

THEORETICAL RESOURCE

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Education

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ABSTRACT The human capabilities approach developed by the economist Amartya Sen links development, quality of life and freedom. This article explores the key ideas in the capability approach of: capability, functioning, agency, human diversity and public participation in generating valued capabilities. It then considers how these ideas relate specifically to education, before arguing that participatory action research might be a methodology for implementing and evaluating capabilities in education as a way of 'doing' fairness and equality in education.

Keywords: human capabilities; freedom; agency; diversity; public participation; equality

This short article sets out to offer a resource for thinking about what economist Amartya Sen's (see Sen, 1992, 1999) capability approach might offer to education and to educational action research. It has a number of core elements on:

- expanding human freedom through a focus on what people are able to do and not just how much resource they have;
- human diversity;
- ethical individualism;
- a democratic process for making decisions.

Put simply, the capability approach is about freedom and the development of an environment suitable for human flourishing. Capability refers to what people are actually able to be and do, rather than to what resources they have access to. It focuses on developing people's capability to choose a life that they have reason to value. Freedom and capabilities cannot be

separated. The opportunities to develop capabilities and the process of deciding collectively on valuable capabilities both require and produce freedom. We might then, through action research, evaluate our attempts to foster well-being by developing capabilities in educational settings.

The capability approach requires that we address human development not simply as abstract ideas, but as lived capacities at the level of everyday life. The capabilities approach focuses on what each and every person is able to do and be, their 'valuable doings and beings', in making meaningful choices from a range of options; hence, having the freedom to choose a life they have reason to value. The notion of 'reason to value' is important, pointing as it does to reflective, informed choices. At issue for critical and democratic forms of educational action research is that Sen's capability approach offers an approach to evaluating social (and, hence, educational) advantage, in which expanding people's agency and freedom is held to be central. In this approach, an individual's capabilities to undertake valued and valuable activities constitutes an indispensable and central part of the evidence for our judgements, arrived at through an educational action research process about how well they are doing.

Sen's core concepts are those of 'functionings' and 'capabilities'. A functioning is 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen, 1999, p. 75), the practical realisation of one's chosen way of life. Capability refers to our freedom to promote or achieve valuable functionings. Capability is a combination (a capability set) of functionings someone can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. The capability approach is based on the notion of life and living as a combination of various doings and beings, with quality of life to be assessed in terms of our capability to achieve valuable functionings. If we value being well nourished, or confident, or becoming a doctor, or a plumber, do we have the freedom to achieve these things, to live one kind of life, rather than another, to have 'real opportunity to accomplish what we value'? A capability is then 'the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible' for a person to achieve (Sen, 1999, p. 75). For Sen, his capability approach relates centrally to 'freedom in the range of options a person has in deciding what life to lead' (Dreze & Sen, 1995, p. 10). Capability is thus the freedom to achieve various lifestyles that, having information about and having reflected upon, we value.

The capability approach therefore argues for well-being and quality of life, not only income generation – a person's well-being is not simply a matter of how rich he or she is. The focus is not solely on income or consumption; instead, resources create opportunities, rather than being an end in themselves. Sen's conceptualisation of capabilities and functionings challenges a narrow income generation approach or, as it might currently be in the United Kingdom, a focus on education and employability as the key, even the only goal that matters for policy makers. While developing capabilities certainly includes an instrumental concern with the growth of national GDP, or individual income generation, this is seen as a means to expanding human capability 'to lead more worthwhile and more free lives'

(Sen, 1999, p. 295). Educational quality and well-being in this approach would be assessed in terms of a person's ability to achieve valuable functionings. Such functionings (actual achievements) may range from the simple (being well nourished, having mobility) to the complex (being numerate and literate, taking part confidently in critical discussions with one's peers).

Sen integrates securing and expanding intrapersonal and interpersonal freedoms (individual agency and social arrangements). Crucially, 'functionings' depend on both individual and institutional conditions and contexts within which potentials (freedom) can be achieved. Freedoms, as Sen points out, depend also on social and economic arrangements (e.g. education, health care), and on political and civil rights. Individual functionings will be inflected by a person's relative advantages in society, and enhanced by enabling public and policy environments, for example, a gender equity policy in schools. As Sen explains, it would be a mistake to think of achievements only in terms of active choice by oneself:

What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people's freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities. (Sen, 1999, p. 5)

Viewing development as the expansion of freedoms, he argues, 'directs attention to the ends that make development important' (1999, p. 1), that is, its intrinsic importance. In this way, individual development becomes interwoven with wider issues around redistribution and equality in that development 'requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom' (1999, p. 1; e.g. poverty, social deprivation, neglect of public services). For example, in contexts of poverty or political dictatorship, it is hard to argue that people have the substantive freedom to develop real alternatives and choices in shaping their lives. In situations of relative material disadvantage, any exclusion on a person's freedom to participate in the social political and economic life of her community restricts that person's capability set; for example, under conditions of gender oppression which restrict their lives, girls and women might freely chose to lead. Individual development, social development and freedom are all interwoven. As Sen explains, development is 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (1999, p. 1). Freedom and development are therefore dialectically and fundamentally related.

Notions of agency are central to the capability approach. At the boundary of functionings and capabilities is the matter of choice, where a person exercises his or her agency, having the requisite set of capabilities, to make choices from a range of options and alternatives, if such a choice achieves his or her well-being. By agency, Sen means 'someone who acts

and brings about change, and whose achievements are to be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well' (1999, p. 19). Agency is one's ability to pursue goals that one values. Agency and well-being are then deeply connected.

Importantly, choice in Sen's conceptualisation is not to be confused with neo-liberal advocates of individual choice. The crucial difference is that the capability approach is ethically individualistic; neo-liberalism by contrast is ontologically individualist. For the latter, the focus on individual autonomy individualises success and failure, and the social consequences that flow from personal choices. However, in Sen's formulation, individual freedom and agency strengthens social life, rather than fragmenting it. At issue is that Sen's work is informed by this ethical individualism – every diverse person counts; whereas the neo-liberal view grounded in ontological individualism is driven by selfish self-interest.

Sen further works with the notion of 'the basic heterogeneity of human beings', thus human diversity is central to and explicit in his approach to equality, not an add-on factor. Sen argues that, 'Human diversity is no secondary complication to be ignored, or to be introduced later on; it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality' (Sen, 1992, p. xi). People will differ along:

- a personal axis (e.g. gender, age, etc.);
- along an intersecting external axis (wealth, climate, etc.);
- along an inter individual axis which refers to differences in people's ability to convert resources into valued outcomes.

Thus, we cannot take men's lives, or the lives of able-bodied people or the lives of white people as the norm for our evaluations. Inequalities of gender, race and disability are included in and fundamental to the space of functionings and capabilities. Such differences affect our ability to convert the resources we have into capabilities to function.

Sen's capability approach is deliberately incomplete; he does not seek a complete ordering of non-negotiable options. Incompleteness is fundamental to his approach and pragmatic. Sen argues that all the members of any collective or society 'should be able to be active in the decisions regarding what to preserve and what to let go' (1999, p. 242). There is a real social justice need, Sen says, 'for people to be able to take part in these social decisions if they so choose' (1999, p. 242). This, in turn, makes basic capabilities of literacy, and conditions of a free and accessible media, and of having reasonable chances of participating important. Sen thus leaves his framework deliberately open, even vague, because of the importance for him of communities deciding what capabilities count as valuable. He does not stipulate which capabilities should count, nor how different capabilities should be combined into an overall indicator of well-being and quality of life. For him, a 'workable solution' is possible without complete social unanimity being required. The process of public discussion is crucial, so that the public, as much as the individual, is seen to be an

active participant in change; citizens whose voices count. Freedom, for Sen, (and one might argue following in a tradition, even if not made explicit in Sen, of educators such as Dewey and Freire) is concerned as much with processes of decision making as the opportunities to achieve valued outcomes. In other words, we make development and freedom by doing development and freedom; a list of capabilities cannot simply be pre-specified without public consultation. By deliberately leaving the capabilities framework under-specified, this approach further requires that we pay attention to participation around decisions as to what capabilities are to count for in any particular collective or society.

Capabilities and Education

These central ideas – choosing a life one has reason to value, and agreeing valuable capabilities through processes of reasoned public consultation – raise a further question, as Saito (2003) has done. Can the capabilities approach apply to children, in that they are not yet mature enough to make wholly independent choices? Saito turns to Sen's argument, which emphasises not only the freedom a child may have in the present, but also freedom they will have in the future. Saito quotes Sen as follows:

If the child does not want to be inoculated and you nevertheless think it is a good idea for him/her to be inoculated then the argument may be connected with the freedom that this person will have in the future by having the measles shot now. The child when it grows up must have more freedom. So when you are considering the child, you have to consider not only the child's freedom now, but also the child's freedom in the future.

(Interview with Sen, March 2001, quoted in Saito, 2003, p. 25)

Adding to this, is the matter of promoting functionings in childhood in order to develop the relevant mature capability (for example, acquiring literacy at school in order to develop a fully mature appreciation of what literature offers in human development and understanding, or developing early respect for all human diversity as a condition for the full development of the capability of affiliation). Thus, says Saito, following Sen's line of argument, 'when dealing with children, it is the freedom they will have in the future rather than the present that should be considered' (Saito, 2003, p. 26). However, this is not, of course, to deny children freedom and the exercise of agency in the present, but this will be in the context of support from adults and society.

It also underlines the role education can play in developing and expanding capabilities. Saito again suggests that education can expand a child's ability, for example, the ability to swim or the ability to add up numbers correctly. Secondly, education can expand the opportunities a child has. Acquiring basic numeracy skills makes it possible to develop more complex mathematical abilities and having success in mathematics in turn opens up a range of career possibilities. Learning fairness in working

and playing with others makes it possible to develop more complex capabilities of deliberation, respect and empathy, all of which expands the opportunities open to a young person to choose a life he or she has reason to value. However, this then points to the kind of educational conditions (teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment), which foster and enable successful and confident learner identities. We cannot assume that schooling necessarily enhances a child's capabilities; indeed, it may even diminish or restrict them where some social and learner identities are valued and others are not.

This brings us to the question of the values that schools and education teach, whether explicitly or implicitly. Saito emphasises the role education can play in its attention to values. 'We need to develop', Saito writes (2003, p. 29), 'the judgement of the person to be able to value in which way it is appropriate to use capabilities through education'. Saito continues that the education that best articulates Sen's capability approach is one that develops autonomy and judgement about how to exercise that autonomy. At issue is that education is also a process of identity formation over the life course – of becoming and being this kind of person, rather than that kind of person; as we learn mathematics or history in formal educational institutions we gain knowledge and cultural understanding, that is we are also learning to be persons (kind, fair, competitive, selfish).

For education we might then ask what are the valuable capabilities (sets of abilities to achieve)? In doing so, we need to focus further on our underlying values and concerns through which we distinguish which functionings are valuable and which less so, or even trivial. Education is in itself a basic capability that affects the development and expansion of other capabilities. Having the opportunity for education and the development of an education capability expands human freedoms (for example, to be literate and numerate). Human agency is also central to the capability approach, and central to human agency is having the capacity to make informed and reflexive choices. What might we then need to be doing in and through education to develop such agency? For example, Brighouse argues that every child in school should 'have realistic opportunity' to become an autonomous person, because autonomy 'enhances dramatically the ability of individuals to identify and live lives that are worth living' (2000, p. 88). I would want to argue that for doing and making social justice, agency and autonomy are both desired functionings and valuable capabilities. They are then core education capabilities, such that if schools were failing to develop children's agency and autonomy we might have reason to ask if a process of education (as opposed say to training or indoctrination) was in process.

The Relevance to Educational Action Research

For those of us committed to improving educational practice towards greater social justice through a fair distribution of knowledge, skills, attitudes and educational success and qualifications, the capability approach offers a framework for judging well-being in and through education. It makes us

think carefully about Sen's core question, 'Equality of what?' Educational action research is potentially useful and powerful in the capability approach because it requires us to evaluate how we are 'doing well being' and 'doing fairness' in education, rather than just talking about these matters. Moreover, a participatory action research process would enable us to involve all those affected by the practice in developing and evaluating the development of valued capabilities in and through education (for example, of critical knowledge, of values such as respect and responsibility, and of abilities such as confidence and cooperation).

By engaging in action and deliberative reflection together, we might clarify and deepen our understanding of the complexity of the practice, which we hold under scrutiny, and thereby contribute to a rigorous social knowledge base that informs and develops practice as research unfolds. Action research would help us to do fairness, and to do capability development better. That this is more important now than ever is brought home by Sen (2002, p. 7) when he reminds us that:

The question of the openness of curriculum and the reach of reason can be quite central to the role in promoting human security. If the schools fail to do that by 'thrusting smallness' on children, we not only reduce their basic human right to learn widely, but also make the world much more incendiary than it need be.

Moreover, schooling and post-schooling can be deeply influential in the identity of a person, and the way in which children see each other. If schools and universities are places where identities are formed, where we learn to be as well as learn to know, how much greater the responsibility for teachers to act and to think about what identities and what capabilities to function are being distributed in our own classrooms, and to whom. The issue for those of us working in education is that schools, colleges and universities contribute, for many people quite substantially, to the formation of their capabilities to function. Ideally, educational organisations ought to equip people with the capabilities to pursue opportunities they value. How valued and valuable opportunities and capabilities are distributed through formal education, and to whom, and how this maps over structures of race, gender, class, able-bodiedness, religion and so on is a matter of social justice in education.

Are capabilities distributed fairly? Do some people get more opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities than others? Which capabilities matter most in developing agency and autonomy for post-education opportunities and choices? These seem important questions to be taken up through educational action research and, hence, adding to knowledge about the operationalisation of the capability approach.

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