqualified good. But a generally poor quality education, or experiences of harassment at school can be a serious life-long disadvantage; it is therefore important to consider that capabilities can be diminished through education as well as enhanced.

With regard to children's exercise of choice over their own valued beings and doings, we would need due attention to what capabilities are valuable for a child both now, and in enabling her choices and capability expansion in the future. It is therefore likely that we would need to specify at least a few core capabilities that education would seek to develop regardless of whether or not a child chose them. For example, Harry Brighouse (2000, p.65) argues that 'all children should have realistic opportunity to become autonomous adults', because autonomy 'enhances dramatically the ability of individuals to identify [for themselves] and live lives that are worth living' (p.88). We need, he argues, to equip children with the skills they need to reflect rationally on alternative choices about how to live, so as to enable them to make better rather than worse choices about how to live their lives now and in the future. Nussbaum (2000) too, insists that in the interests of democracy and tolerance in society, children should develop their capability to critically reflect and plan in an autonomous way, even if as adults they choose a non-autonomous life. Nussbaum is also clear that in the case of children we require that they remain in compulsory education (schooling) until they have developed the capabilities that are important in enabling them to have genuine and valued choices, for example to exit from a traditional community. She concedes that we cannot develop a mature adult capability without having some practice of it, and has pointed out that with respect to children, we might need to promote a relevant capability 'by requiring the functioning that nourishes it' (2000, p 91). She gives the example of requiring children, especially girls, to spend time in play, story-telling and art activities as a way to promote the general capability of 'play' for girls and the women they will become. In other words they need to do it (function) in order to develop the mature capability. Nussbaum suggests that 'the more crucial a function is to attaining and maintaining other capabilities, the more entitled we may be to promote actual functioning in some cases'.

The capability approach provides rich resources for thinking about social justice and education. Sen's (1992) question, 'equality of what?', suggests an answer that involves expanding people's capabilities through education. But it also prompts the question of whether or not there are capabilities which are so important in education that we should work towards *equality* in these capabilities. Debates over how we define educational equality have asked whether we need to think about equality of access, inputs, treatment, achievement, or outcome – assessments based on equality in any of these areas tend to look for sameness or difference in each. There are problems in aiming towards identical inputs and outcomes; because of human diversity, learners will have different needs, and different interests.

The capability approach asks us to consider equality of capabilities through education. Foregrounding the basic heterogeneity of human beings as entirely normal, it connects individual biographies and social arrangements by focusing on equality in the capability to convert resources into functionings. So instead of looking at similar levels of inputs, we can ask how free children are to participate in education in different settings, and if there is equality in this freedom to participate. Thus in thinking about justice we are not thinking only about procedures, freedoms or various forms of equality in isolation from each other. We are linking a concept of social justice with a notion of equalizing capabilities and ensuring fairness.

The capability approach calls for a focus on how social context sets the conditions for individual freedoms. So in the case of education, we need to aim at equalising people's capabilities both in and through education. In this way, the capability approach provides a framework which is sensitive to diverse social settings and groups. It also suggests how one can think about evaluating education at an individual level. This is particularly useful in comparison to both human capital theory and structuralist approaches which tend to be largely concerned with aggregated outcomes. By placing emphasis on the importance of what is valuable to the individual, it allows us to shift our focus away from simply the aggregate benefits that education has for the whole of society, and towards individual benefits.

Unterhalter (2005) offers an example to illustrate why educational evaluations should take into account individual freedoms and capabilities as much as observed functionings. Imagine two 15-year-old girls participating in an international study of learning achievements. Both achieve poor results in mathematics. One girl attended a well-equipped school with highly qualified and well-motivated teachers and ample time for additional learning support. A major reason for her poor result was her personal decision to spend less time on maths homework. But the other girl's teacher was absent for long periods; there was a lack of supportive culture in the school and at home for girls' achievement in mathematics, and heavy demands on her to perform housework and childcare for other family members. So despite her interest in mathematics and schoolwork generally, her poor results stemmed from these other factors.

In this example, the two girls achieved the same educational functioning: they gained poor results in mathematics. However, note that their *capabilities* to achieve this functioning were different. Their various opportunities formed through social arrangements, such as their family background and the schooling they received, as well as their own individual biographies, influenced the educational outcome. This therefore requires us to ask questions about inequalities. In the first case, the girl had opportunities and made a rational decision, valuing her art studies more than mathematics. In the case of the second example, the girl had rationality in her valuing of her schoolwork, but lacked the freedom to pursue this valued functioning. Both rationality and freedom matter in the capability approach.

The capability approach does not *explain* the causes of educational inequality, but it provides a tool with which to *conceptualise* and *evaluate* them. The other approaches we have outlined would have noted only the similar outcomes (human capital theory), the dissimilar structural settings of the schools (structuralist analysis) or the individual engagements with ideas of femininity and power (post-structuralist analysis). The capability approach offers a critique of all three, but considerable work is still needed on what indicators might better signal the rich form of evaluation it points to.

Exploring educational capabilities

Work on the capability approach and education so far has been exploratory, and practical applications have covered a diverse range of educational settings. Research has covered valued functionings and capabilities within educational settings, such as participating in class, learning about history, being able to take part in discussions with other learners, or being respected by your teachers. The link between education and other dimensions of social well-being, such as developing vocational skills and knowledge, numeracy, or general confidence, has also been explored. While many of these issues have been the subject of well established scholarship, the capability approach provides a comprehensive framework for exploring these in relation to normative, not just empirical discussion, as it provides a social justice framework for how education can contribute to the expansion and equality of capabilities in other spheres of life.

For example, in studies on education and the different needs of learners with disabilities, the capability approach provides an analytical framework that goes beyond the medical model which looks to education to 'fix' a disability and the social model which sees the problem for people with disabilities as located in discrimination practiced by the wider society. Terzi argues how equality of capabilities does not diminish the significance of the exclusions associated with a disability but suggests that it is the valued aspirations of those with disabilities that must be evaluated. She emphasizes the design of educational contexts and institutions in relation to situations in which difference (which is typical and normal) becomes disadvantage and inequality.

The values and aspirations of learners in higher education have also been explored using the capability approach, particularly in relation to government policies in the UK which seek to increase numbers of students at this level. These authors argue that the freedom to make valued educational choices in higher education is directly conducive to learner well-being, and is central for developing agency and autonomy in life-choices (Watts; Flores-Crespo; Walker).

The capability approach has been used to counter the (resource-based) arguments that increasing girls' access to schooling without attending to questions of equality is always beneficial (Unterhalter, 2003). In some scenarios, for example in some schools in South Africa, where there is a high incidence of rape and high levels of infection with HIV/AIDS, attending school may have the potential to *reduce* some capabilities.

Other work has looked more specifically at the role of education in the capability approach. It has been suggested that the function of education is currently under-specified and, drawing on Nussbaum's proposal of an objective but revisable list of central functional capabilities, that it is important to consider what might be 'core' or 'basic' educational capabilities (Walker, Terzi). Whether one should specify a list of educational capabilities is contested, with Sen preferring to leave the matter open to public dialogue.

In terms of measurement, the capability approach has been used to critically review international indicators of educational equality. Alternative measures have been suggested which weight a number of different measurements relating to schooling, such as enrolment, participation and survival to give a wider understanding of equality in the experience of schooling (Unterhalter, Challender and Rajagopalan).

Challenges

There are a number of issues relating to the use of the capability approach in educational settings which require further exploration.

- The first challenge is that of measurement. To get an understanding of valuable functionings, individual interviews seem appropriate; even then, there are problems evaluating the 'real' aspirations of children and young people. How can we tell when a person's preferences have been adapted by the circumstances and customs in which they have been brought up? However, theorists have in some cases been able to use achieved functionings as proxies for certain educational capabilities; for example, test results can be seen as evidence that a student has the capability to function as a knowledgeable learner in a particular subject.
- There are questions relating to the extent of freedom and capabilities children should have in education. How much should we listen to the values of young children in relation to their schooling? For example, a child may say it is valuable to them to play computer games instead of going to school; or that it is important to them to not study maths at all. But these scenarios may have a negative impact on their future capabilities. This highlights one problematic aspect of the capability approach: the potential for conflict between an individual's freedom and well-being. While adults may choose to forfeit their individual well-being in favour of another valued outcome, balancing children's current values with their future freedom and well-being can be difficult. If an adult makes decisions about what contributes to the wellbeing of a child, this may simultaneously ignore other important wellbeing aspects such as their own ideas and choices about what is good for them, although Sen has argued that in this scenario the future capabilities of the child should be prioritised (Saito, 2003). The tension between freedom and wellbeing, however, is also dependent on how we define well-being¹.
- A further point is that the educational process itself imparts values. So while the capability approach requires observing what is valuable to an individual, their definition of a valuable functioning may have been determined by their educational experiences. For example, imagine a society in which women are ridiculed and discriminated against if they are not good at cooking and housework. Without further clarification, the capability approach could hypothetically be used to argue that teaching women domestic skills will give them greater capabilities and freedoms.

While some of these problems of research are compelling, the capability approach offers a robust framework which incorporates notions of social justice in thinking about education within very different and unequal social settings, and which future conceptual and empirical work will help to illuminate.

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¹ In negotiating the concept of 'wellbeing', it is important to note the differences between Sen, who distinguishes between wellbeing and agency (although arguing that they are thoroughly interdependent), and therefore between wellbeing freedom and agency freedom; and Nussbaum, who uses a broad definition of wellbeing which encompasses the notion of agency within it.

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