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## BRIEFING NOTE

### CAPABILITY AND EDUCATION

#### EVALUATING EDUCATION

While the capability approach provides a general normative framework for the assessment of overall human development, it is also possible to consider what it has to offer to evaluations of specific areas of social policy. 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 briefing is concerned with how the capability approach might be used in educational settings and thinking about educational inequalities.

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 very much open to debate. Although engagement with the implications of the capability approach 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 the relationship of education and political economy. Nussbaum's work 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 relates 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 outcomes or desire satisfaction. In education, much standard evaluation measures only examination results or what it is people say they want from their schooling. The standard problem with this is that if children from low income groups receive only primary education, and children from high earning families attend primary and secondary school, but both groups say they are satisfied, because this is what each has come to expect there is no problem about utility or desire satisfaction as both groups are equally content. However, there is something uncomfortable about this kind of conclusion, however widespread practice that supports it is. A focus on capabilities would require us to evaluate not just outcomes but the links between valued beings and doings (capabilities) and outcomes (functionings). We would need to ask whether people's educational aspirations 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 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 (teachers or years of schooling) and that we must look at how learners convert resources into capabilities and functionings. If we evaluate only inputs, each child in the class has access to equal amounts of resources. If we evaluate the link between capabilities and functionings 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 area, 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 they use concerning 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.

Some of the mainstream arguments have a number of limitations.

*Human capital theory*, which argues that the value of education is in increasing the rates of return, generally measured in terms of increased incomes to 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 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 these other dimensions of education, not only rates of return can be considered.

*Structuralist accounts* of schooling have been an important feature of sociological analysis of the way that schools in societies divided by race, ethnicity, class or gender, reproduce inequalities. 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 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. They are particularly interested in discursive formations and their boundaries. 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 studies to investigate issues of distribution, justice and equality. The capability approach 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.

Firstly, at the heart of the notion of a capability is a conception that a person is able to develop an 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 aspiration 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. Is school education always beneficial to an individual's overall capabilities in life? Sen's approach does not explicitly allow that formal education might 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 important to consider that capabilities can be diminished through education as well as enhanced.

The capability approach gives rich resources for thinking about social justice and education. There have been numerous debates over how we define educational equality. Do 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. But 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 in and through education. Foregrounding the basic heterogeneity of human beings, 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 attention to the aggregate benefits that education has for the whole of society towards individual benefits.

Unterhalter (2003) 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 and more time with her friends in the evenings. For the other girl, her 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.

The capability approach does not *explain* the causes of educational inequality, but that 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. For example, in studies on education and the different needs of learners with disabilities, the capability approach provides important insights that go 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.



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). 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, Challenger 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.

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 incorporating notions of social justice, in thinking about education in very different and unequal social settings which future conceptual and empirical work will help illuminate.

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