Stud Philos Educ (2009) 28:387–390
DOI 10.1007/s11217-009-9133-7

Introduction to the Special Issue 'Capabilities and Education'

Geoffrey Hinchcliffe · Lorella Terzi

Published online: 26 March 2009

It is with great pleasure that we are able to introduce this special issue of Studies in Philosophy and Education devoted to exploring the concept of capability in education. Hitherto, the bulk of work on capability has been within a developmental context but there are now signs that its importance for the field of education is being more widely recognised. We hope that that this issue will help this process further.

The concept of capability was originally formulated by the economist Amartya Sen (in the early 1980s) as an alternative to utilitarian or preference based models of social distribution.[1] In asking the question 'what can people do?' (rather than how much do they have), Sen directed attention to forms of empowerment: capabilities provided substantive freedoms for rational agents in the form of opportunities for functioning (that is for acting in ways that agents have reason to value). Developing people's capabilities is an effective way of treating them as ends. Moreover, in place of measuring and evaluating subjective satisfaction and preferences, capabilities can be seen also as constitutive of human flourishing: persons flourish best when they are exercising their capabilities across a range of functionings or 'doings' and 'beings'. No doubt the neo-Kantian and the Aristotelian perspectives are bound to differ at certain key points: but that a concept can bear the weight of two contrasting perspectives attests to its fecundity.[2]

It is only comparatively recently that questions have been raised on the relation between education and capability: although we all acknowledge the virtues of interdisciplinarity it can take an uncommon amount of time for concepts to cross boundaries. Still, the time for capabilities for educational researchers, writers and thinkers seems to have finally arrived.[3]

[1] See Sen's article *Equality of What ?* originally delivered as a Tanner Lecture on Human Values in 1979, to be found in Sen (1982), particularly pages 365–367.

[2] See Nussbaum and Sen (1993); Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000). .

[3] See, for example, Melanie Walker's brief survey (Walker 2005a) and the article by Madoka Saito (2003). In addition, Elaine Unterhalter and Lorella Terzi (2005) have compiled a most valuable bibliographic database. Moreover, we now have from Walker (2005b) a comprehensive book-length survey of learning as a capability. See also the collected essays in Walker and Unterhalter (2007).

G. Hinchcliffe (✉) · L. Terzi
Centre for Staff and Educational Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK
e-mail: g.hinchliffe@uea.ac.uk

There does seem to be two approaches or, rather, differences of emphasis. The one focuses on the nature of capabilities themselves, how they are to be developed and what kinds of functioning their development is likely to afford. The second approach focuses more on the structural features (institutional, social, economic) that govern the development of capabilities. From an educational point of view, both approaches need to be brought together. A wonderful pedagogy with first rate teachers will have little impact without being embedded in the right kind of institutional framework. On the other hand, excellent policy initiatives that promote favourable institutions and resources will have little impact (so far as capability is concerned) if the curriculum is impoverished and does not address the development of capabilities and freedoms in imaginative ways.

This special issue can be seen as raising and responding to a series of questions:

(1) Is there a range of capabilities that need to be developed in learning environments? And are there capabilities that can only be developed informally, outside of any formal curriculum?
(2) What are the distinctive institutional features of places of learning that are likely to promote the development of capabilities?
(3) What are the prospects of developing a capabilities-driven pedagogy of education? What would it look like? What distinctive processes of learning would it contain? If there is such a pedagogy can this be transportable out of the school and into the communities and the workplace?
(4) In so far as the concept of capability emphasises the potential and possibilities of human activity, do we have here an *alternative* to the performativity-driven concepts of skills and competences, an alternative (itself rooted in *practical* reason) that could start to mount a serious challenge to current orthodoxies?
(5) Does a consideration of capability in the field of education and learning uncover significant capabilities that have hitherto been comparatively neglected or, alternately, does such a consideration shed significant new light on existing work that explores capabilities?
(6) Finally, is there anything in what might be loosely called the tradition of the philosophy of education that might help us in formulating and understanding of capability?

In the opening contribution to this special issue, Caroline Hart introduces the main concepts of Sen's capability approach, and highlights their significance for education. Hart discusses how the approach provides a framework for reconsidering notions of well-being and the good life, and for repositioning the role of education in the pursuit of human flourishing. Within the capability framework, she maintains, existing models of education and educational research are challenged, and new theoretical and practical dimensions emerge. These include the recognition of the institutional and informal places where learning takes place, and the importance of a pluralistic approach to research, which accords a central role to children's participation and voice.

Geoff Hinchliffe explores the role of deliberation—defined as a critical evaluation of ends and means in relation to well-being- in the capability approach, and argues for its centrality in the achievement of well-being freedom, i.e. the agent's freedom to pursue his or her well-being. In line with notions of the self developed by Charles Taylor, Hinchliffe defends the idea of the subject of capability as a strong evaluator, who, in choosing among possible sets of functionings, considers opportunities for functionings as well as the values associated to those functionings. Thus, this article shows that both freedom and values play a role in the process of deliberating on well-being, and argues that the latter may well take

different forms at various times in individuals' lives. Hinchliffe exemplifies the importance of deliberation through the case of occupational choice, and highlights how deliberating on capabilities, rather than merely focussing on skills and knowledge, is essential to achieving well-being.

Elaine Unterhalter explores the concept of equity, hitherto a somewhat neglected concept in both education and political philosophy which is differentiated from equality as the *process* of making social arrangements and policies equal and fair. She argues that the enactment of equity can have considerable bearing on the capability set. She employs a range of very interesting examples—both historical and political—to show the variety of contexts in which equity needs to operate if we are to give substance to the recognition of equality. She observes that part of the business of enacting equity is simply that of giving space for dialogue and discussion amongst human agents. In addition, though, attention also needs to be paid to the way in which resources are deployed.

Michael Watts addresses the problem of adaptive preferences in the capability approach and illustrates its significance in the context of higher education. Watts critically analyses John Elster's understanding of adaptive preferences as non-conscious changes of preferences due to lack of knowledge, and both Sen's and Nussbaum's positions on the distortion of preferences or self-abnegation due to deprivation. Drawing on empirical studies about the reasons informing the rejection of higher education by two students from a working class background, and in the light of the counterfactual nature of the capability approach, Watts argues for a more nuanced understanding of adaptation, which encompasses a distinction between adaptation to the means of well-being and adaptation to its ends. The theoretical reach of the capability approach, Watts maintains, requires careful consideration of the freedoms people have to use the resources at their disposal to choose and to lead lives they truly value, as well as attention to the right questions being asked in evaluating such choices.

Robert Garnett wishes to deploy the capability approach to academic freedom in higher education. In many ways, this article shows us how the concept of capability can be used to enrich and develop what may be initially seen as a fairly dry and predictable arena. For who does not subscribe, in some sense, to the virtues of academic freedom in the name of liberty? But with Garnett's analysis we see how academic freedoms are not only necessary to preserve some notional concept of freedom, for he does much more than that. First, he is by no means content to restrict the idea of academic freedom to teachers alone; he strongly advocates its implementation for all members of the university, including—of course—students of whatever age or discipline. Second, he argues that academic freedom is not only necessary for preserving some notional concept of liberty but that it is also crucial for enabling students to flourish and to provide them with opportunities for functioning.

Ortrud Lessman argues that the capability approach would benefit from drawing on educational theory, and, more precisely, on a theory of learning based on John Dewey's work. Lessman begins her analysis by showing how, despite the central role of choosing in the capability approach, both Sen and Nussbaum significantly under-theorize the actual functioning of choosing. The process by which people develop the fundamental ability to choose among possible functionings, and hence ultimately to live meaningful lives, Lessman maintains, requires a more rigorous analysis than the basic acknowledgment that choosing depends both on internal and external conditions. Such an analysis—in her view—needs to consider how human beings learn to choose, or learn how to make decisions over time. To this end, Lessman turns to the philosophy of Dewey and his concepts of experience, freedom of the learner, and the learning situation, and highlights how these

concepts are fruitful for a more complex understanding of how people become able to choose among valuable functionings.

Marit Hoveid and Halvor Hoveid take a slightly different approach to capabilities for instead of drawing on Sen they have looked to the work of Paul Ricoeur for inspiration in thinking about capabilities. First of all, they show how the development of the basic capabilities of speaking, acting and telling contribute to what they term 'imputation'. By this they refer to process whereby a child/student gradually assumes self-recognition and self-responsibility. They then try and show how these capabilities can be developed in the context of an institutional practice. In particular, they focus on the processes of assessing and giving assignments. They show how the functions of assessment/assignment also 'assign' the child/student a place in the institutional practice. It is through this latter kind of assigning that the basic capabilities are developed. This complex paper therefore combines two theoretical motifs—that of capability and that of practice.

We all know the dangers of writing the philosophy of education. We try and write pieces in which philosophy illuminates some aspect of practice or where an examination of some aspect of practice prompts philosophical reflection. Yet what can too easily happen to us is that we end up talking just about philosophy and then tack on a bit about practice at the end; or we get so immersed in practice that it can be difficult to see just where the philosophy emerges. We will let readers judge for themselves as to whether the balance is the right one in this issue.

The editors would like to thank Shirley Pendlebury for her early contribution in getting this issue off the ground, and the chief editor, Gert Biesta, for his continuing encouragement and support. We would also like to thank all those who felt able to submit a proposal. The choice on which to include was not always easy and we are grateful for the contributors' patience.

References

Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M., & Sen, A. (1993). *The quality of life*. NY, USA: Oxford University Press.

Saito, M. (2003). Amartya Sen's capability approach to education: A critical exploration. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 37*(1), 17–34.

Sen, A. (1982). *Choice, welfare and measurement*. NY, USA: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. NY, USA: Oxford University Press.

Unterhalter, E., and Terzi, L. (2005, ongoing). *Capability and thematic group bibliographic database*. http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/elaine/Capability-and-Education.pdf.

Walker, M. (2005a). Amartya Sen's capability approach and education. *Educational Action Research, 13*(1), 103–110.

Walker, M. (2005b). *Higher education pedagogies: A capability approach*. UK: Open University Press.

Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education*. New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.