Challenges in accessing higher education: A case study of marginalised young people in one South African informal settlement

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A B S T R A C T

Statistics show that student enrolment in higher education institutions in South Africa has dramatically increased over the past years, a clear indication that higher education (HE) is addressing issues of equitable access in the wake of an exclusionary apartheid past. Despite these positive trends, there are still marginalised groups in society about whom we know little, and who risk being overlooked both in access statistics and at the level of actual lives. The article therefore outlines the aspirations and challenges for vulnerable young people in accessing higher education, based on a case study conducted at Orange Farm informal settlement in South Africa. A qualitative approach, using Sen (2009, 1999a) and Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach (CA) was adopted as the conceptual frame for the light it casts on real lives, opportunities and plural achievements, with empirical data collected through face-to-face interviews with purposively selected young people living in an Orange Farm orphanage.

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1. Introduction

In 2011, statistics show that 938,201 students were in higher education, a significant increase from 473,000 in 1994 (CHE, 2013; 1999). Despite these improvements, the same year, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group published a briefing by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) indicating some of the challenges still faced by vulnerable groups in accessing higher education such as the poor state of basic education and a lack of funding (PMG, 2011). In line with inadequate basic education, Wilson-Strydom (2011) argues that a new form of social exclusion in dealing with access to higher education in South Africa has emerged, that of increasing access without increasing the success of underprepared undergraduates from poorer backgrounds. This is strengthened by the CHE report that acknowledges that students entering university do so from positions of extreme inequality (CHE, 2010). Thus while overall numbers are encouraging, they do not necessarily provide the whole picture of the direction of access, especially by marginalised young people living in informal settlements.[1] These may fall outside the purview of recruitment efforts by universities, and where young people may not be encouraged by teachers or care-givers, or see themselves as candidates for a university education. Where they do hold such aspirations they may have no realistic way of pursuing their ambitions without falling prey to what Berlant (2006) calls 'cruel optimism'. Yet access to HE is one of the significant ways in which young people's capabilities and valued actions (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000) – their well-being – can be enabled, enhanced and, importantly, secured so that vulnerability is reduced or removed over the longer term. HE offers both instrumental economic opportunities, and also broader goods of personal development and social participation. This paper therefore outlines a capability enhancement approach to access, incorporating both valued achievements and the conditions under which vulnerable young people make their choices about what makes a good life for them.

Specifically, we operationalise the ideas in a case study of young people in Orange Farm, asking what knowledge they have regarding HE; and, what their aspirations are for their futures. The paper innovatively opens up research space to consider the lives of marginalised young people in access debates and policy. We outline the key features of the capabilities approach, sketch the methodology and methods we adopted in the case study, explain what we found in our data, and the implications. Although ours is a small-scale study we think it has wider significance for how it demonstrates that operationalising capabilities reveals depths of disadvantage in actual lives, not captured in aggregate access

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[1] Informal settlements are broadly speaking shanty towns with homes constructed from whatever materials are to hand, housing the urban poor.

figures or debates which focus only on student success at university (CHE, 2013). There is much less attention on who gets to choose and to access higher education, and who does not.

2. Context

Established in 1988, Orange Farm is now one of the most populous informal settlements in South Africa, as well as one of Johannesburg's most geographically isolated communities (City of Johannesburg, 2011). Its first inhabitants were laid-off farm workers, and despite little development in the area, the settlement has attracted many homeless people from nearby townships, parts of the Free State and other provinces as far away as the Eastern Cape. Current estimates place the population at over 1.3 million people (Onyango, 2010). Orange Farm faces numerous challenges such as poverty; high unemployment, low literacy levels; a lack of access to justice and health facilities; a lack of consultation between the local government and the community members; alcohol-related violence; and crime (Foundation for Human Rights, 2013). In Orange Farm, 29% of households rely solely on government grants, 50% of the households do some income-related work (informal, self-employment and formal), and not many residents have formal training (Public Citizen, 2004: 10). Yet, despite the challenges, there has been significant development in Orange Farm recently (Habitat for Humanity, 2013), including a new library, some paved roads, an information centre and a community centre for different purposes. However, because of general poverty, few people proceed to HE in Orange Farm. A study published in 2010 (Onyango, 2010) showed that only 115 students in Orange Farm qualified to enter University, and only 51 had a B.A. degree. The latter are likely to be working as social workers or teachers.

However, while the context of Orange Farm does not look promising for accessing higher education, this is not reason enough to justify excluding people living in difficult circumstances, or to accept unproblematically that higher education will always reproduce existing social inequalities, writing off large numbers of individual lives. Rather we need conceptual and empirical approaches to education and development that will take us in the direction of understanding and action.

3. Capabilities

Vaughan and Walker (2012) state that theorising the capabilities approach in relation to education has, among other things, "clarified the role of education in human flourishing" (2012: 495) as well as the role of public policy in expanding individual capabilities in diverse social contexts (498). Reinforcing this view, Biggeri and Santi (2012) believe that the inclusion of young people in decision making could be significant in fostering their wellbeing, agency and participation. Hence there is a need to re-think education, which Vaughan and Walker (2012) conceptualise as a transformative space to enable individuals to learn and develop their values and goals, and hence as an instrumental capability that shapes other capabilities.

The methodology therefore draws on the CA as a normative development framework concerned with the freedoms individuals have to achieve beings and doings they have reason to value, that is their well-being (Sen, 1999a; Nussbaum, 2000), offering a justice-based lens for education in which real lives and social structures are taken into account. Sen (1999b) argues that policies should focus on what people are able to be and to do (for example having information about post-school choices, or having encouraging friends). Moreover, while higher education budget figures and statistics are helpful in painting the broad picture of higher education access numbers, these cannot tell us much about actual lives or alert us to who is left out and why, and what individual advantage is possible for each person. As Nussbaum explains:

> We ask not only about the person's satisfaction with what she does, but about what she does, and what she is in a position to do (what her opportunities and liberties are). And we ask not just about the resources that are sitting around, but about how those do or do not go to work, enabling [a university student] to function in a fully human way. (2000: 71)

Capabilities are the freedoms each person has to choose and exercise a plurality of ways of beings and doings they have reason to value. Thus the functioning may be critical thinking, and the real opportunity for critical thinking is the corresponding capability. The opportunity overall to choose a good life is then constituted of many different functionings. Functioning achievements (beings and doings) indicate what a person manages to do or to be in comparison with others. What Sen (1999a) calls 'conversion factors' will vary from person to person based on their biographies, and social and environmental conditions; these alert us to social conditions and constraints on each person. For example, a young person from an informal settlement may need more resources to convert their aspirations into actual access to a university compared to someone from a middle class and relatively well-off background. Having the freedom to choose functionings from an individual's capabilities set is also intrinsically valuable. A young person with a wide capability set of values, knowledge, and skills is empowered to do more with their life, to have more well-being.

In the context of education the evaluative focus needs to include both the capability set of the alternatives open (real opportunities) and possibilities to realise functionings (that is what they are actually able to be and do) (Sen, 1999a). The internal capability (Nussbaum, 2000) for higher education without the external conditions that enable the exercise of the relevant functionings would result in dashed hopes and broken aspirations. Moreover in the case of young people we need to keep in mind future freedoms which will be shaped by the choices available to them in the present; wide and informed choices now are more likely to shape future freedoms and good lives.

The approach thus focuses on people's multi-dimensional well-being, but also on the social arrangements which enable or constrain well-being, put another way, the conditions under which choices are made, as well as the actual choices made. For example, who chooses to go to university and who does not, does not tell us about the underlying conditions of choice (Hart, 2009). We need to know the social determinants of relevant capabilities, such as being able to choose a university education (Robeyns, 2005).

3.1. CA and education

The literature on the capability approach has expanded significantly in recent years, but with less attention to higher education in developing countries. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) examine education theoretically and empirically, including attention to basic education, gender and adult education but with no specific focus on universities or access. Walker (2006) looks at higher education pedagogies and includes attention to widening participation for working class students, but in a UK context. Wilson-Strydom (2015) examines access to university for students from diverse schools in the Bloemfontein region of the Free State in South Africa and tracks students through their first year of study. Nonetheless, her sample does not include students from informal settlements. Unterhalter (2003) has applied the CA to gender justice in education where she asserts that schooling may not necessitate an enhancement of capabilities and freedom. The relevance for our study is understanding that education in certain