



# A capital or capabilities education narrative in a world of staggering inequalities?

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## ABSTRACT

In a world of tremendous inequalities, this paper explores two contrasting normative models for education policy, and the relationship of each to policy, practices and outcomes that can improve lives by reducing injustice and building societies which value capabilities for all. The first model is that of human capital which currently dominates contemporary education policy globally, harnessing education policy to economic growth imperatives so that development through education is the means to the end of increased resources and income. The second model draws on the work of Amartya Sen to present a human capabilities model of education policy in which human lives are the end of development and the education focus is on promoting capabilities and functionings to choose a good life. An argument is advanced for capabilities as the superior approach. The paper closes by noting the problematic of social change and struggle demanded by a transformative view of education and how or if the capability approach is adequate to the task.

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'Turn a tree into a log and it will burn for you, but it will never bear living flowers and fruit'. (Rabindrath Tagore)

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to take up *Judt's* (2010) challenge applied to education, to ask: 'Will education help bring about a better society or better world?', exploring which policy designs and educational practices we need in order to promote both flourishing and growth in regions and countries in a globalized economic order. Two approaches – human capital and a logic of productivity and competence (*Keeley, 2007*), and human capabilities and a logic of freedom and sustainable human development (*Sen, 1999*) are described and contrasted for what they have to offer in reducing injustice and inequalities. In particular, I explore whether human capabilities can enable us to adequately challenge human capital as the grounds for education policy, and deal with the incommensurable goods of advancing both the economy and good lives for all. In this way the paper builds on previous work on the capability approach published in this journal (*Walker et al., 2009; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Wang, 2011*)

My starting point is that we live in a world of considerable inequality, and this affects all of us directly or indirectly. Here are just two examples among many which illustrate the problem of

unequal lives and unjust life chances. In 2002 Tanzania with a population of 35 million had a GDP of \$10.15 billion (*World Bank, cited in Basu, 2006, p. 1361*), compared to the net worth of the 10 richest individuals in the USA in the same year of \$127 billion (*Basu, 2006*) – 10 people who together were richer than 35 million. Comparing countries, Norway the richest of the 152 countries surveyed had a per capita income of \$43,400 in 2002 compared to one of the three countries ranked at the bottom of the per capita income table, Burundi, with a per capita income of \$90 (*World Bank, 2005 in Basu, 2006, p. 1361*). These are tremendously worrying figures, and *Basu (2006, p. 1361)* asks whether in the future people looking back to today, 'will wonder how primitive we were that we tolerated this'. Moreover, inclusion in an educational system is ever more vital since the confidence, resilience, motivation, knowledge and navigational skills that can be acquired through education are preconditions for dynamic participation in work, life and community domains. However, not only do many people not have access to a good education, the effects of failure – a 'permanently flayed, wounded or mutilated self-image' (*Bourdieu, 1999, p. 424*) – can be lifelong on people's identities and hopes because choices, good and bad, become cumulative over time.

Are we asking the right question when we privilege economic growth? Should we be asking what it means to be human, what it means to live a fully human dignified life, what education contributes to this, and how we assess its contribution? In policy design we need to be clear about our ultimate objectives and this in turn will depend on what we value for society, and hence what it is we are trying to maximize (*Basu, 2006*). Faced in our contemporary world with its challenges of staggering global inequalities,

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suffering, social and environmental sustainability, cultural and political conflict and differences, we therefore ought to ask: What kind of world and what kind of society do we want to work and live in, and what is the contribution of education?

At issue here is that different normative frameworks will give rise to different education policies, and these policies capture configurations of values, shaped by histories and contexts (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Different models may well both advocate that public education educate 'citizens' (a common education objective), but what it means to be a citizen may be contested and depend on the underpinning values precisely because education is normative, suggesting that something valuable is being attempted (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). So if our value judgment of education is that it ought to promote economic development and citizen-consumers, or that policy ought to promote human flourishing and public-minded democratic citizens, different policies will ensue, with different impacts on equity, educational provision and experiences. Policy is of course also mediated by local histories and conditions and what is possible in one country may not be possible in another. Nonetheless, education policy is now constituted globally more than locally (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010), and human capital outcomes are currently widespread in driving education policy around the world, so an argument challenging human capital ought to hold across diverse contexts if it has something significant to say.

Drawing now on Robeyns' (2006) three models of education – human capital, human rights and human capabilities (also see Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2006 and Lanzi, 2007) – I elaborate on two of her contrasting models, human capital and human capabilities to decide which approach offers the richer policy direction for the possibility of people being able to choose good lives. Which approach promotes more just societies in which people have well-being and inclusion in public reasoning (Sen, 2009) as well as economic opportunities? In particular I present and then try to unpick and refute arguments for human capital policies, given that these are increasingly accepted for their political fit with market reforms of education (Lanzi, 2007). I will not be dealing with empirical educational processes but trying to develop a conceptual framework to aid clarification (although practices and realizations are crucial in the end, or the debate is pointless). I do not elaborate Robeyns' third model of human rights, not because this is unimportant, but rather to present two sharply contrasting approaches to make my conceptual point. The promotion of human rights through education continues to be substantially important and the further question is then whether human capital or human capabilities is more likely to do this.

## 2. Human capital development paradigm

Human capital focuses on each person's productive ability measured in terms of goods and services they produce, with consumption the ultimate goal of economic activity (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash, 2010). It involves the idea that education is instrumentally a means to economic growth (Keeley, 2007) because better educated workers are assumed to be more productive in generating wealth (Schultz, 1989). Individuals are thought to consciously choose to invest in themselves (for example in more education) to improve their economic returns, and to rationally optimize their own [educational] behaviour, motivated by self-interest; more learning generates more earning. Human capital theory further assumes that labour markets are efficient in placing people in work in relation to their skills and that opportunities are shared equally. Better educated countries – producing more skilled workers for knowledge economies – also tend to be or become wealthier; by human capital measures they have a higher quality of living thereby further reinforcing the

economic link between the economy and education (Keeley, 2007). This has evoked the particular interest of human capital economists in education for its role in advancing economic growth (Tikly, 2011). The recent *Leitch Report* in the UK captures the education policy approach well:

In the 21st century our natural resources – and their potential is both vast and untapped. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice. The alternative? Without increased skills we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all. (2006, p. 1)

A human capital model of education is advocated as the right way to improve lives and society according to accepted market-led norms and the productivity requirements of the labour market. While the OECD *Education at a Glance Report* (2009) shows that it is the quality of learning outcomes, not the length of schooling that makes the difference, it also emphasizes the link between education and national wealth, above all. Thus, a 'modest' goal for all OECD countries of boosting their average PISA scores in science, reading and mathematics by 25 points over the next 20 years would increase OECD gross domestic product by USD 115 trillion over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010. More 'aggressive' goals, the OECD suggests, could result in gains in the order of USD 260 trillion. Sufficient investment guarantees social mobility through education, with income disparities explained by differing investments in education by individuals and families, rather than by gender, social class or ethnic differences (Becker, 1976). However, although extra time spent in education is supposed to pay-off in the future in higher earnings, empirically this is not easily demonstrated. For example, Ball et al's (2000, p. 18) study of young people's further education choices in London found little evidence of them as 'individual, rational calculators'. Nor is there an explanation for why people with the same amounts of human capital may face unequal employment opportunities. Indeed, the advantages of family wealth and social networks and access to private schools for example, are not considered in the paradigm's field.

Human capital further supports and advances the 'global war for talent', and the rise of a new global meritocracy of the 'brightest and the best' who can pick and choose jobs internationally (Brown and Tannock, 2009). Brown and Tannock (2009) argue that this global war for talent is grounded in a 'cut-throat', neoliberal and human capital driven view of market competition which encourages rising income inequalities. Moreover, we have seen a growing recent concern by human capital economists for wasted talent such as the shortage of women engineers, and attention to the impact on life chances of quality early years education (Brown and Tannock, 2009), demonstrating thereby Tikly's (2011) argument for the capacity of neo-liberal policy to 'bind' progressive concerns to itself. There may well be such concerns, but this will be in relation to effects on the economy (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003). Without close attention to the underlying normative position, human capital could appear sufficiently expansive to appear to address social justice, even though what is really at stake is the economy, and what is happening is new forms of inequality and elite reproduction based on amounts of high status human capital. Nonetheless, so long as economic growth is proceeding, the problematic of an uneven distribution of human capital and uneven labour market opportunities (for women, for migrants, for the disabled, for youth, and so on) would not arise in a human capital model. Economic development is prioritised as an end in itself, over social inclusion (which if mentioned is 'thin', see Wolf, 2002).

Yet, the argument for human capital is not without merit. Who among us would argue against the tremendous importance of early learning opportunities, or the especial significance of investing in small classes for the first four years of schooling, given the convincing evidence of sustained educational effects (Finn et al., 2001) or the crucial importance of quality and student achievement in education. Moreover there are less crude and more holistic human capital models which prioritise the development of complex skills and competences over the longer term, offering support and coaching to job seekers over time to improve their sustainable employability and effective advancement (Lindsey et al., 2007). Lanzi (2007) has argued for a human capital/human capabilities loop to show how human capital accumulation produces capability enlargement and capability enlargement in turn can increase human capital. So there do seem to be synergies (Sen, 2003). But this approach may be less attractive to policy makers than reductive 'quick win's (Lindsey et al., 2007), which focus on short terms skills training. However, and rather crucially, even expansive human capital models are limited for labour market integration in that they remain focused on what a person is able to do with their skills sets for profit in the labour market. There is no necessary effect on freedoms, choice or well-being.

### 2.1. Pedagogical realization

While admittedly crudely drawn – teaching and learning contexts are complex environments – this pedagogical sketch serves to draw out implications of a human capital approach for pedagogy as the critical space where human capital policy would be educationally realized. Here Baptiste (2001) is helpful. His arena is adult education but the outline of practices could be applied across education sectors. According to Baptiste, human capital educational aims claim to be 'apolitical' (on the surface – although dig deeper and education is always political) and shaped by 'market analysis'. Consensus about aims is assumed rather than struggled over. There may nonetheless be some kind of notional consultation process which has little effect on the final decision (see Hextall and Mahony, 2000 on reaching 'consensus' on standards for qualified teacher status in England). It is assumed that there is no conflict of interest among the needs of learners or learners and other stakeholders, all of which is harmonious. Education is adaptive rather than transformative so that learners are taught to adapt to the new context, for example trying to change the behaviour of young people (teaching more 'skills' for example) regarding the job market, while ignoring the economic and social barriers many face.

Learners, says Baptiste, have no option except to be 'educational consumers' (Baptiste, 2001, p. 197), rather than producers of knowledge, increasingly even in higher education, diminishing possibilities for change. Education is individualistic, without concern for ties or debts to others. Each learner, argues Baptiste (2001) 'would simply stock up enough ammunition and face the world as an educational Rambo'. He (Baptiste, 2001, p. 14) argues that the pedagogical implications of human capital theory are that learners are 'invincible, indomitable' lone wolves 'in need of no other but themselves'. In short, students must become entrepreneurial selves, active, competitive and flexible (Bonvin and Galster, 2010).

### 2.2. Fractures and gaps: the illogic of a human capital logic

Might it be the case, however, that even for these 'lone wolves' that there could be a gap between economic growth and human well-being? At issue here is that links between economic growth and human development are not automatic: even where there is high economic growth, valuable lives can prove elusive and even

fragile. For example, OECD (2008) figures for 30 countries for the mid 2000s using the Gini co-efficient of income inequality, point to continuing inequalities, with only Denmark and Sweden having a narrow inequality gap. A focus on economic growth appears not to be yielding more equality in nearly all these countries. Indeed, the gap between rich and poor in most OECD countries has widened over the past two decades so that income inequality in the mid-2000s is wider than in the mid-1980s. The scale of the change is 'moderate but significant' (OECD, 2008, p. 8); it is going quite simply in the wrong direction. Moreover, research by Brown et al. (2010) on globalization, knowledge economies and a 'global skills race' suggests that rapidly increasing university enrolments around the world, especially in China and India, mean that graduates from the West are competing for higher-end jobs with their equally skilled counterparts from China and India. A growing proportion of high skilled work, they argue, is now to be found in low cost, low wage countries. Their study suggests that transnational companies are increasingly able to choose their talent from leading universities in different countries, including low cost economies with the 'price advantage' their graduates offer. Thus claims for the rising value of human capital ring hollow and a likely scenario is the rise of a high skill, low wage workforce so that the linear relationship between education, skills, jobs and rewards in developed economies in the face of a 'new tide of global knowledge capitalism' breaks down. They suggest that growing inequalities and failed expectations will increase and that a one-dimensional view of education for employment as the means to a good life challenges our understanding of justice and efficiency achieved through connecting education, jobs and rewards. Rather, they argue, we need alternative visions of education, economy and society.

Thus Balakrishnan et al. (2010) argue that the current global economic crisis provides evidence that neo-liberal economic policies and the virtues of unregulated markets have not worked. They argue that, divorced from concerns for human rights and flourishing, economic policy making has proceeded on the basis that economic growth, no matter how skewed in favour of a few, will ultimately benefit all by providing resources for the realization of human rights. Yet, the means adopted to achieve economic growth have been responsible for actually undermining goals in the domain of human rights. More economic growth does not then automatically lead to greater rights-based political freedoms (Balakrishnan et al., 2010). A human capital model would then not seem particularly favourable for the protection and implementation of human rights in education.

Maybe, suggests Baptiste (2001, p. 198) 'human capital theorists have it all wrong'. Overall, there is a difficulty with the logic of human capital model of education and its associated system of economic liberalism, which effectively removes education from the realm of the social and the political and dislocates it to the economic realm, more specifically a market economy which assumes that people act to maximize income or financial gain. The economy is disembedded from society and politics in what Polanyi (1944) describes as a 'market society', in which important social activities (for example health and welfare services) are increasingly entrusted to a market focused on those individual wants and needs which can be supplied by the market. In this model there is less likelihood of state intervention to advance human development (Stewart, 2010), and more likelihood of growing inequality and injustice.

If we follow Polanyi's (1944) compelling argument, human capital and trends towards market societies will simply result in 'annihilation'. In his thorough critique of market liberalism based on a detailed study of economic and social changes in Europe from the preindustrial world to the 'great transformation' of the Industrial Revolution, Polanyi argues that there cannot be a

market utopia because of the dire consequences of untempered market capitalism on people's lives and relationships ('labour'), on the environment ('nature') and on an unregulated financial system ('money'):

To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society for the alleged commodity 'labour power' cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately or even left unused, without affecting also the human individuals who happens to be the bearers of this peculiar commodity. (Polanyi, 1944, p. 76)

He argues that a market society elevates material wants above other social and human values and needs, and does not support social well-being:

In Polanyi's writings we therefore find an explanation as to how liberating the market from the restraining bonds of public authority (mostly but not exclusively the state) results in allowing market forces, motivated by the need for private gain, to determine more and more of how we think and what we value, of what is produced and by whom, of how it is distributed, and of how all these affect society, livelihoods and quality of life. (Kirby, 2005, p. 149)

However, such dire possibilities 'for the forms of life of the common people' (Polanyi, 1944, p. 79) has historically generated counter measures of state intervention and democratic politics and struggles to protect people and society 'against the perils inherent in a self-regulating market system' (Polanyi, 1944, p. 80). Recently, Gamble (2010, p. 705) has noted in response to severe funding cuts to public services in the UK that these, 'mobilise coalitions of special interests against them, both within and outside government'; cuts can end up being temporary because of the pressures to balance the competing demands of markets (cuts) and citizens (increases in public spending). We see more and more examples of this kind of resistance being reported in UK newspapers. The assumption that economic growth can be sustained (that is beyond any short term gains) without concern for human flourishing is also challenged in research by Ranis et al. (2000). A more expansive focus, they argue, will strengthen rather than reduce economic development. Ranis and his colleagues argue that a development focus only on economic growth is not sustainable, but they also argue that a focus only on human development may also not be sustainable. Nonetheless, a focus primarily on human development is more likely, in the event of appropriate economic reforms, to move into a 'virtuous' cycle of sustainable economic growth plus human development.

Moreover the logic of a strong human capital approach is to withdraw public funding from all or most education provision as just another marketable service which ought to be free to charge, 'whatever fees the market will bear' (Gamble, 2010, p. 707). Education is not regarded as a public good, and is open to the privatising of provision, including universities (Gamble, 2010). Even weaker versions of human capital, would overlook, as Robeyns (2006) points out, non-market values and goods. The further logic is that even if public provision persists it would need to be linked to clear evidence that education does indeed generate income growth, in itself by no means accepted by all researchers (see for example Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2006). While all this may be a somewhat crude interpretation of human capital, it works to demonstrate the logic of the normative model, what is at stake and what view of humanity prevails.

In the longer term society – and we might add education – cannot be run as an adjunct to the market; a pure market economy,

would as Polanyi (1944) argues, destroy society and nature. He further explains that from his historical analysis that there has never been a self-regulating market because of what he calls the 'double movement' as people resist the rolling back of the state, it is rather the product of a school of thought in economics. Returning to the idea of how language shapes the social world, Wolf (2002) points out that historically education has had more expansive purposes. To read government documents [in the UK] of even fifty years ago, she suggests, 'gives one a shock' in the breadth of concerns captured by educational provision. Education is certainly important to economic life, she argues, but this is only one aspect not its entirety, 'and does not deserve the overwhelming emphasis which it now enjoys' (Wolf, 2002, p. 254). If we are indifferent to the more expansive aims of education – the cultural, moral and intellectual – we will impoverish ourselves (Wolf, 2002).

Human capital we can now conclude may well be a persuasive, empirically verifiable and market aligned model (Lanzi, 2007), appealing for policy makers. But it is also an impoverished normative model for education because it does not prioritise well being or an expansive human agency, nor is it underpinned by a transformative notion of development. It does not attend to (beyond the rhetorical), 'the issue of how to ensure that all individuals are equally able to develop their talents and abilities through formal education and elsewhere' (Brown and Tannock, 2009, p. 386). It is a model which further risks damaging education and education systems if left solely or even mostly to the vagaries of the market. Describing what education is for in terms of the quality of the workforce (Keeley, 2007) is a terribly reductive aim. Moreover, argues Wolf, we do not need to remake education (and remake it reductively) 'to avoid economic perdition' (2002, p. 256). Indeed the recent financial crisis suggests that it is precisely the moral and ethical dimensions of human life, rather the quantity and level of education which has let us down so badly. Furthermore, the dominant human capital model seems not to have done very well in improving all lives in education over a trajectory of several decades.

Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash (2010) therefore argue that the stage is set to move the focus on from estimating the market determinants and gains from education to something which more comprehensively embraces plural dimensions of people's lives to better understand the role education plays. They advocate combining capital and capabilities as they can be complementary theoretically and empirically. But, unlike Sen (2003), they further suggest that because human capital is already firmly established that this should be the starting point, but enriched by capability insights. Yet it is hard to see what reality this would bring us closer to or how it advances the shifts human capital theorists already seem to have made (see Keeley, 2007), or changes our education discourse substantially. People can be in work without their capabilities being of concern or being developed (Lessman and Bonvin, 2011). For neo-liberal policy makers labour (human capital) is just another input into production, yet people's well-being has become more dependent on the vagaries of the marketplace as state's prioritise global competitiveness over citizens' well-being (Kirby, 2005). Philosophically it would not work to subsume capabilities into a human capital model because of the reductive understanding of human agents in human capital and the lack of attention to human freedoms.

It is then rather surprising that Nussbaum (2011) commends James Heckman's (for example Carneiro and Heckman, 2003) human capital approach in economics and describes it as work on a version of 'human capabilities'. In particular she highlights Heckman's research which shows that the early years are likely to generate the best return on investment in developing children's cognitive abilities because learning begets more learning and early learning in particular influences later learning, even though

abilities develop throughout a life cycle, shaped by schooling but also by families and other informal learning opportunities. Non-cognitive abilities such as motivation and social adaptability are seen as important also for producing human capital. Certainly, Heckman is concerned with the waste of human potential and the growing equality gap between those with low skills and those with high skills. There is probably no good reason to ignore influential research when the possibility is there to reinterpret it or ask new questions of it. Nussbaum suggests that Heckman's research 'needs to be fully integrated into the work of philosophers and economists pursuing the Human Development paradigm' (2011, p. 195). But it is not clear what she means by this. Human capital is focused on the economy and cost-benefit analyses of human development in relation to economic growth. For example, arguing for prioritising funding for early years interventions or social policy interventions for 'dysfunctional' families. It is hard to see how difficult trade-offs fare when judged only on a cost-benefit basis; certainly the arts and humanities in university education in the UK lose out seriously from a human capital approach.

Yet we should not be complacent that the human capital model has been successfully overtaken by our superior logic; it is neither down nor out! Human capital, for example, now recognises the role of social capital (Keeley, 2007) (understood somewhat reductively as networks, norms and values). It has more recently expanded to include goods like health (Keeley, 2007), even though it remains philosophically and normatively wedded to seeing people first and foremost as the means to an end of economic productivity. Good health is understood and valued as a kind of by-product of human capital development. But this is a clever reframing of human capital making it harder to argue against it in the face of claims that economic growth 'is only part of the human capital equation', the recognition that education 'brings other benefits', and of the acknowledged value of social networks (Keeley, 2007, p. 35). We need an especially persuasive alternative moral narrative, which for its part recognises the importance of the economic argument but goes beyond this in order to think well about an education which encourages the full range of human abilities – for example, curiosity, imagination, creativity, and intercultural understanding, the wonder of learning, and the power of good teaching. But if human capital is subsumed into a human capabilities approach, then there is real potential to enrich the approach by drawing on extensive empirical research to make the argument for human capabilities, beyond human capital.

### 3. Human capabilities development paradigm

Brown and Tannock (2009, p. 386) have suggested that there are no global frameworks to provide an alternative way to re-imagine, 'equality in educational opportunity as a global project'. I disagree and want to make the case for capability-friendly education policies; crucially the approach has a different, richer view of what it means to be human from that of human capital. I therefore now turn to a second normative model (Robeyns, 2006) for a richer set of goals and aims for education which imagines ethically inclusive and humanly rich goals for development broader than the impact for increased productivity. In doing so – moving policy over to the human capabilities side (also see Walker et al., 2009, Tikly and Barrett, 2011) – is not so much about reinventing education but rather reinventing the way policy makers think about education based on 'what human beings require for a flourishing life' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 125). This would incorporate but go beyond in some transformative way an evaluation of people's quality of life in Sen's (1999) approach. For Nussbaum, any 'decent' plan 'would seek to promote a range of diverse and incommensurable goods, involving the unfolding and development of distinct human

abilities' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 127) in the direction of a life of human dignity. Because human beings have dignity 'it is bad to treat them like objects, pushing them around without their consent' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 130). The question then becomes what kind of education plan 'permits human abilities to develop and human equality to be respected' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 133). Education by its very nature should help people to develop their best selves' (Noddings, 2003, p. 23). Crucially the exercise of reasoning is central to flourishing so that an education for flourishing would have to include this particular feature, of which I say more later.

Education contributes to what Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000, 2011) call 'capabilities'-opportunities which enable us to choose and to live in ways we find meaningful, productive and rewarding individually and collectively to the good of society. Capabilities are the potential to achieve functionings – to be knowledgeable, to use one's knowledge in worthwhile ways, to be intercultural aware and sensitive, and so on. The question we ask of education is then: what are people actually able to do and be? What opportunities do they have to attend a school or university, to be healthy, to be creative, to get rewarding jobs, and so on?' Capabilities are these real and actual freedoms people have to do and to be what they value being and doing.

Sen does not eschew the importance of the labour market and jobs for well-being, and recognises the value of integration in economic life, writing that:

unemployment has other serious effects on the lives of individuals, causing deprivations of other kinds. There is plenty of evidence that unemployment has far-reaching effects other than loss of income, including psychological harm, loss of work motivation, skill and self-confidence, increase in ailments and morbidity (and even mortality rates), disruption of family relations and social life, hardening of social exclusion and accentuation of racial tension and gender asymmetries. (1999, p. 94)

He especially recognises that youth unemployment can take a particularly high toll, leading to loss of self-esteem of young workers and would-be workers, and is obviously connected with the problem of social exclusion. As Rose (2009) further reminds us, individual enterprise can be a powerful force both for personal development and public benefit. Thus, it is not that human capital is bad as one goal for education: fair economic opportunities promote identity and belonging, and a productive business environment and reducing human insecurity are central to well-being. Integration into economic life matters if people are to participate fully in income generation and securing remunerative employment. Moreover human capital generates the skills and competences which allow for an expansion of capabilities, enlarging the possibilities for genuine choices in the labour market.

But income alone cannot capture the full range of contributions to a state of well-being in a person's life. Sen (2003) rejects the view that improved lives can *only* follow from economic growth – there is a range of valued human ends, he argues so that being a better producer is not the only evaluative end for human lives; the key purpose of development is *human* development (Haq, 2003). A strong economy ought to be a means to good lives, but not an end in itself. Sen's acknowledges the synergies between capital and capabilities, and that 'both put humanity at the center of attention' (2003, p. 35), but they are also – rather crucially – distinct:

Human capital concentrates on the agency of human beings – through skill and knowledge as well as effort – in augmenting production possibilities. The latter [human capabilities] focuses on the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to

value and to enhance the substantive choices they have. (Sen, 2003, p. 35)

While education can enhance human capital, people benefit from education and work in ways that exceed its role in human capital for commodity production. If we pursue his (2000, p. 29) argument that what ultimately what matters, 'is what freedom does a person have' – then a human capital model does not do well. Even acknowledging the importance of a job to social inclusion prospects – and the obverse, unemployment to social exclusion (Sen, 1999), an educational focus on employability and jobs tells us nothing about the quality of work, or whether or not people are treated fairly and with dignity at work.

Capabilities, implies a larger scope of benefits from education, which include enhancing the well-being and freedom of individuals and peoples, and influencing social change. Nor, Sen argues, is a focus on good living such a radical departure from economic thinking which in its origins was substantially motivated by the need to study and assess the influences on the opportunities people have for well-being.

Also, unlike human capital which does not ask us to show concern for others whether at home or in distant countries, Sen (2009) argues that capability is a kind of power and a central concept in human obligation; we are enjoined by him to use that power for social betterment:

Freedom to choose gives us the opportunity to decide what we should do, but with that opportunity comes the responsibility for what we do – to the extent that they are chosen actions. Since a capability is power to do something, the accountability that emanates from that ability – that power – is part of the capability perspective. (Sen, 2009, p. 19)

All people need to be 'well educated to understand the plights of other people' (Nussbaum, 2006a, p. 412); the capabilities model is global in its reach and responsiveness to human lives. Agency must then include 'other-regarding' goals, and commitments and obligations to use one's power on behalf of other human beings by reason of our shared humanity to bring about sustainable changes that would enhance human development in the world. In the capability approach the vulnerability of human beings is acknowledged – our lives can go well and they can go badly – and this has implications for education, social relationships and communities. As Nussbaum (2000) explains, we are needy beings, in need of love and care.

### 3.1. Pedagogical realization

Bearing in mind that Baptiste (2001) argues that human capital led education is apolitical, adaptive and individualistic, by contrast for human capabilities education is empowering and emancipatory – freedom making. For Sen (Dreze and Sen, 2002) education is personal, interpersonal, social and political and has redistributive potential, while Nussbaum (2000) describes her education capability of 'senses, imagination and thought':

Being able to use the senses to imagine, think and reason – and to do these things in a 'truly human way', a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including but by no means limited to literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to search for the ultimate meaning of life in

one's own way. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-necessary pain. (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78–79)

Above all, we might argue, pedagogy would form Nussbaum's (2000, p. 79) capability for practical reasoning: 'Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life'. Moreover, through education, human rights would be secured, not just talked about.

Sen (2009) provides indirect curriculum and pedagogical guidance in that he ascribes a central role to our powers of critical reasoning as a moral and political imperative. The advancement of justice depends on inclusive democracy – deepening democracy depends on discussion and collective reasoning that injects more information and knowledge, diverse perspectives and plural voices into debates. Critical inquiry/discussion practices in education ought then to produce justice or at least reduce injustice, for example by developing students with critical knowledge, critical self-reflection and the capacity to act in the world. Discussion has a central role in human life, 'it constitutes a human world, and it is itself educative...Discussion is the principal way in which humanity is cultivated' (Morrow, 2009, p. 10). Such rich dialogic and participatory pedagogical processes enable the formation of a capability for 'voice' in decision-making not only making possible but also valuing students' ability to express their points of view, to argue and defend these, and to do so in a 'capability-friendly' educational environment which fosters not only individual development, but through collaboration and group working supports a collective agenda too. The process allows students to participate in public debates as a key component of Sen's focus on public reasoning; pedagogical processes are then designed to promote agency and the exercise of this agency.

This pedagogy might learn from educators such as Dewey (1916/2009) and Freire (1972), whose ideas are strongly aligned with the expansion of capabilities and democratic processes of dialogue and reasoning. However, arguably both place far more emphasis on the social than either Sen or Nussbaum, no doubt because education for both is inherently a social process, even if the outcome is individual development. Dewey (1916/2009) emphasized how democratic processes experienced in school form democratic citizens, because democracy 'is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (quoted in Nussbaum, 2006b, p. 5). He therefore argued that education and learning are social and interactive processes, all students should have the opportunity to participate actively in their own learning, and social reform through education is possible. Educational arrangements should balance curriculum (knowledge) with the interests and experiences of students, because the child and the curriculum are two points in a single process, in which the present standpoint of the child on the one hand, and knowledge on the other define instruction. Dewey further argues for education not only as a place to gain knowledge and skills, but also as a place to learn how to live; realizing one's full potential and the ability to use knowledge and skills for the common good. He proposed that education can be instrumental in creating social change and reform in that education mediates a process of coming to share in social consciousness; the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is, he argues, the only sure method of social reconstruction. By changing people – by expanding their consciousness and capabilities to choose worthwhile lives – reform is possible.

Aligned educationally also with human capabilities, Freire (1972) advocates education as 'the practice of freedom' and the construction of democratic pedagogic subjects so that students acquire a deep and critical understanding of themselves and their society – reading the word to read the world, as Freire puts it. He

distinguished between what he called 'banking education' ('narration sickness') and problem-posing education. The former is oppressive and involves transmitting or pouring ideas into blank and docile containers who then reproduce these ideas uncritically. Criticism and questioning are suppressed and alternative ways of understanding the world are not encouraged. By contrast education as freedom involves learners as agents in a dialogical and critical approach. Students learn to ask questions, not just to answer them. Education is something students do, rather than something that is done to them. Dialogue is absolutely key – a culture of silence excludes and oppresses – speech/voice and freedom are intimately connected. Emancipation becomes the process of finding one's own voice and this can occur only in conditions of justice and equality (even if such justice and equality is only in the classroom). Teachers in this pedagogical mode are critical and reflective intellectuals, having a questioning frame of mind and open to learning from their students and from other teachers. For Freire we humanise ourselves when we engage in such critical, dialogical praxis; we dehumanise ourselves and others when we actively prevent this.

There are no doubt others to whom we could turn for ideas and inspiration. Nussbaum (2006b) for her part has drawn on Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore, but also substantially on Aristotle, the Stoics and others (Nussbaum, 1997), while Sen (1999) acknowledges his own debt to Dewey. Also a potential resource is the work of Van Staveren (2001) with her 'missing capabilities' of rational economic man. These are: moral commitment, emotion, deliberation and human interaction and we can see how Sen, Nussbaum, Dewey and Freire offer guidance for pedagogies which might be shaped by the need to develop these ethical capabilities through education. The point here is to illustrate what a capability friendly pedagogy might look like, contrasting it with a human capital pedagogy.

Most importantly, the language used to talk about education would be different – expansive rather than reductive, political rather than technical, human well-being led rather than market-led, transformative rather than adaptive. Education would pay attention to the conditions to engage in and succeed in education (e.g. availability and accessibility of schooling or adult education classes; freedom from class, gender or ethnic discrimination); a suitable curriculum; inclusive pedagogies and good teaching; achieving desired qualifications (e.g., for a job); being able to participate in community, social and political life as an equal among others. Rather than being adaptive it would seek to form transformative agency, for example, making an informed choice of adult education/schooling/economic opportunities; being able to exercise the agency to act on one's goal/s; being able to choose and realize a life one has reason to value. Education would work to secure capabilities to all students, paying attention to the social arrangements in education (pedagogies, institutional culture, and education policy) which enabled capabilities rather than diminished them. How factors of diversity, esp. gender, social class, ethnicity, disability and spatial segregation impede the development of opportunities would be evaluated, as well as how – or if – education forms the capability to identify and aspire to valued outcomes.

#### 4. A capital and capabilities comparison

In a human capital model the dimension to measure if equality has been achieved would be average income, however unequally distributed to individuals and families, and without attention to who gets which jobs unless this becomes a human capital problem. The philosophical basis would be economic liberalism. In the second model the dimension for measuring equality would be each person's capabilities. The human capabilities model is part of political liberalism, and has a broadly egalitarian approach to

reducing inequality. I therefore suggest that the richest model and one most appropriate to an expansive understanding and practice of education, based in the dignity and intrinsic worth of human beings and respect for personal autonomy and reflexive choices is a model based on human capabilities which asks what people are actually able to be and to do, rather than only what resources they have. This model captures the significance of human capital and embeds it in the approach but unlike human capital prioritises human beings as ends in themselves, always asking what growth is for and, how does education reduce injustice? It manages to be a much more fertile 'both-and' model of education policy, which leads us into asking better questions of public policy with regard to capability formation. Which capabilities, distributed to whom, with due regard to prioritising capabilities of the least advantaged (which could mean developing the professional capabilities of the advantaged with a view to equipping them with the values and knowledge to work with the least advantaged, see McLean and Walker, 2012), and hence – how fair is the formation and distribution of individual capabilities?

Put together capital and capabilities look something like this in the core elements of what it means to be human, the policy values which follows, and the outcomes which flow from the policy framework (Table 1).

#### 5. Struggle and change

How the capability approach works to incorporate struggles for change in and through education needs attention and can only be touched on here. Given that the basic intuition that human concerns should be the ultimate goal of economic activity continues to be ignored in development policy all over the world (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009), if transformation is the educational goal, then this calls for struggle, action and change. But some critics have argued that the capability approach provides little guidance in this respect (Carpenter, 2009; Dean, 2009; Feldman and Gellert, 2006). Carpenter (2009), for example, argues that there is a need to align with political struggles if the capability approach is to realize its full potential, and connecting also to a 'fuller economic and social analysis that transcends the limited growth oriented global capitalism' which he argues is embedded in mainstream (i.e. Sen and Nussbaum) capability approaches. Tikly and Barrett (2011), argue for adding in Fraser's (2008) notion of participatory parity and its inherent notion of struggle for recognition, for direct political participation, and against exploitation and the systemic injustices of capitalism. For Dean (2009), equality in the CA is conceptualized as freedom but not solidarity, yet collective and social freedoms matter too.

However, they arguably overlook that Sen (1999) describes five instrumental freedoms (political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security) as the conditions for capability formation. Thus even though Sen may not have an explicit theory of social change, this is not to say it is not to be found in capabilities. Nor does he divorce individual flourishing from social conditions. His instrumental freedoms might operate in education at the macro, meso and micro levels. For example, macro political freedoms might include arrangements in society such as civil liberties; at the meso level, student voice through student representative councils; and, at the micro level of the class room, student participation in learning. Similarly social opportunities might include macro access to education, meso (school, college, university) provision for access to learning, and micro opportunities to access knowledge through collaborative work with peers. Economic facilities might include not being excluded from education on financial grounds, appropriate and adequate material resources in schools and classrooms. Transparency guarantees might include discussion

**Table 1**  
Comparison of capital and capabilities ‘narratives’.

	On being human	Assembled values in policy design	Pedagogical approach	Desirable outcomes
Human capital paradigm	People are valued as economic producers and consumer-citizens. People are self-interested, rational, utility-maximizing (cost-benefit) individuals. People exhibit stable (predictable) preferences. Human differences are not acknowledged (unless they have severe economic/profit effects)	<u>Instrumental market values:</u> Economic growth, income and employability are the end of development. Individuals before society. Education is an investment by individuals for human capital. Competitive, free market forces and market values guarantee fairness. Cost efficiency training-focused. Prioritise public money for most ‘productive’ education sectors.	Adaptive and reproductive. ‘Banking education’ methods. Focus on the individual. Critical capacity but within limits of accepting social norms and arrangements.	<u>Skills, knowledge, competences:</u> People are trained as productive [economic] agents, with flexible identities’, skills, and adaptability to the market. Global educational meritocracy justifies and explains human and social behaviour and inequalities and exclusion from labour markets.
Human capabilities paradigm	Full human flourishing and dignity to choose a good life, including economic opportunities and work, well-being and agency. Obligations to others. Participant in social and political life. Human diversity is valued.	<u>Instrumental and intrinsic market and non-market values:</u> Education is a cultural experience. Development includes human capital, but human capabilities are the overarching value. Foster voice and public reasoning in and about education.	Transformative, dialogic, participatory, discussion-based, questioning. Socratic methods. Inclusive and intercultural methods. Collaborative, social and experiential methods. Critical analysis to question knowledge and taken-for granted perspectives. Foster ability to express a point of view and defend it individually and collectively.	<u>Capabilities:</u> Rich agency goals and ‘voice’, with real freedom to choose the job one has reason to value. More justice in education and society and less inequality. Unfair labour market outcomes lead to scrutiny of social arrangements and diversity factors. Human rights.

of the purposes of a curriculum and pedagogy, and transparency regarding assessment criteria, while protective security might include guarantees of freedom from physical harassment or gender violence. In other words, these instrumental freedoms are capability ‘inputs’ and require attention not only to capability development in classrooms, but how this articulates with just institutions and justice in broader social conditions. That Sen does not unambiguously pin down how this might all work or how it might work in the specific case of education should be seen as requiring educational research to evaluate and flesh out the ideas. Sen both recognises the ambiguities in his approach, stressing that it is not a theory of justice but an approach or framework and suggests that it is undoubtedly more important to be vaguely right than precisely wrong. He does not tell you how to go from A to B or that society B is in all respects better than society A, but he does provide conceptual resources to think well about lives are going in the society in which one lives and works and whether a decent life is available to all.

Feldman and Gellert (2006) while also critical do concede the real possibilities in Sen’s approach to public reasoning. They note that in the body of Sen’s work, they find ‘an important acknowledgement of the importance of collective action and resistance in efforts to realize deliberative democratic practice’ (p. 445), which ‘provides the conditions of possibility for the disadvantaged as they strive to understand, re(frame) and redress the conditions of their inequality’ (Feldman and Gellert, 2006, p. 446). Furthermore, Brighouse (2004) has argued that the logic of the capability approach is in a radical direction – for everyone to be able to develop their capabilities for full human flourishing would take action and policy in a radically egalitarian direction and would require political and educational struggles against staggering inequalities within and across countries.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Judt (2010, p. 17) writes that, ‘the materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human

condition’; we can imagine alternatives. I have argued that it is not the case that there is no other way to imagine education policy than that of current neo-liberal approaches which suit powerful interests and which currently drive and maintain inequality. Yet such imagining is not easy – if it were we would not be in the situation where our education narratives have become impoverished, reducing ‘those parts of the educational endeavour that are crucial to preserving a healthy society’ (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10). In the UK for example, we have come both to accept and use a neo-liberal language of key performance indicators, targets, performance, delivery, competition, efficiency gains, audits, and the like, and the complaints by business leaders about the ‘deficiencies’ of the education system.

Yet how we speak about education – for example as a system of market exchanges and cost-benefit decisions – is not ethically neutral but affects how we live. According to Aristotle (see Kraut, 2010) we learn to be virtuous by acting in virtuous ways, we learn to live well by living well. We then need to ask what we are all learning to become and be as we currently ‘live and ‘do’ in our schools, colleges and universities; through discourse we end up producing the kind of education system desired by government policy makers, while non-market values get squeezed to the margins. As Mike Rose (2009, p. 29) explains, ‘Public discourse, heard frequently enough and over time affects the way we think, vote and lead our lives’. Tikly (2011) argues that the current global context exhibits a particularly ‘virulent’ neo-liberal governmentality with a ‘profound constitutive effect on policy’. It then becomes progressively harder to sustain public values that support the social contribution, such as informed citizens, as well as the individual benefits of education, together with the rationale for public investment in education and advancing public purposes. This is further complicated by the capacity of the neo-liberal project ‘to bind itself’ (Tikly, 2011) to multiple policy projects, including as this paper has suggested, in relation to human capital’s capture of progressive voices and a potential capture of capabilities. The education policy that produces such effects persists because it is seen by the powerful in the most influential



countries as being able to respond to the social and economic challenges of current times, basing competitive economic growth on knowledge and innovation (Keeley, 2007).

However, human beings are complex and plural in their valuable beings and doings; a one-dimensional human capital framing of what it means to be human does not capture this in education policy, nor adequately explain unequal political and social relations, nor support human rights. What has been proposed is therefore a 'thick', non reductive human capability approach to education and education policy design and implementation, with an emphasis on human well-being, and the transformative educational possibilities of capability-friendly policies and pedagogical processes of reasoning and reasoned action and agency. The capability approach is advanced as superior to a human capital model in its potential to address both economic demands and human flourishing, while always privileging dignified human beings as ends in themselves. Moreover, drawing on Polanyi (1944) the paper has shown that we cannot separate economics from politics, and neither can we separate both from education models and policies.

The human capabilities model would be implemented according to Sen's (2009) pragmatic idea of justice – we aim for better education and improvements through education even as we acknowledge that there is more that needs to be done and that education alone cannot do everything. The capability approach applied in education contributes to rich human understanding and concern in which economic opportunities are the means to the end of good lives rather than the end in themselves. Education is then still a key site where we might, 'advance justice or reduce injustice in the world' (Sen, 2009, p. 337), and this suggests struggle for change. Education, while by no means the only arena for intervention for the formation of capabilities might be operationalized to form the kind of human beings who can contribute to shaping the kind of society which values human capabilities, who want to contribute to capability building and a society and public culture which can sustain capabilities for all.

Capabilities, I believe, offers a resource to take into public arenas to make the argument for change and public action in education in the direction of societies which support and sustain human capabilities for all. Carefully considered, human capital is limited in what it offers to this end. We ought to be able to think, talk and act differently in education from the way policy directs us today not least because there have been times (Wolf, 2002) when we did education differently, while the unbridled pursuit of economic self-interest is itself a cultural creation, as Polanyi (1944) shows us.

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