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Quo Vadis? The Capability Space and New Directions for the Philosophy of Educational Research

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Abstract Amartya Sen's capability approach creates an evaluative space within which individual well-being is considered in ways that diverge from dominant utilitarian views. Instead of measuring well-being based on the accumulation of wealth and resources by individuals and nations, the capability approach focuses on the opportunities (capabilities) an individual has to choose and pursue a life they have reason to value. The capability space is introduced with an explanation of Sen's evaluative framework. It is claimed that conceptions of well-being are inextricably linked to our values and views of what constitutes justice, the 'good life' and notions of human flourishing. The paper invites philosophical reflection on how the capability approach can inform the development of a research paradigm that furthers our understandings of individual well-being and human flourishing. A specific focus is given to what more can be done to assist children and young people in making the best of their situation in negotiating a valued life for themselves in which they can flourish.

Keywords Capability approach · Amartya Sen · Well-being · Human flourishing

Introduction

The capability approach presents new challenges for the philosophy of educational research as it drives researchers to reconsider dominant ontological and epistemological stances to research particularly in relation to the nature of well-being and human flourishing. It offers a new space to evaluate what is of value in education. The paper is broadly divided into three sections: the first part introduces some key concepts within the capability approach and how they can be used to develop a new research paradigm. The second part of the paper considers how the capability approach might inform research into new models of education. The third section of the paper considers the challenges of evaluating education and schooling using this approach.

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The capability approach stems from a liberal tradition and presents a partial theory of justice (Robeyns 2005). It was initially developed by the economist, Amartya Sen for application in the arena of human development but its applications have broadened across disciplines as the potential of the capability approach has become more widely recognised. Although the capability approach was first introduced by Sen, it is also closely associated with the work of the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. Sen argues that, 'the capability approach is concerned with showing the cogency of a particular space for the evaluation of individual opportunities and successes' (Sen, in Nussbaum and Sen 2001, p. 50). The capability approach questions the forms of justice we are seeking and challenges assumptions about the kinds of equalities and freedoms towards which societies are striving.

Views of justice vary geographically, culturally and temporally and any given government may decide certain freedoms or equalities are fundamental to justice within a society whilst others are not. Depending on the formulae used different priorities are derived. In some sense this may relate to cultural views of what constitutes a 'good life' and the nature of well-being and human flourishing. White points out, 'there is no community of experts on what constitutes a flourishing life' (White 2007, p. 23). In turn, views of justice, the 'good life' and what constitutes well-being inevitably influence social policy and pedagogical practices.

Key Concepts used by Sen in the Capability Approach

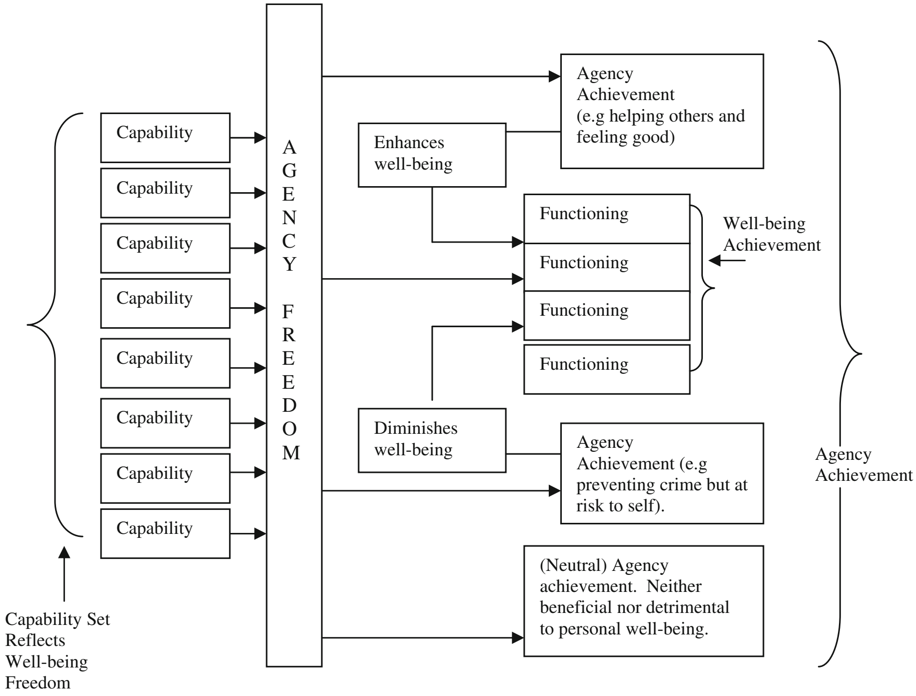
Functionings and Capabilities

Sen argues that in evaluating an individual's well-being it is important to look at the *capabilities* or real opportunities an individual has to lead a valued life (Sen 1985). Capabilities represent the freedoms an individual has to achieve beings and doings they have reason to value although only some of them will become realised as functionings. *Functionings* are the beings and doings individuals actually achieve. The range of capabilities an individual has is reflected by their *capability set* and this in turn is an indicator of their *well-being freedom*. Figure 1 helps to further illustrate the key concepts in Sen's capability approach.

Well-being Freedom and Well-being Achievement

Sen separates the notion of *well-being freedom* from *well-being achievement* arguing that individuals may choose to pursue valued goals other than those based purely on self-interest. Well-being freedom represents the freedom an individual has to pursue their own well-being, based on their capabilities, whereas well-being achievement represents the well-being actually derived (Sen 1992). Therefore well-being achievement may vary even where well-being freedoms are similar for different individuals. Sen argues, "the quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what he or she achieves, but also of what options the person has had the opportunity to choose from. In this view, the 'good life' is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced into a particular life—however rich it might be in other respects." (Sen 1999a, p. 45).

Sen argues that a significant aspect of well-being is related to an individual's freedom to choose in what way to promote their sense of well-being from a set of 'capabilities'. The individual's freedom is associated with the range and nature of the capabilities available.


Capability
Capability
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Capability
Capability
AGENCY FREEDOM
Agency Achievement (e.g helping others and feeling good)
Enhances well-being
Functioning
Functioning
Functioning
Functioning
Well-being Achievement
Diminishes well-being
Agency Achievement (e.g preventing crime but at risk to self).
(Neutral) Agency achievement. Neither beneficial nor detrimental to personal well-being.
Agency Achievement
Capability Set Reflects Well-being Freedom

Fig. 1 Key concepts used by Sen in the capability approach. (1) In Sen's earlier writings the term 'capability' was synonymous with capability set (Robeyns 2005, p. 100). Within their capability set an individual was deemed to have a range 'potential functionings' but these are now more commonly referred to as capabilities. The doings and beings an individual actually achieves were formerly referred to by Sen as 'achieved functionings' although now they are more commonly referred to as 'functionings'. (2) Nussbaum, unlike Sen, does not see the necessity of including agency stating, 'I believe that all the important distinctions can be captured as aspects of the capability/function distinction' (Nussbaum 2005, p. 14). She distinguishes internal capability as, 'states of a person that enable him/her to exercise a specific capability, if the circumstances and constraints allow this exercise'. In addition Nussbaum identifies combined capabilities as 'internal capabilities together with the external provisions that effectively enable the person to exercise the capability' (Robeyns 2005, pp. 101–104)

Sen describes what might be understood as an individual's best option as the 'maximal element' in their capability set (Sen 1999a, p. 44). However, he also points out that although an individual is free to choose that option they may choose some other possibility from within their capability set. This idea can be applied to the example of a student with a strong academic record deciding whether or not to apply for a university place. The individual may decline the opportunity to go to university which might subjectively be considered by others as the 'maximal element' in their capability set. The individual would still be seen by Sen as 'advantaged' in the sense that this individual has had a 'real opportunity, especially compared with others' (Sen 1999a, p. 3). Sen concludes that, 'the freedom to achieve well-being is closer to the notion of advantage than well-being itself' (Sen 1999a, p. 3). In other words it is not enough to consider only the achievements and actual life choices of an individual as this does not fully represent the capability set from which they are choosing.

Achieved well-being tells us little about the distribution of resources, opportunities and an individual's capabilities in converting resources and opportunities into achievements. Different individuals may be more or less able to make use of the same resource. As

Robeyns writes, 'not everyone has the same rate of return on education. Given the same amount and quality of education, not every child or adult will to the same degree be able to use this education for income-generating activities' (Robeyns 2006, p. 73).

Agency Freedom and Agency Achievement

When discussing agency, Sen separates the terms '*agency freedom*' and '*agency achievement*'. Agency freedom refers partly to the freedom an individual has to turn any of a range of capabilities (potential functionings) into (achieved) functionings. Sen describes 'agency freedom' as 'one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and attempts to produce'. The outcome of this aspect of agency freedom is reflected by the well-being achievement of an individual. However, according to Sen, agency freedom goes beyond this to include, in addition, the agency of an individual to affect others in ways that may either enhance or diminish their own well-being achievement (see for example, Sen 1985, p. 205). He describes 'agency achievement as the 'realization of goals one has reason to pursue' which 'need not be guided by her own well-being' (Sen 1992, pp. 56–57). Hence the notion of agency is more wide-ranging than personal well-being. For example a mother may use her agency freedom to promote her child's survival, and hence their well-being achievement, but in doing so this may compromise her own well-being achievement (Sen 1999b, p. 202).

Although Nussbaum uses different terminology to describe this process the importance of individual choice is crucial to both Sen and Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2005). However, this is notwithstanding the recognition of the many social, political and cultural factors which operate to constrain or enhance individual opportunity. For example, Nussbaum argues that, 'habit, fear, low expectations and unjust background conditions deform people's choices and even their wishes for their own lives' (Nussbaum 2005, p. 114). Adaptive preference is the term generally used in the capability approach to describe the interaction of social, psychological and environmental constraints on the choices individuals make despite their apparent agency freedoms. Bridges summarises that, adaptive preference, 'at its simplest, reflects the observation that in choosing what they will do, how they will spend their time or resources or what kind of life they will lead people are affected by or take into account, for example, what they can afford, the likely responses of others to their choice and the values and practices which shape them and the communities in which they live' (Bridges 2006, p. 1). His comment implies that the individual may impose certain constraints upon their decision-making based on their perceptions of their situation (perhaps in relation to others), their identity and the social context in which they live. Therefore, adapting a preference implies something different from simply changing one's mind due to a change in preference. The adaptation of preference may occur when it seems that the original preference is unlikely to be achieved. Therefore, consciously or otherwise, an alternative (and perhaps less desirable) preference is chosen instead. This could be seen as making the best of an unfavourable situation. At different moments the pre-eminence of certain constraints leading to adapted preferences may vary, whether relating to an individual's sense of identity, family restrictions, peer group pressure and so on. David Bridges explores the diversity of constraints which may operate on an individual giving them cause to adapt their preferences. I would venture that these (and other constraints) can also be seen in terms of self-oriented, other-oriented and environmentally-oriented constraints. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into depth about the range and type of adapted preferences but Bridges gives an interesting discussion of this area (Bridges 2006).

Sen concludes, 'There is deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom' (Sen 1999a, p. xii). Flores-Crespo has written about the role Sen's 'instrumental freedoms' have in contributing to the degree of freedom individuals have to achieve a way of life they have reason to value. These instrumental freedoms include, 'political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security' (Flores-Crespo in Walker and Unterhalter 2007, p. 50).

The Capability Space and the Pursuit of Well-being

Sen argues, 'Commodity command is a means to the end of well-being, but can scarcely be the end in itself…A person's well-being is not really a matter of how rich he or she is…' (Sen 1999a, p. 19). Sen's claim for the strength of considering capability in relation to well-being, "builds on the straightforward fact that how well a person is must be a matter of what kind of life he or she is living, and what the person is succeeding in 'doing' or 'being' " (Sen 1999a, p. 19). For example, being healthy, being sheltered, (doing) working, as compared to having money, possessions and so on. The capability approach is not opposed to having nor proposing being and doing instead of having. However, the approach draws attention to the inadequacy of utilitarian and human capital approaches which have focused on having (e.g. resources) at the expense of doing and being (Becker 1975). As Robeyns writes, 'The focus on capabilities does not deny the important contribution that resources can make to people's well-being' (Robeyns in Agarwal et al. 2005, p. 66). Two things follow on from this. Firstly, when considering how well off a nation is the tendency has been to look at gross national product (GNP) and the accumulation of financial assets and possessions. Nussbaum points out that, 'It has by now become obvious that this approach is not very illuminating, because it does not even ask about the distribution of wealth and income, and countries with similar aggregate figures can exhibit great distributional variations' (Nussbaum 2005, p. 60). Secondly, when looking at what a person is able to be or do this encompasses (but is not restricted to) looking at what a person has. For example, a young person may be able to gain a university place providing they achieve certain qualifications (having). However, their capability to achieve the functioning of 'doing' going to university is contingent on the individual being able to operate effectively in that environment socially, psychologically and from a practical point of view. For example, an individual may risk being alienated from family and friends if they come from a social *milieu* where participating in higher education is not the norm. This in turn may affect whether they take up and maintain their university place. The capability approach draws attention to the myriad of complex social, personal and environmental factors which affect what a person is able to (and chooses to) do and be (Alkire 2005).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Education aim to, 'achieve universal primary education' and 'ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling' (Department for International Development 2006, p. 1). From Sen's perspective, it cannot be assumed that the number of years schooling a child receives is related to the expansion of capabilities. For example if a female is 'educated' to accept a lower social position compared to her male counterparts we cannot say that this has expanded her capabilities (or opportunities for future well-being achievement). Similarly, if in order for a child to attend school their family has to undergo significant financial sacrifice (due to loss of a child's income or cost of travel and equipment) this may result in poor health or even increase morbidity and mortality. Unterhalter has also written about the intimidation and physical abuse particularly faced by girls attending formal education in South Africa (Unterhalter 2003). Furthermore, if policies to increase participation in education benefit some social groups more than others then this can lead to increased inequalities and reduced capabilities for disadvantaged groups. Hence, we cannot say that increasing school attendance *per se* contributes to well-being achievement, although the MDGs seem to assume this is the case. From Sen's perspective it becomes necessary to look at the risks and benefits of formal education to a specific individual's capabilities and hence well-being freedom. The situation is further complicated as it has been argued that certain capabilities that might be developed in schools are pre-requisites to further capabilities. Terzi argues, for example, that the capability to be educated is 'fundamental and foundational to the capabilities necessary for well-being' (Terzi in Walker and Unterhalter 2007, p. 25).

Vaughan proposes that education occupies, 'two different positions in relation to an individual's capability set' (Vaughan in Walker and Unterhalter 2007, p. 114). One position relates to functioning as the educational process itself and the other to the functionings enabled through formal education (in which case education acts as a conversion factor). For example, it could be argued that being able to read and write enables the expansion of other capabilities. However, such a measure does not take account of whether the teaching materials are a form of indoctrination or even in the primary language of the students. The capability approach demands a closer look at processes as well as outcomes and questions dominant assumptions about the value of education. It calls into question the nature of children's *participation* in education and acknowledges that some children may benefit more than others from the same quantity of educational experience (see Hart 2008 for further discussion of 'participation'). The capability approach does not negate the value of quantitative indicators of educational achievement but demands that these are substantiated with more detailed analysis of the nature of children's participation in educational processes in relation to notions of freedom, equity and social justice.

A New Research Paradigm for Education

Embracing the capability approach as a fruitful avenue to developing human flourishing and well-being requires more research to inform the future development of policy and pedagogy (Walker 2006). It becomes important to understand what we mean by 'education' and to acknowledge that not everything that goes in the name of education is necessarily positive, empowering and so on. The capability approach invites us to reconsider the role of education in relation to the pursuit of well-being. The capability approach advocates a shift away from target driven discourses regarding, for example number of qualifications gained or percentages of young people remaining in schools. There is a drive to shift the emphasis towards the *processes* of learning and personal development taking place within educational institutions and elsewhere rather than the more traditional focus on outcome measures. White argues, 'one of the purposes of education in a democratic society is to equip people for a flourishing life. As part of this aim they also become better qualified to make judgements about human flourishing. They become better informed contributors to the national and global conversation' (White 2007, p. 25). Using the paradigm of the capability approach we might begin to ask how young people view their capabilities and their agency with regard to achieving valued ways of being and doing for themselves. The process of identifying and developing capabilities needs to be dynamic and iterative as the ways of being and doing that young people value may be subject to change as they grow and develop. There needs to be a sense of fluidity with opportunities to review, refine and reframe the capabilities identified on an individual basis.

Applying the Capability Approach to Education Development

The capability approach challenges existing models of education on a number of fronts and Ball's work on education policy provides a starting point. He has identified curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and organisation as four areas for consideration in relation to policy in education (Ball 1994). The capability approach impacts on all of these areas. There is lack of consensus on whether or not certain core capabilities should be pursued within the formal education system and if so how these should be identified. For example, Terzi has suggested a provisional list of seven 'basic capabilities for educational functionings' at the ideal level using Robeyns procedural approach. Robeyns suggests that when drawing up a context specific list of capabilities or functionings that the list should be 'explicit, discussed and defended'. In addition, she argues for a clear method which is sensitive to context. Robeyns further suggests that initially an 'ideal' list of capabilities or functionings should be created but that this should be followed by 'drawing up a more pragmatic list' which takes account of methodological, socio-political and other constraints. Finally, Robeyns suggests that any list should 'include all important elements' but 'not be reducible to other elements' (Robeyns in Agarwal et al. 2005, pp. 72–73). Terzi's list of 'basic capabilities for educational functionings' holds much in common with Nussbaum's List of Central Human Capabilities (in Walker and Unterhalter 2007, p. 37). However, in order to progress Terzi's ideal list to a pragmatic list further public discussion and in particular the active and meaningful participation of children is required. Working towards a research methodology which enables appropriate data to be collected and analysed will inevitably raise some challenging issues. Research needs to take account of the fact that the education system is aimed at supporting children (rather than adults) whose capacities for reasoning and critical thinking are not necessarily well developed.

The capability approach is centred around valued *beings* and *doings*. It is worth thinking for a moment about what a child's life in school is like. In the UK for example children are expected to attend school from around 5 years until the age of 16, 5 days a week. They are told when and where to attend. Lesson time is managed by adults who may determine who a child sits next to, when they speak and about what, the activities they undertake and the deadlines for completion. The criteria for success are also externally determined and involve prolific testing and assessments. However, education can take place in the community, family, informal learning environments, outdoor centres, religious institutions and so on. Can schools give individuals the freedom to be educated in whatever environment they feel will best meet their needs? For example, if a female student feels the distribution of power and privilege in her schools inhibits her learning then should she be free to seek her education through other means? And who is to decide what education will be of most value to her? How can we create freedom within the curriculum for children to have time to reflect and time to discuss the ways of being and doing that are of importance to them. Researchers need to bear in mind that ideas are likely to change over time with age and maturity alongside the development of other skills such as reasoning, literacy, the growth of confidence and so on. Evidence from my own research indicates that many young people would value such opportunities (Hart 2004). Perhaps we might work towards a more open curriculum that is more child-centred enabling children to pursue ways and beings they value outside of school if necessary. Often the currency of educational achievement is the acquiring of qualifications based on objective performances in tests and examinations. Research is needed to consider how we formally might recognise children's developments in understanding themselves and their values from a capability perspective. A certain kind and amount of education may be arguably justified as being in children's best interests.

However, we need to constantly question and evaluate the extent to which children's schooling serves their interests or the interests of the state and wider society. We need to consider the justification for the relative lack of freedom children have as a result of compulsory schooling and determine whether this lack of freedom offers a fair trade-off for the securing of future freedoms gained through the benefits of schooling, for example, becoming literate, raising self-esteem, developing positive social relations and so on. The capability approach is invaluable in drawing attention to such moral and ethical questions.

Perhaps a way forward lies in thinking outside of the conventional boxes that limit the organisation of schooling. The capability approach encourages us to consider education without institutional limits which is able to reach into political policy, community networks and entrenched hierarchies to help produce the conditions which allow all citizens greater agency freedom to achieve valued ways of being and doing. Although reference has been made to informal learning environments (e.g. Terzi in Walker and Unterhalter 2007, p. 25) this remains an under-theorised area. Similarly, the aims of education beyond the limits of formal schooling also have yet to be fully explored. This point draws attention to longstanding debates on the relationship and tensions between individual agency and the structure of the state and its institutions. The aims of education in schools may go some way towards expanding individual's freedoms but the limits of those freedoms will be influenced to greater or lesser degrees by the structural constraints of the society at local, national and indeed global levels. For example, a girl growing up in a patriarchy or a black student in an apartheid regime will not enjoy the same freedoms to achieve well-being as their male/white counterparts no matter how equitable their schooling experience. Hence the project of education needs to encompass adults as well as children, both formal and informal learning environments as part of a lifelong education about the pursuit of social justice through the expansion of capabilities.

A Capability Approach to Evaluating Education

The capability approach presents challenges to educational research resting on the interpretations of well-being, agency, equality and advantage. For example, Sen's conceptualisation of well-being in terms of freedom *and* achievement makes it difficult to justify measuring well-being simply according to quantitative outcomes-based measures. Although the capability approach is concerned with well-being achievement this is only one of four evaluative tools offered within Sen's evaluative framework. Well-being freedom does not lend itself so easily to a positivist research paradigm compared to utilitarian views of well-being based on the accumulation of resources.

Well-being achievement might lend itself to some objective enquiry using achieved functionings although well-being freedom is more difficult to assess since we are not looking at what a person is actually doing or being but rather the various options from which they are free to choose. Hence it remains a subjective matter whether an individual is capable of achieving the functionings suggested by opportunities that are identified in relation to their well-being freedom. To give an example of this, a young person may say they are free to go onto higher education if they want to. This would represent a capability (potential functioning) if it was of value to the individual and furthermore it is genuinely a realisable possibility. However, what we do not know is whether finances, lack of confidence, family constraints and so on might prohibit this assumed capability from becoming an achieved functioning. We only categorically have evidence that a capability is just that if it is later transformed into an achieved functioning. For example, if an individual actually takes up a university place this shows that this was a genuine rather than assumed opportunity for that individual. However, there will always be more capabilities (indicators of well-being freedom) than achieved functionings (indicators of well-being achievement) so this is problematic from a research perspective. How can we investigate the full extent of an individual's well-being freedom? How can we assess capabilities? We can make observations; we can ask people what capabilities they perceive themselves to have at a given moment but this remains within a broader dynamic socio-cultural, political, historical and environmental context over which they have limited control. We could look at the achieved functionings of groups of individuals over time in relation to certain kinds of behaviours such as, for example, higher education participation. If we find low representation from certain groups we might question whether this is because, for example, white working class boys do not often genuinely have the potential functioning of higher education participation. This may lead us to investigate this possibility in more detail and yet the reasons why members of this group do or do not participate in higher education may vary from one individual to another. In fact the capability approach encourages us to look at people on an individual basis and not to assume that the opportunities and constraints will remain constant for members of artificially created groups.

Hence, the capability approach demands a shift away from the dominance of empiricism and towards more interpretive approaches. However, that is not to say that empirical work is redundant but rather that a pluralistic approach is required that draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods depending on which aspects of Sen's key concepts are being investigated. For example, well-being achievement and agency achievement may lend themselves more readily to quantitative methods. By contrast, well-being freedom and agency freedom may be explored more fruitfully using qualitative methods that aim for hermeneutic understanding rather than causal explanations. There is a growing body of work that supports a pluralistic approach to enquiry which can be traced back at least as far as Dewey's work on 'false dualism' but which has foundations in the work of Aristotle (Alexander 2006). Pring argues that it is a mistake to attempt the binary division of types of research in relation to objective and subjective worlds, quantitative and qualitative methods or public and private (Pring 2000, p. 33). Alexander echoes this need to avoid a simplistic 'dual-epistemology' (Alexander 2006, p. 206). Hence the adoption of what might be termed a broadly interpretive paradigm does not have to be bound by the assumptions that often go with this perspective, that work should be solely qualitative or subjective.

Researchers who adopt perspectives of the capability approach may need to critically reflect on their own positionality with regard to the value of qualitative and quantitative methods. It may be that individuals with shared characteristics such as gender, age and occupation as a population tend not to achieve certain functionings. This may be a matter of reasoned choice but having this information may be useful in terms of identifying situations where individuals have adapted their preferences due to social barriers which interventions might reduce or overcome. In other words, whilst there is no expectation that all or certain groups ought to be pursuing certain functionings, the monitoring of well-being and agency achievements may guide researchers to identify the social, personal and environmental factors which enable and constrain individuals well-being and agency freedoms.

In order to find out how young people perceive their well-being freedom and agency freedom it is crucial to find suitable methods for enquiry. One of the most obvious ways of seeing the world from another's viewpoint seems to be by direct communication with them. Although there is a growing literature on student voice in relation to school improvement this has yet to be applied comprehensively in the field of capabilities (Cooper 1993; Rudduck et al. 1996; Brooker and Macdonald 1999; Rudduck and Flutter 2000; Slack 2003). One of the first challenges to address is the development of a common language of enquiry which allows the unfamiliar and abstract concepts within the capability approach to be communicated effectively. Research with children also needs to take account of the possibility that young people may be influenced, constrained or pressurised by parents, teachers and others.

There are a number of ethical considerations which arise particularly from the participation of children in research surrounding notions of well-being and agency. The researcher has a responsibility to authentically represent what individuals have to say about their sense of, for example, well-being freedom. Young people may reveal personal and intimate details about the nature of their lives and as Reissman points out often, 'An investigator sits with pages of tape-recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of a book and tries to create sense and dramatic tension. There are decisions about form, ordering, style of presentation, and how the fragments of the lives that have been given in interviews will be housed' (Riessman 1993, p. 13). There is an onus on the researcher to authentically present the way young people view their well-being. For example, if a child tells us that being a pet owner is a vital part of them achieving a sense of well-being how do we interpret this? What authority do we give to the child's interpretation of their own well-being (as opposed to our interpretation or Sen's interpretation?). How much credence do we give to the notion that pet ownership is vital? There has been some innovative research with children on their perceptions in relation to their own well-being which is worth exploring in more detail (Hanafin and Brooks 2005). In addition, Jonathan Bradshaw's review of studies of child well-being found that the 'active role of children in creating their own well-being' emerged from many studies (Bradshaw et al. 2006).

The capability approach questions assumptions we may have made about the value, importance and meaning of fundamental concepts such as freedom, equality, well-being and advantage in relation to education. Sen encourages us to question our notions of what constitutes justice and the nature of human flourishing for young people. It seems imperative that we have an understanding of our own positions with regard to these issues in order that we can reduce bias in our interpretations of the perspectives of others whom we invite to participate in our research. Pring draws attention to the, 'constant need to reflect on the values which inform the research and the ways in which those values might be made concrete in the research activity itself' (Pring 2000).

Concluding Remarks

Current educational policy often places young people on the receiving end of policy interventions as opposed to emphasising their central participative role in expanding their capabilities. 'No one can lay down in detail how a person will best flourish in the future. There are simply so many ways of thriving, so many forms of well-being goods. One can discuss these with the individuals concerned and warn them about misconceptions, but as autonomous persons weighting among goods must be up to them' (White 2007, p. 22).

In terms of educational policy and pedagogy there is a possibility of simply upholding existing structures of inequality and maintaining the false image of a meritocratic society based on qualifications and credentials. Alternatively there is a possibility of emancipatory practice which attempts to expand young people's capabilities and develop opportunities for them to pursue a life they have reason to value. This requires listening to students about the constraints they identify to their well-being and agency freedoms as well as assisting them in identifying unseen barriers and constraints. It is about preparing them for the inequalities and injustices they may face and helping to equip them as far as possible to negotiate such circumstances to their best advantage. It challenges researchers, practitioners and policy makers to consider the consequences of making young people conscious not only of what they have to gain by pursuing certain opportunities but also what they have to lose and considering ways to prepare individuals for the risks they may take. Educational research has a pivotal role to play in these processes.

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