

A Capabilities perspective on education quality: Implications for foundation phase teacher education programme design

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While governments and communities across the globe are faced with the challenge of providing their citizens with good-quality education, there is lack of consensus on how education quality should be defined. Whereas a great deal has been written about the human capital and human rights approaches, which currently dominate the debate, the potential value of the capabilities approach to the field of education quality policy and practice is yet to be fully explored. This article aims to advance discussions on education quality, through critical engagement with discourses on the capabilities approach and its implications for education quality thinking, and offer an example of what implementation of this approach might mean in a South African teacher education context. The article outlines the core concepts underpinning the capabilities approach to education quality against the background of critiques of the human capital and human rights approaches. It then critically explores what a capabilities approach has to offer to education quality thinking, and describes how these concepts and principles are being interpreted within the new Rhodes B.Ed. (Foundation Phase) programme, currently being developed.

Keywords: education quality, capabilities approach, educational capabilities, human capital approach, human rights approach

Discourses on education quality: issues and debates

Many governments and communities across the globe are faced with the challenge of providing their citizens with good quality education. This is especially so in those countries that have experienced rapid growth in student enrolment figures as a result

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of the Education for All (EFA) agenda, amid growing evidence of a simultaneous decline in learner achievement levels (UNESCO, 2004).

Education quality is currently attracting a great deal of attention in South Africa. This is due, *inter alia*, to the persistence of racial and regional inequalities in learner achievement levels (Van der Berg, 2007; DBE, 2010), and a critical skills shortage in scientific and technological spheres which is threatening not only the country's path to sustainable economic growth, but also its economic competitiveness at global level (Pennington, 2011). Among wide-scale interventions designed to address this challenge is one targeting improvements at Foundation Phase (FP) level, within which context the current research has been carried out. The article aims to advance discussions on education quality through critical engagement with the capabilities approach, against a background of critiques of dominant current discourses. It concludes that the capabilities approach has the potential to significantly enrich education quality thinking and practice, and describes how its principles are being interpreted within the new Rhodes University B.Ed. (Foundation Phase) programme, currently being developed.

Approaches to education quality

Few issues in education have stimulated as much public debate as that of education quality and its evaluation (Nsubuga, 2011). Many definitions have been offered of 'a quality education' and, based on these, governments and international bodies have made many attempts to define and assess 'education quality' (a term usually associated with monitoring and measurement) (Barrett, Chaula-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel & Ukpo, 2006; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2009). Is a quality education one that prepares the learner for the world of work, maximising his/her earning power, and contributing to national GDP? Is it one that liberates the mind, or one that familiarises a student with the world's great artistic and scientific achievements? Is it one that encourages critical thinking, promotes human rights, or instils discipline? With numerous options such as these available, the lack of agreement in the literature on what education quality entails is not surprising. The assessment of quality requires identification of its dimensions and the development of appropriate indicators (UNESCO, 2004; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Tikly, 2011). Depending on the concept of quality, findings are obtained through testing and computation, or through some kind of qualitative process. Thus, the multiplicity of education quality conceptions affects not only how it is understood and researched, but also the design and implementation of assessment, monitoring and improvement strategies.

This article does not allow for a full exploration of this complex field. It examines in some detail the capabilities approach to education quality against the background of critical outlines of the human capital and the human rights approaches (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Tikly, 2011), both dominant currently. This is followed by an example of the capabilities approach in action.

Human capital approach

Quality education from the human capital (HC) perspective is education that equips learners with knowledge, competences and skills which increase personal earnings and contribute to economic productivity (Robeyns, 2006). From this point of view, the purpose of investing in education is to contribute to national economic development (Robeyns, 2006; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Tikly, 2011). Within this framework, preferred indicators of education quality relate to measurable inputs and outputs, for example teacher numbers, cost of resources, enrolment and retention figures, GDP and scores in assessment tests (Alexander, 2008, Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

Human rights approach

In the human rights (HR) approach, education's role in addressing justice, moral and political concerns takes precedence over its contribution to economic productivity (Robeyns, 2006). Human rights need to be promoted to, in and through education (Tikley & Barrett, 2009: 3). They are pivotal to human development, impacting positively on peace, human security, and environmental sustainability (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). School practices should enact both negative rights (for example, protection from abuse and discrimination) and positive rights (for example, promotion of creativity, local languages and learner-centred approaches) (Tikley & Barrett, 2009). Indicators of quality relate to the presence or absence of such features, and qualitative methods are usually used for assessment.

The HC and HR approaches have been used extensively to guide educational policies and practices worldwide, and have made invaluable contributions to the education quality debate. However, they are widely critiqued for reflecting a limited view of education quality which downplays the central role of teaching and learning processes (Alexander, 2008; Tikly & Barrett, 2009), reflects predominantly western world views, and is insensitive to the contexts of developing countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (Tikly & Barrett, 2009; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The HC approach is criticised for treating learners as a homogeneous group, measuring quality in instrumental and quantitative ways (Unterhalter, Vaughan & Walker, 2007), and having a commodity-based view of human development. While the HR approach takes a more democratic and less mechanistic view of education, it is criticised for its individualistic view of learners, which takes little account of their context, and offers no way of analysing social and economic forces (Tikly & Barrett, 2009).

It is no surprise then, that there is growing interest in alternative approaches which address some of the weaknesses mentioned earlier. The capabilities approach (CA) is receiving growing attention, although little is known about it in education circles¹ outside academia, and its full potential in informing education quality theory and practice remains, to a large extent, unexplored. This article engages in this exploration, by first outlining the main features of the CA. It then investigates the meaning of education quality within a capabilities framework and discusses criticisms

and expansions of the approach. Finally, it draws some conclusions on the value of the CA as an alternative education quality framework, and illustrates how it is being used within the programme design of the B.Ed. (FP) at Rhodes University.

Basic tenets of the capabilities approach

The CA is rooted in the concept of human capabilities, which has gained prominence since the 1980s as an effective metric for evaluating human well-being and development. In its current form, the CA derives from the work of the economist Amartya Sen (1992, 1999), and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2003).

Briefly, the CA rejects expansion of incomes, goods and services, or of happiness and desire fulfilment, as the sole aims of human development. It argues that, while resources and utilities are important, they form an inadequate informational base for the evaluation of human well-being (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2003). They are needed as means to other valued ends, and not for their own sake. People differ in their commodity requirements depending on their culture, gender, age and social circumstances, and the accumulation of commodities can also have negative consequences (Saito, 2003). Furthermore, there are components of human well-being, not directly linked to income growth, that also need to be taken into account when evaluating human development. Human dignity, for example, is valued for its intrinsic worth, rather than its contribution to wealth or happiness. To “effectively use health-care, and enforce one’s legal rights” are valuable functionings apart from their contribution to income (Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2006: 289).

The CA offers ‘*capabilities*’ as an alternative to economic wealth as a measure of development (Tikly & Barrett, 2009). This term refers to people’s real freedoms, opportunities and powers to engage in valued functionings. A narrow range of capabilities limits choice with regard to what individuals can do and be. Capabilities can be categorised in various ways. Lanzi (2007), for example, recognises three groups, namely S-caps, concrete skills and knowledge; E-caps, including social and political rights and institutions, cultural practices and norms (Robeyns, 2006), and M-caps, ethical principles and judgements (Lanzi, 2007).

A second core concept of the CA is that of ‘*functionings*’, defined as valued activities and states which contribute to an individual’s well-being (Clark, 2005). Examples include being well-fed, safe, literate, healthy, having a job, having self-esteem, and belonging to a community (Sen, 1992).

According to Sen (1999), ‘*agency*’ and human flourishing are interlinked, since agency allows people to act on behalf of the goals for which they have reason to strive, while limited agency constraints one’s ability to choose preferred functionings (Walker, 2006).

The ability to convert commodities into capabilities and functionings depends on what are called ‘*conversion factors*’, of which there are three types, namely personal conversion factors (for example, race, sex, age, physical condition, education level); social conversion factors (for example, public policies, social institutions, power relations), and environmental conversion factors (for example, geographical location, climate, infrastructure) (Robeyns, 2003). People also differ in their choice of functionings and preferred life options (Robeyns, 2011). Hence, conversion factors and human heterogeneity are key tenets in the CA, demonstrating clearly why incomes and other commodities alone form an insufficient information base for evaluations of human well-being and development (Robeyns, 2003).

Capabilities and education quality: what is the link?

From the point of view of the CA, education has both intrinsic and instrumental value. It is simultaneously a basic capability, a capability input, and a personal conversion factor (Otto & Ziegler, 2006: 10). Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley (2006: 289) maintain that “[i]f we gauge the value of education in terms of the capability to achieve valued functionings ... rather than the accumulation of resources ... it becomes clear that society is duty-bound to enable each child to complete at least a basic education, irrespective of their relative contributions to growth”.

The CA has implications, then, for how education quality is understood and monitored (Tikly & Barrett, 2011), although hardly any research and writing has so far explored this relationship in depth. Apart from the work of researchers such as Tikly and Barrett (2009, 2011), Tikly (2011), Terzi (2007), Walker (2003, 2006) and Unterhalter (2003), few attempts have been made thus far to analyse comprehensively the potentiality of the CA as an education quality framework, and hardly any empirical research using the approach. However, a body of evidence-based research, conducted by people such as Maarman (2009), Tao (2009), Walker (2003, 2006), Wies (2012) as well as Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley (2006), is slowly beginning to emerge. This article wishes to contribute to this body of knowledge. Before describing the Rhodes B.Ed. exemplar by outlining decisions in design of the programme, the article describes six components of education quality, from a capabilities viewpoint.

Expanding learners’ sets of capabilities

CA researchers agree that the content, processes and contexts of education should serve to expand learners’ capabilities (Saito, 2003; Bakhish, Hoffman & Van Ravens, 2004). While the CA recognises the significance of developing learners’ literacy and numeracy skills (S-caps), it also insists on the development of other capabilities that contribute to learners’ current and future well-being. Examples of these will be given later in the description of the Rhodes B.Ed. (FP) programme.

Paying attention to conversion factors

According to the CA, quality education should not only expand learners' capabilities, but also help learners overcome obstacles that prevent them from living the lives to which they aspire (Otto & Ziegler, 2006; Walker, 2006). These obstacles may originate from learners' individual characteristics or from their social, cultural or school contexts (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Walker (2006) cites lack of school safety, sexual harassment, bullying, drugs and various forms of abuse as obstacles which can prevent South African female high school learners from achieving desired functionings. Otto and Ziegler (2006: 3) emphasise that "converting capabilities are highly diverse among people". Thus, paying attention to the influence of learners' heterogeneity on their ability to achieve valued functionings is one of the cornerstones of education quality within the CA.

Developing learners' agency

Quality education should foster agency by developing self-determination, participation, public debate, democratic processes and empowerment (Alkire, 2005), and working against oppression, passivity and coercion.

Valuing all benefits that accrue from education

By foregrounding capabilities and functionings instead of accumulated resources, the CA extends the gaze of education quality practitioners beyond education's impacts on productivity and human rights to a wider array of benefits which promote human flourishing. According to Sen (1992), these include fostering debate on a wide array of issues; facilitating participation in decision-making processes; giving voice to minority groups, and facilitating their access to centres of power. The CA also acknowledges that, apart from its instrumental value, education can be valuable for its own sake (Terzi, 2007; Robeyns, 2006).

Centralising the needs of the individual learner

CA has been described as "a species of a Human Rights approach" (Nussbaum, 2006, in Tikly & Barrett, 2009: 7). However, rather than emphasising the equalisation of access to resources for all learners, as the HR approach does, it highlights the need to describe the quality of educational experiences and outcomes at the level of individual learners (Walker, 2006). It insists that, since learners have different values, needs and interests, and differ in their abilities to convert educational inputs into capabilities and functionings, the same level of resources might not be adequate, for example, for urban and rural learners, girls and boys, and different population groups. It thus helps to reconceptualise what needs to be equalised in and through education, drawing attention to equality of access to capabilities (real opportunities to achieve valued life choices), instead of focusing on inputs and outputs (Tikly & Barret, 2011).

Reconceptualising the right to education

The CA also alleges that the Human Rights' conceptualisation of the right to education is inadequate and mainly theoretical; in many developing countries, there are vast numbers of out-of-school children in spite of the fact that education in these countries has been declared a legal right (McCowan, 2011). The CA foregrounds access to capabilities that cover all aspects of a learner's well-being, and emphasises the need to ensure that effective strategies are in place, enabling individual learners to enjoy that access (Robeyns, 2006; McCowan, 2011). In this way, it offers "a deeper ethical basis of justice and freedom in relation to development" (Tikly & Barrett, 2009: 6).

Critiques and expansions of the capabilities approach

CA has been critiqued from a number of angles, and responses to such criticisms have expanded the approach in various ways.

Some critics maintain that the CA is too abstract, academic, and complex, leaving much room for misunderstanding and making it difficult to operationalise (Smith & Seward, 2009). Its terminology ('capabilities', 'functionings', 'conversion factors', and 'agency') is somewhat counter-intuitive, not immediately easy for practising teachers and 'the man in the street' to relate to. Another problematic aspect of the approach is that operationalisation involves a number of interrelated factors such as capabilities, valued functionings, agency, human diversity, and a variety of different conversion factors. Despite this complexity, a number of researchers and institutions have used the CA as a tool for assessing education quality, utilising various different methods. They have worked, for instance, with teachers and learners (Weis, 2012), whole school improvement (Tao, 2010), and explored the value of education in relation to health functioning (Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2006).

Critics also contend that the CA is too individualistic, and numerous responses attempt to show that capabilities are socially embedded and contextualised (Tikly & Barrett, 2009). Robeyns (in Smith & Seward, 2009: 219) claims that "there is no problem incorporating social ontology into the framework". Smith and Seward (2009), drawing on Martins, provide a framework which incorporates the social dimension into CA by means of conversion factors, suggesting that the CA be combined with literature on collective action and situated within critical studies which give appropriate prominence to power relations (Smith & Seward, 2009).

Some, like Saito (2003) and Lanzi (2007), contend that Sen's approach does provide ethical or moral guidance for making good choices. While supportive of CA, they stress the need for education to inculcate values and develop learners' judgement regarding the use of the capabilities they have at their disposal.

It is clear that, in order to realise the full potential of CA's contribution to education quality discourse, there is a need for more engagement with its core

tenets from an education quality perspective, both at theoretical and empirical levels. Current prominent gaps include the lack of a conceptual framework outlining the key dimensions of education quality within this approach and how they relate to each other to produce educational outcomes; how capabilities relate to the teaching and learning processes, key in driving quality, and identification of suitable indicators or core capabilities whereby quality within this approach can be analysed and monitored.

Sen has refused to specify particular capabilities as desirable, but supports Unterhalter, Vaughan and Walker's (2007) view that parents, teachers and members of the society should support learners in making choices regarding capabilities that are likely to improve their current and future life opportunities. Several researchers have begun grappling with the issue of appropriate capabilities for learners, asserting that, once such capabilities are identified, strategies targeted towards their enhancement can be put into place. This work is still in its infancy, however, and the authors insist that their lists are exploratory and open-ended rather than prescriptive. Based on her research on gender equality at South African secondary schools, Walker (2006) proposed a list of educational capabilities bearing immediate relevance to the South African educational context. Working with McLean (2013), Walker also researched a list of capabilities and functionings for incorporation into the training of professionals at tertiary institutions.

Distinctive features of CA education quality

By promoting an integrated approach to education quality and widening the scope of its meaning, the CA helps raise questions that are often ignored or side-lined by more traditional approaches. For example, it does not only ask questions such as: What was the learners' performance in Mathematics? What percentage of the learners' completed Grade 12? Are there enough resources and qualified teachers? It urges us to also ask, for instance: To what types of opportunities do learners have access? What are learners' valued functionings? To what extent does the content of the curriculum empower and support learners in actively pursuing these functionings? How free are they to exercise agency in pursuing them? What factors influence the ability of education participants to convert educational resources into capabilities? To effectively deal with such questions, a type of thinking is called for that looks beyond a focus on educational inputs and outputs towards a focus on human well-being, when conceptualising and monitoring educational quality. The next section considers an example of what this might mean in practice, in one institution.

Designing a teacher education programme underpinned by

CA principles

Rhodes University is one of the participants in a research and development consortium² which seeks to identify and understand teaching and teacher education practices that can raise education quality at FP level in South African schools.

An outcome of the programme's research has been a decision to draw strongly on the CA in designing the Rhodes teacher education programme and materials. In the 'theoretical under-labouring' of the programme, teacher flourishing and well-being are specified as primary end-goals. Developers state that, in striving to achieve the intersection of quality education, epistemological access, identity (being and becoming) and practices, they will draw on the social justice and capabilities approaches, specifically the concepts of capabilities and functionings (RU, 2012).

Some of the initial thinking of the programme developers is now presented as an example of how the CA can impact on practice. This is done by attempting to line up the six components of CA education quality and the questions presented earlier with initial thinking on the BEd (FP).

The focus on producing *WELL* teachers (RU, 2013) places upfront the focus on the person as an end, rather than a means, moving the programme beyond a narrow pursuit of teacher education outcomes. Apart from a course involving observation in a school, the entire first year of the programme focuses on supporting well-being, nourishment and growth for the individual students in the context of the collective, rather than moving straight into subjects relating directly to their future teaching practice.

All first-year courses are compulsory, but two have electives within them, enabling students to identify what is of value to them and exercise agency in making choices. A language course gives students the choice of enriching their command of their home language or developing their skills in another national language. The second offers Sociology, Journalism, Anthropology, Politics and Psychology as options. All of these highlight the students' context, drawing attention to conversion factors, both in the students' own lives and in those of possible future learners.

The first year also incorporates two foundational courses: Understanding the Whole Child and Holistic Development of the Teacher. These give students the opportunity to identify their valued functionings, and expand their capabilities and their identity in a number of largely self-directed ways. The courses focus on a broader set of capabilities than those conventionally dealt with in TE programmes, for example autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, informed decision-making, management of new situations (Saito, 2003: 29). They give space for developing emotional and spiritual intelligence, as well as capabilities which help them contribute to a peaceful and democratic society, exercise their political rights,

and participate fully in civil and economic activities. Students are also assisted in overcoming obstacles, either individual or sociocultural, which prevent them from achieving their aspirations. It is hoped that student teachers who have experienced such a year's study will be moved to offer similar kinds of opportunities to their learners.

In designing the programme, the development team has identified certain "capabilities and functionings [which] point to what it is that professionals ought to be and do" (Walker & MacLean, 2013: 14). At present, the following capabilities have been specified for the B.Ed. (FP): 'caring, competent' (both in educational content and professional knowledge), 'able to make deliberative decisions', 'responsive', having an 'understanding of the broader picture' (Cape Consortium, 2011: 1). In this instance, one can detect an emphasis on agency ('decisions') and awareness of conversion factors ('the broader picture'). There is no doubt that some of Walker and MacLean's (2013: 19) 'public-good professional capabilities' such as informed vision, affiliation, resilience, social and collective struggle, emotional reflexivity and integrity will also feature.

The development of this programme is still in its infancy, and it remains to be seen exactly how CA principles will be realised as materials are finalised and programme implementation begins. However, the programme does represent a significant attempt to develop a programme based on an alternative view of education quality.

Conclusion

We would argue that the capabilities approach to education and education quality has great potential to enrich and deepen thinking and practice, and the use of this approach by Rhodes University has been offered as evidence of this. We contend that the CA's complexity is a strong point rather than a weak one, even though the framework still needs to be made more 'user-friendly', and full operationalisation may be some time in coming. The concepts of 'capabilities' and 'functionings' broaden the possible scope of educational opportunities and benefits, and transform the existing concept of rights, so that it refers to real opportunities rather than guaranteed entitlements (Tikly & Barrett, 2009). Unlike the other two approaches discussed earlier, it pays careful attention to inhibiting or enabling contextual factors and acknowledges the intricate interdependence of the individual and the social. In the South African context, in particular, the lens of capabilities highlights a crucial role of the Foundation Phase, that of facilitating the building of capabilities which every citizen needs in order to achieve desired functioning in the world, rather than reinforcing the present limited view that the FP lays a foundation for good performance in the Grade 12 examination and beyond. Perhaps the CA's most important strength is that it views persons as ends rather than as means, and is less interested in educational resources and rights in themselves than in what people do with them.

Endnotes

1. It is currently very popular in economic and development discourses.
2. The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), Rhodes University (RU), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) form the Cape Consortium which has been funded by the EU for a 3-year period (2010-2013) to assist with the development and implementation of the “Quality teaching and teacher education research programme” in the Eastern and Western Cape. This programme focuses on three objectives for strengthening the FP in South Africa:
 - Research into teaching practices and teacher education practices.
 - Programme design of Initial Teacher Education courses.
 - Materials development for teacher education. (Cape Consortium, 2010).

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