



Quality teaching in rural Sub-Saharan Africa: Different perspectives, values and capabilities



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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade vast sums have been invested in Sub-Saharan Africa to enhance teacher quality. Yet improvements in quality – when interpreted as enhanced pupil attainment – are disappointing. This paper shows how Amartya Sen's capability approach can help answer the call for a renewed focus on, and reconceptualisation of, quality teaching by considering the pursuit of valued goals in teachers' work.

It is increasingly understood that what teachers do, matters. Drawing on a recently completed PhD, this paper examines the professional capabilities of two women teachers from a rural Nigerian school. These teachers provide a focus for exploring the relationship between official representations of teachers' work and the professional lives teachers create and experience. Official perspectives were extrapolated from policy documents around teachers' work, teachers' perspectives were drawn from an ethnography of rural teachers' lives carried out between 2007 and 2011. A list of professional capabilities was developed from each perspective to represent what was valued in teachers' work, and the study developed an analytical framework for evaluating teachers' professional capability from each perspective.

This paper draws out some highlights of this analysis and proposes a new cyclical model of professional capability for quality teaching.

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1. Introduction

Gadanan school, in a village in northern Nigeria, is typical in terms of infrastructure (dilapidated), resources (insufficient) and results (poor). There are not enough classrooms and pupils sit four or five to a desk designed for two, or on the floor. Local education officials are concerned about the quality of education at Gadanan, and the quality of teaching. The teachers at Gadanan, however, while frustrated by the circumstances in which they work, see themselves as motivated and good at their job. This paper explores this difference in opinion.

It is increasingly acknowledged across academic and policy literature that what teachers do matters, and matters more in low income countries (Dembélé and Lefoka, 2007; UNESCO, 2014). Yet what teachers do is under-recognised in existing education quality metrics which primarily assess pupil achievement (UNESCO, 2005). Teacher quality tends to be conceptualised through teacher qualification, length of service and vaguely defined attributions of wide-spread demotivation (Bennell and Akyeampong, 2007; UNESCO,

2009; VSO, 2002). This paper, which focuses on women teachers in rural Sub-Saharan Africa presents alternative ways of thinking about education quality and good teaching. It uses contemporary ideas around Amartya Sen's capability approach (1999) to draw out what is valued and what is possible in teachers' work. Developed as an alternative to utility-focused evaluations of human development, the capability approach is rooted in ideas around social justice and seeks to understand not what people have, but what they are able to achieve. A person's capability refers to the extent to which they can pursue objectives (or capabilities) that they have reason to value. At its heart, the capability approach begins with the question 'what are people able to do and be?' (Nussbaum, 2011). This study began with the question 'what are women teachers able to do and be in some of the most under-served schools in the world?'

This paper proposes an exploratory definition of quality teaching: teachers' achievement of valued professional capabilities. The wider study (Buckler, 2012, 2015) analysed the professional capabilities of seven teachers in five countries, but this paper focuses on just two, Habibah and Agnes who teach at Gadanan school in Nigeria. First the paper explores what is valued in teachers' work from a policy perspective as well as a teacher perspective. It then evaluates Habibah and Agnes' professional

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capability – i.e. the extent to which they are able to pursue and achieve what is valued in their work. Finally, it addresses a criticism of the linear nature of existing capability models and shows how the teachers' experiences point towards a new, cyclical model of professional capability and quality teaching.

2. Quality: conceptualisations and capabilities

In the first phase of Education for All (EFA), international organisations and national governments focused primarily on provision (for example building schools) and access (the removal or subsidisation of school-fees). Primary enrolment in Sub-Saharan Africa increased five times faster between 1990 and 2005 than between 1975 and 1990 (UNESCO, 2010). Concerns about the quality of education (and the quality of teachers and teaching) began to emerge as a decline in pupil achievement in Literacy, Numeracy and Science was reported in expanding education systems. In 2000, participants at the World Education Forum in Senegal adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, reaffirming their commitment to achieving EFA by 2015. The framework drew attention to the role of teachers and described them as '...essential players in promoting quality education' (UNESCO, 2000: paragraph 69).

Throughout the 2000s, the focus on education quality and teaching gained momentum, galvanised by UNESCO's 2005 EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR): 'The Quality Imperative'. In the same year UNESCO launched TTISSA (Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa) and reoriented the focus of UNESCO-IICBA (International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa) towards capacity building in teacher education. Nationally, governments have raised minimum qualifications for teaching, expanded provision for in-service teacher education, redesigned curricula and shifted expectations of pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.

But attempts to define and measure quality are ongoing. Alexander (2008) criticises 'quality indicators' from a range of high-profile, international education organisations and finds that at best they leave 'important methodological questions unanswered' (p. vii) and, at worst, are so vague they 'lose all remnants of credibility' (p. 5). The 2005 GMR emphasised that quality must be seen in the light of how societies define and understand the purpose of education. Yet it also both explicitly and implicitly highlights improved pupil attainment on standardised tests as the goal of improving teacher quality.

An ambiguous conceptualisation of quality teaching was also found to be evident in a study of policy documents and official education literature from five Sub-Saharan African countries (Buckler, 2012, 2015). Nigeria's *National Education Report* (2008), for example, cites the findings of a national sector analysis in which teacher quality was given a score of 1 out of 5, but does not explain how quality was interpreted or measured. This analysis found that quality teaching in this literature is most often defined as the inverse of 'poor teacher quality' – which is conceptualised around issues of insufficient qualification, absenteeism, low status and low motivation. Here too, what teachers do in classrooms – how they interact with and teach their pupils – is missing from the quality debate (see also Alexander, 2014).

This article proposes an exploratory reconceptualisation of quality teaching through a move away from the imprecise language of quality and towards the language of values. First, because it is difficult to pursue the goal (or goals) of quality teaching when policy and practitioner literature alike offer inconsistent interpretations of what this is. Secondly, because while it is implied that the primary outcome of good quality teaching is increased pupil attainment, policy, practitioner and academic literature – as well as common sense – suggest that pupil

attainment is not all that is valued. It is clear that teachers are expected to pursue and facilitate other valued goals, to occupy a range of roles and embody specific types of behaviour. The pursuit of valued goals is at the heart of the capability approach. The next section briefly introduces this approach and explores its potential to offer new insights into the quality teaching debate.

2.1. The capability approach

The capability approach was conceived by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen as an alternative method of measuring poverty. It focuses on the freedom – or capability – people have to achieve specific 'functionings', which are defined as 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen, 1999:75). Resources are important, but as 'detached objects of convenience' (Sen, 2009:233) – they are not the 'end' of human development, rather they are a means to this end and can be used in different ways to achieve various functionings. The ways in which resources can be used depends on a person's agency which Sen defines as 'the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value' (Sen, 1999:19) (see Fig. 1).

A person's capability can be evaluated in four distinct but related 'concepts of advantage': well-being freedom (the opportunity to achieve well-being); well-being achievement (the extent that well-being has been achieved); agency freedom (the opportunity to pursue and bring about the goals one values) and; agency achievement (the extent to which these goals have been achieved). Concepts of advantage can be selected to structure an evaluation of capability, depending on the type of valued goals under scrutiny (Sen, 2009:287).

Articulating what is valued, however, can be challenging: people's subjective choices are shaped and informed by the society they live in (Nussbaum, 2000). In capability literature this subjectivity is referred to as 'adaptive preferences' (Sen, 1985, 1992) and is primarily discussed in relation to people living in adverse situations, or contexts with strictly enforced gender norms, who may adjust their values in the direction of realistic possibilities. Once they have adjusted these values their agency and well-being may be diminished even if they do not realise it (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007; Qizilbash, 1997). This has obvious implications for empirical evaluations of capability, and a process of 'self-reflection and open debate' (Unterhalter, 2007:100) is encouraged to critically engage with factors that shape people's values and influence the choices that are made from available freedoms.

The capability approach has traditionally been used to frame issues of human welfare (focusing on the pursuit of functionings that are valued for personal well-being). Over the past decade it has increasingly been used in education studies in both high- and low-income countries (Smith and Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2003; Walker, 2006; Watts and Bridges, 2006), although primarily to evaluate the extent to which education expands or restricts the capabilities of students. Others, for example, Cin and Walker, 2013; Tao, 2009, 2012) have used the capability approach to develop the insights from studies of teacher identity and teacher welfare in impoverished school environments (e.g. Akyeampong and Stephens, 2000; Barrett, 2008; Jessop and Penny, 1998) to



Fig. 1. Simplified model of the capability approach. Adapted from Robeyns (2005a).

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