



Beyond education for economic productivity alone: The Capabilities Approach



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ABSTRACT

The Capabilities Approach, as developed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, provides a much needed re-balancing of aims in education. With its Aristotle-inspired ethical dimension this approach values the capabilities of *practical reason* and *affiliation* as critical for individual and societal development. As shown by social science research children continue to face difficulties in society today, whether in respect of educational or psychosocial development. A narrow utilitarian approach in education aimed at economic productivity alone, often prevalent in policy in England, exacerbates this situation. By contrast, it is proposed that the Capabilities Approach, with its broader aims, be embraced in education to help children flourish as engaged actors in society capable of making good judgments individually and with others.

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1. Introduction

Education surely develops a person's *awareness* by enlarging, deepening and extending it. Its impact is cognitive but it also transforms and regulates a person's attitudes, emotions, wants and actions because all of these presuppose awareness and are impregnated with beliefs (Peters, 1981: 33).

The Capabilities Approach, as will be argued here, provides a broader approach than education driven primarily by economic productivity sometimes prevalent in education today. The latter, although it can promote instrumental skills development for some, or even many, to seek increased GDP, inevitably can leave behind the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, and does not always nurture personal fulfilment or sustain democratic societies.

In a speech to the [Royal Society in 2011](#), Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education applauds the improved performance in GDP in East Asia and suggests that economic productivity should be the key driver of education practice in the West in order to succeed in the global market.

When I see the pace at which other countries are transforming their education systems to give more and more of their students mastery in maths and science, . . . Unless we dramatically improve our performance, the grim arithmetic of globalisation will leave us all poorer. (Michael Gove, Royal Society speech, 2011).

There is no doubt that efforts to improve mathematics and science education are commendable and necessary. What is in doubt is whether a narrow utilitarian approach which promotes economic productivity alone, as exemplified by the quotation above, is the primary ethical dimension for education practice to sustain a fulfilled and democratic society.

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In this article I challenge the ethical dimension of a narrow utilitarian view of education, which risks reducing practice to a mechanistic approach in favour of economic productivity. Economic productivity as the principal driver in education is exemplified in narrow instruction measured through standardised tests in the primary and secondary stages in education in England (i.e. SATs and GCSEs). I suggest that when this narrow approach is adopted it leaves little room for other important elements in education, which develop children's ability to flourish as they think and act well. Children and young people continue to face difficult challenges in society, whether educational, psychological or social. If we are to engage in helping children to flourish and succeed, it is arguably an ethical dimension as provided by the Capabilities Approach, which embraces education practice beyond economic productivity alone, which should be considered.

The Capabilities Approach, has already influenced development in economics, health, and social policy. Like the focus on economic productivity, the Capabilities Approach is also concerned with growth, including economic growth, but uses a broader model for its definition of growth than that allowed within the model of economic productivity. In particular, the Capabilities Approach as developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, based on Aristotle's work, could have much to offer education, as the approach includes an explicit ethical dimension when considering human development, defined by a shared humanity with important capabilities to realise. The Capabilities Approach as developed by Nussbaum is underpinned by the notion of a basic shared human capacity for care, affiliation and deliberation which is of intrinsic value and which forms an essential part of the moral imperative which society must work to realise. If adopted more fully in education practice in schools the Capabilities Approach provides pointers about the kind of person and the kind of society which is valuable and to be nurtured, which cannot simply be reduced to economic measures.

Significantly, this approach could ensure a space in education for the development of important capabilities such as practical reason and affiliation, understood as follows: 'Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' (Nussbaum, 2001: 417) and affiliation as 'Being able to live with and towards others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction, to be able to imagine the situation of another' (Nussbaum, 2001: 417). Within the Capabilities Approach, teaching and learning would seek to develop practical reason and affiliation through ethical enquiry, reflective practice and social action. Curriculum time which includes the arts and humanities would be considered invaluable for learning development within this approach and be balanced with the sciences and mathematics.

An approach such as this is particularly relevant if we are to prevent obtuseness in individuals and societies which is at odds with human development, democracy and a sustainable economy. Developing practical reason and affiliation which are intrinsically valued in this approach seem urgent given the innate narcissistic tendencies in human beings, exacerbated by social context and the forces in personality that militate against reciprocity and respect evident in the human condition. I agree with Nussbaum that there should be an explicit ethical dimension in education to nurture these capabilities which is essential to the development of a civilised society (1997, 2000, 2010). If we dismiss this dimension in society (including in education) as unnecessary in the sole pursuit of economic productivity we do so at our peril.

In order to develop this discussion, in this article I first outline a working definition of ethics. Second, I explore the drive towards education for economic productivity and suggest the need for a broader approach. Third, I focus on the challenges which children and young people already face in society, exacerbated by sometimes economic-driven education practices in England. Fourth, I discuss the emergence of the Capabilities Approach in the social sciences and advocate a specific iteration of this approach as developed by Martha Nussbaum, inspired by the philosophy of Aristotle. I propose this version of the Capabilities Approach as broader and more helpful than a narrow utilitarian approach in education for economic productivity alone. Fifth, I engage with the notions of thinking and doing well, necessary in practical reason and the capability of affiliation, both of which require trust and co-operation.

1.1. A working definition of ethics

The sometimes prominent language of productivity present in education in England can be an obstacle rather than a facilitator for ethical practice in education towards human flourishing. I propose a broad working definition of ethics to guide education, which challenges such performative approaches and which encourages care for every individual's development.

Ethics is about how people should live, and live together, as they shape their lives in co-operation and reciprocity with others, and as they are themselves shaped by practical reason and affiliation (that is: the capability to make sound judgements through critical sensitive interpretation, and the capability to relate to others with compassion, care, and with respect for the dignity to every individual). In short it is about personal fulfilment and inter-personal respect and harmony. These principles are the basic intuition from which arise criteria that certain human abilities or capacities exert a moral claim that they should be developed. This is a claim about how human beings are in essence at their best. Here, ethics is seen in the holistic sense as a way of being, which requires developing a set of psychological and cognitive capacities in order to make judgements about how to live a fulfilled life.

In this wider sense the term ethics is used interchangeably with morality, but both are defined with reference to that which we share by virtue of being human, rather than with reference to conformity to any behaviourist format, or a particular cultural or religious authority, as the term morality is sometimes associated with and spoken about. Ethics in this sense is not restricted by the sometimes narrow Kantian interpretation of responsibility or duty in specific aspects of morality. Nor is it confined to rule compliance in the utilitarian sense. Instead, ethics is considered as a broad approach to how we should live a life and so is concerned with all of life. As understood from an Aristotelian perspective, I take ethics to

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