Human capabilities, education and ‘doing the public good’: towards a capability-based theory of social justice in education

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‘And be said, “Now this schoolroom is a nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number 20, isn't this a prosperous nation, and ain't you in a thriving state?”'

‘What did you say?’ asked Louisa.

‘Miss Louisa, I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all,’ said Sissy, wiping her eyes.

‘That was a great mistake of yours,’ observed Louisa. (Charles Dickens Hard Times)

In order to situate this paper in the light of the conference theme, I start by outlining three ideas, or claims, which are central to the argument in this paper. The overall project is to develop a capability-based account of social justice in education, and this paper is a contribution to that wider project.

The first step is to outline core ideas in the capability approach, given that this is to be the basis of my attempt to theorise equality and justice in education. I argue for Amartya Sen’s (1992, 1999, Dreze and Sen, 1995) capability approach as the basis for theorising social justice, applied to the specificity of education. Following Sen, no claim is made for the capability approach as a complete theory of social justice in education; it may be that additional theories are needed to complement the approach (Unterhalter, 2003, Robeyns, 2004). Sen (1992) identifies education as one of 'a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well being' (p.44). But ‘education’ is underspecified and undertheorised in the capability approach, either being stated as a capability good or being broadly equated with literacy, knowledge or information. Secondly, I emphasise that social justice in education is both economic and cultural, and that the capability approach ‘does the public good’ in being able to encompass both redistribution and recognition (Robeyns, 2003a). Thirdly, doing the public good, then, ought to address how education can contribute to the well being of society as a whole, including both economic development and social equity (Jonathan, 2001). But the idea of education as a public good is also open to diverse interpretations. For example, one version might view the public good as individual competition and a hierarchy of advantage. Another version might argue for the fair distribution of education as/for social equity. Thus we need to keep in mind ‘which public’ and whose’ good’ in education. The paper then proceeds to consider how to apply the capability approach in education by selecting a list of education capabilities, drawing on a situated South African example. This is a rough attempt at seeing how the capability approach might work in actual lives and experiences, and to deal with education with greater precision.
The capability approach

So what then is the capability approach? Against economic wealth and income as an indicator of a country’s quality of life, and against human capital arguments for judging education only by its success in preparing participants for employment, Sen (1992, 1999) insists on the importance of capabilities to function in making normative evaluations about equality and well being. For Sen, growth as an indicator of quality of life does not help us to understand the barriers in our societies against equity for all. Instead, capabilities offer a rich set of goals for the development of our full human dignity. By this he means what people are actually able to be and do, rather than how much income or other ‘primary social goods’ (Rawls, 1971) they have. Sen (19920 explains that: ‘In the capability-based assessment of justice, individual claims are not to be assessed in terms of the resources or primary goods the persons respectively hold, but by the freedoms they actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value’ (p.81). Thus ‘equality of what?’ is answered as ‘equality of capabilities’.

A capability is a potential functioning; the list of functionings is endless; it might include doings and beings such as being well nourished, having shelter and access to clean water, being mobile, being well-educated, having paid work, being safe, being respected, taking part in discussions with your peers, and so on. The difference between a capability and functioning is like one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome. For example, the capability for mobility and actually moving around, the capability to be literate compared to actually reading, or the capability to be well-educated and actually being a well-educated person. All a person’s capabilities together comprise her capability set, ‘her real or substantive freedom to be and do what she wants’ (Robeyns, 2003b, p.544). For Sen, it is not so much the achieved functionings that matter, as the real opportunities (freedoms) that one has to achieve those functionings. Thus, the notion of capability, ‘is essentially one of freedom – the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead’ (Dreze and Sen, 1995, p.11). Capability ‘represents a person’s freedom to achieve well being’ (Sen, 1992, p. 48), so that ‘acting freely and being able to choose are…directly conducive to well-being’ (1992, p.51). Sen (1992) further stresses the importance of choosing a life one has reason to value, that is a life reflectively chosen.

Central to the capability approach, and key in addressing education are Sen’s concepts of ‘agency freedom’ and ‘wellbeing freedom’. The former ‘is one’s freedom to bring about achievements one values and which one attempts to produce, while the latter is one’s freedom to achieve those things that are constitutive of one’s well being’ (Sen, 1992, p.57). By agency, Sen means ‘someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements are to be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well’ (1999, p.19). Agency is then one’s ability to pursue goals that one values and that are important for the life an individual wishes to lead, and agency and well being are deeply connected. Because agency is also central to Sen’s ideas of freedom to make choices, a lack of agency or a constrained agency equates to disadvantage – if an individual (or group, see Robeyns, 2003) faces barriers to genuine choice and life of reflective choice. If education’s contribution to living a fully human life is anything it then follows that education ought to contribute to agency freedom and agency wellbeing. We must then assess education interventions according to the effects on things people value, and have reason to value, in other words we need to ask how education contributes to human capabilities. Moreover, education is understood here to be a capability in itself, and education is also understood to be made up of a number of separate but intersecting and overlapping constitutive capabilities.

We further need to keep in mind Nussbaum’s (2000) point that if we aim to develop adult capabilities, this will likely mean not only capability but also functioning in children in order to produce a mature adult capability. The capabilities that adults enjoy are then deeply conditional on their experiences as children (Sen, 1999). Sen argument emphasises not only the freedom a child may have in the present, but also the freedom they will have in the future. Thus, says Saito, ‘when dealing with children, it is the freedom they will have in the future rather than the present
that should be considered’ (Saito, 2003, p.26). If a child refuses, or is denied or restricted in his or her access to the goods of education, this will in return reduce opportunities in adult life and restrict future individual freedom and agency. Lifelong education then begins with the very young child, and children are key to a better future. But this is not, of course, to deny children freedom and the exercise of agency in the present, but this will be in the context of support from adults and society. I further element of Sen’s capability approach should be borne in mind. It is concerned with the capabilities of each and every individual. Importantly, Sen’s conceptualisation is not to be confused with the neoliberal advocates of individualism and individual choice who dominate current education policy making. The crucial difference is that the capability approach is ethically individualistic; neoliberalism by contrast is ontologically individualist (Robeyns, 2003b).

Sen integrates securing and expanding intrapersonal and interpersonal freedoms (individual agency and social arrangements). We should not, he and Dreze (1995) argue, view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms. Crucially, functionings depend crucially on individual circumstances, the relations a person has with others, and social conditions and contexts within which potential options (freedom) can be achieved. Individual freedoms, as Sen points out, depend also on social and economic arrangements (e.g. education, health care), and on political and civil rights. Individual functionings will be inflected by a person’s relative advantages in society and enhanced by enabling public and policy environments, for example a gender equity policy in schools. As Sen explains, it would be a mistake to think of achievements only in terms of active choice by oneself:

What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people’s freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities. (Sen, 1999, p.5)

Viewing development as the expansion of freedoms, Sen argues, ‘directs attention to the ends that make development important’ (1999, p.1), that is, its intrinsic importance. In this way individual development becomes interwoven with wider issues around redistribution and equality in that development ‘requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom’ (1999, p.1)(e.g. poverty, social deprivation, neglect of public services). For example in contexts of poverty or political dictatorship, it is hard to argue that people have the substantive freedom to develop real alternatives and choices in shaping their lives. In situations of relative material disadvantage, any exclusion on a person’s freedom to participate in the social political and economic life of her community restricts that person’s capability set, for example under conditions of gender oppression which restrict the lives girls and women might freely chose to lead. Individual development, social development and freedom are all interwoven. As Sen explains, development is ‘a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’ (1999, p.1). Freedom and development are therefore dialectically and fundamentally related. As we need to identify sources of unfreedom in society, so we need to identify and change practices of unfreedom in schools.

The matter of resources enters the picture in that access to resources enables functionings in and through education. We might ask the important question: if our intention was to promote capabilities in education, how would we deploy our available financial resources? These resources might include school buildings, books, computers, the teacher-pupil ratio, class size and so on. We might think of these, says Robeyns (2004), as capability inputs. At issue is the relationship, however, between these resources and the ability of each individual to convert the resources available to her into valued capabilities. Sen incorporates a notion of ‘the basic heterogeneity of human beings’, such that human diversity is central to and explicit in his approach to equality, not an add-on factor. He argues that, ‘Human diversity is no secondary complication to be ignored, or to be introduced later on; it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality’ (Sen, 1992, p.xi). People will differ along (a) a personal/axis (e.g. gender, age, etc.); (b) along an intersecting external or environmental axis (wealth, climate, etc.); and, (c) along an inter-individual or social axis
which will generate differences in people’s ability to convert resources into valued outcomes. Thus we cannot take boy’s lives, or the lives of able-bodied people, or the lives of white people as the norm for our evaluations. Inequalities of gender, race and disability are included in and fundamental to the space of functionings and capabilities. Such differences affect our ability to *convert* the resources we have into capabilities to function. For example a disabled child with the same resources and opportunities as an able-bodied child will nonetheless find it more difficult to convert these resources and opportunities into capabilities (the capability for mobility for someone who cannot walk, the capability for enjoying literature for someone who is blind, and so on). We could say something similar for boys’ and girls’ capability development, for example in a context where girls numeracy is not valued, or where girls are not allowed out in public on their own, or where girls as in South African schools are subject to violence and harassment, the social conversion factor would be a source of misrecognition. Thus resources (or we might say processes of redistribution) are only a part of the story; what matters is the opportunities each person has to convert their bundle of resources into valued doings and beings. It is not that Sen does not think resources matter; rather it is his concern with human diversity and its effects for the conversion of resources. Unequal resources are an in issue, and redistribution is necessary but not sufficient for equality of capabilities. Robeyns therefore argues in respect of gender equality that:

> The cultural and non-material social constraints on choice that influence which options a person will choose from her capability set, must also be critically examined. In the capability approach, preference formation, socialization, subtle forms of discrimination, and the impact of social and moral norms are not taken for granted or assumed away but analyzed upfront. (2003a, p.547)

Thus matters of resources (distribution) and recognition (how resources are converted) are integrated. Ingrid Robeyns has developed a convincing counter critique of Nancy Fraser’s criticism that theories of distributive justice ignore issues of the recognition of difference, or the recognitional effects of redistributive measures. For example says Robeyns a basic income for women would be necessary but not sufficient to address traditional gendered divisions of labour. It would be redistributive without being recognitional. By contrast, argues Robeyns, the capability approach integrates both. Key to this argument is Sen’s point that ‘equalizing ownership of resources [redistribution]…need not equalize the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons, since there can be significant variations in the conversion [cultural, social, recognitional] of resources and primary goods into freedoms’ (1992, p.33). At issue for education is that economic matters are inseparable from matters of culture and society. Thus it appears that the capability approach is able to accommodate both redistribution and recognition in so far as it addresses both economic inequalities and cultural injustices (Robeyns 2003a), or put another way, both key elements of doing the public good as I argue below.

This resonates further with the problem of assessing subjective well being. Nussbaum (2000) points to the difficulty with ‘adapted preferences’. As she explains, our subjective preferences and choices are shaped and informed or deformed by society and public policy. Unequal social and political circumstances (both in matters of redistribution and recognition) lead to unequal chances and unequal capacities to choose. These external (material as well as cultural) circumstances ‘affect the inner lives of people: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p.31) People adapt their preferences and subjective wellbeing or choices according to what they think is possible for them, and formal education plays its part in this identity formation. Therefore we need to be circumspect in how we interpret people’s choices, which they happen to express at some moment in time. Nussbaum reminds us to keep in mind the importance of aiming for ideal contextual conditions in which people are ‘respected as equals, and free from intimidation, and able to learn about the world, and secure against desperate want’ (2000, p.152).

The capability approach goes beyond a human rights discourse in its emphasis on agency and well being achievement, demanding that we go beyond a rights to ensure people’s capabilities to function in the space of rights. For example not just the right to political participation, but also
the capability to function as a participant in a democratic society. The right to education is of course important and in some societies hard won by girls and women, but we need also to ask about the capabilities of girls and women to access, participate and succeed in education, in other words to ask both about their right to education and their capability to be educated and to lead a life they have reason to value (see Sen 1992, 1999; Dreze and Sen 1995; Nussbaum, 2003a). Bernstein (2000, p.6) in linking education, democracy and pedagogic rights argues for three interrelated rights, the right to individual enhancement involving ‘the right to the means of critical understanding and new possibilities’ as the condition for confidence, without which, he argues, it is difficult to act. The second right, ‘is the right to be included, socially, intellectually, culturally and personally’ (p.7). The third is the right to participate and shape outcomes. Again, this pedagogic version of rights requires a matching capability if they are to be secured. For the purposes of this conference, at issue are the opportunity capability (capability to be educated) and process capability (capability to participate in education) of education and how their development point to personal and interpersonal advantage, and to doing the public good as both a matter of personal development and a social concern.

**Education and doing the public good**

This paper takes education as a public good to involve both the capability (by which I mean, following Sen, freedom) to participate in education, and the promotion of capabilities through education (Vaughan, 2004). The paper assumes that education matters in that it is of personal benefit to individuals, enabling them to lead richer lives, and that it is of benefit to society as whole; it is then both a private and public good, or as Jonathan (2001) suggests, a ‘social’ good at the nexus of individual and community benefit. Getting education is a matter of social justice. Moreover, schooling is a site for state intervention and public policy. As Brighouse (2000, p.120) importantly reminds us, ‘equal schooling is something that government may and can aim at’. Put another way, diverse learners should have access to equivalent learning opportunities (OECD, 2004). It further takes up Sen’s core question, ‘Equality of what?’ and his argument that the choice of the evaluative space in which to assess equality determines what equality we prioritise. Narayan and Petesch’s (2002, p.126) comprehensive study of the voices of 60,000 poor men and women from 50 countries states, without qualification, that the denial of education (schooling) ‘perpetuates cycles of exclusion, disempowerment and marginalization’. In Biggeri et al’s (2004) study of the views of 200 children aged 14-17 years at the Children’s World Congress on Child Labour in May 2004, 88.5% of the children identified the opportunity for education’ as important in their lives. Basic education leading to functional literacy and numeracy expands people’s choices; it provides a basis for future opportunities. People are generally better off having had access to basic education. Above all, in trying to operationalise the capability approach in actual lives we need to assess education [schooling] according to ‘its effects on things people value and have reason to value’ (Alkire, 2004, p.3; Sen, 1992). Put another way, we need information or evidence on how resources for education are ‘at work in the context of human functioning’ (Nussbaum, 2001, p.440).

Sen argues that education is an enabling factor in the expansion of freedom for a number of reasons. Like human capital approaches, Sen recognises that education has an instrumental role for each person in helping him or her to do or achieve many things such as getting a job and being able to take up economic opportunities. Education is then for something else, for some other good. But in contrast to human capital approaches to education in which the benefit of education is directly judged for its effect on employability, Dreze and Sen argue that the ‘bettering of a human life does not have to be justified by showing that a person with a better life is also a better producer’ (1995, p.184). Education is of intrinsic importance in that being educated is a valuable achievement in itself, for its own sake. Education is in itself a basic capability which affects the development and expansion of other capabilities. Having the opportunity for education and the development of an education capability expands human freedoms. Not having education harms human development and having a full life. It fulfils an instrumental social role in that greater literacy and basic education fosters public debate and dialogue about social and political arrangements.
has an instrumental process role by expanding the people one comes into contact with, broadening our horizons. Finally, it has an empowering and distributive role in facilitating the ability of the disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded to organise politically. It has redistributive effects between social groups, households and within families where better education is shown to reduce gender inequality. Overall, education contributes to interpersonal effects where people are able to use the benefits of education to help others and hence contribute to the social good and democratic freedoms. (1) In short, ‘education’ is an unqualified good for human capability expansion and human freedom.

Sen therefore promotes the notion of autonomous persons and sees human well being as founded in the capability to critically reflect and make worthwhile life choices from the alternatives available to the individual person. The point is that capability, he would argue, equips us to determine our own major goals in life and we should not prescribe for adults how they should live. Nussbaum (2000) favours the Rawlsian idea of an ‘overlapping consensus’ among people who hold a plurality of conceptions of the good life. She argues that her list of central human capabilities is grounded in a view of ‘truly human functioning’ (p.76) but does not seek to prescribe ‘any particular metaphysical view of the world, any particular comprehensive ethical or religious view, or even any particular view of the person or human nature’ (p.76). (2) They are both thus broadly anti-perfectionist, that is they do not prescribe a specific conception of the good.

From a similarly politically liberal perspective, autonomy, argues Brighouse (2000), should be a fundamental value in the design of educational policy; ‘all children should have realistic opportunity to become autonomous adults’ (p.65), because autonomy ‘enhances dramatically the ability of individuals to identify and live lives that are worth living’ (p.88). Social justice ‘requires that each individual have significant opportunities to live a life which is good’ (p.68). It then also follows that children need to develop a sense of what it means to live well, to compare different ways of life, and to choose a good life for themselves. This in turn involves fostering the capability for critical reflection on one’s own goals and values as ‘an essential part of living well’ (p.67). Children should, argues Brighouse, learn how to access truth, weigh up evidence, investigate and think about their decisions and so learn a ‘critical attention’ to the options available to them. However, Brighouse is careful to distinguish between an autonomy-facilitating and an autonomy-promoting education:

The argument claims that equipping people with the skills needed rationally to reflect on alternative choices about how to live is a crucial component of providing them with substantive freedom and real opportunities, by enabling them to make better rather than worse choices about how to live their lives. The [autonomy-facilitating] education does not try to ensure students employ autonomy in their lives, any more than Latin classes are aimed at ensuring that students employ Latin in their lives. Rather it enables them to live autonomously should they wish to. (2000, p.80)

In other words, he too leaves open for adults to make their own choices. This notion is similar to Nussbaum’s (2000) human capability of ‘practical reason’, which she describes as ‘being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life’ (p.78). But Nussbaum (2003b) explains that she does not use the word ‘autonomy’ because of her emphasis on the distinction between the capability for practical reason and functioning autonomously. She does insist that in the interests of democracy and tolerance in society, children ‘not be held hostage to a single conception [of the good life]’ (2003b, p.42) but that they are exposed to diverse possible ways of living. Her concern is that they should have the capability to critically reflect and plan, and if they so choose to opt for a non-autonomous life in which this capability will not be exercised (functioning), for example, if a life in a traditional religious community is chosen. She argues that the state has no business telling adults ‘that they are not leading worthwhile lives’. Thus adults might choose to live non-autonomously. Nussbaum is therefore clear ‘that we shoot for capabilities, and those alone [i.e. not for functionings]. Citizens must be left free to determine their own course after that’ (2000, p.87). Moreover, we might also argue that we cannot claim to want to foster autonomy in education on the one hand, and then
say what kind of life pupils and students must then choose on the other. This is helpfully illustrated by turning to Hannah Arendt (1977) who argues that education should not attempt to predict the needs of the future and to make education ‘relevant’ to the perspectives of government and employers. Instead Arendt is concerned to emphasise the unpredictability of the future and the possibilities of change, renewal and a better life through human agency coupled to educational processes in which no one ‘strikes from their [students] hands their chance of undertaking something new, something foreseen by no one’ (1977, p.177). As Arendt explains: ‘The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right [of the world] remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured’ (1977, p.192).

Now, Nussbaum has in mind adult choice; she is clear that in the case of children we require that they remain in compulsory education (schooling) until they have developed the capabilities that are important in enabling them to have genuine and valued choices, for example to exit from a traditional community. She states therefore that ‘education in critical thinking and debate is a compelling state interest’, and that children taught to develop (learn) these capabilities in debating complex and controversial social and moral issues ‘can always reject the teaching later’ (2003b, p.42). She has pointed out with respect to children, we might need to promote a relevant capability ‘by requiring the functioning that nourishes it’ (2000, p.91). In other words functioning is required for further development of a capability. She gives the example of requiring children, especially girls, to spend time in play, story-telling and art activities as a way to promote the general capability of ‘play’ for girls and the women they will become. In other words they need to do it (function) in order to develop the mature capability. Nussbaum suggests that ‘the more crucial a function is to attaining and maintaining other capabilities, the more entitled we may be to promote actual functioning in some cases, within limits set by an appropriate respect for citizen’s choices’ (2000, p.92) Thus, with regard to the education capability of practical reason (autonomy) we might argue that it is crucial for children to practise critical thinking and reflection, and for us to evaluate their functioning in these areas in order that they might develop this capability through education. To take further examples. We might argue with regard to life in schools that we need to enable children’s functioning as respectful and compassionate young persons so that they develop the mature capability. We need information on what knowledge children have acquired and which analytical and conceptual tools (their functioning) so that we might be assured that they are developing the capability of knowledge. We need to provide children and young people with opportunities for their voices to actually function, for their aspirations to be tested, for their emotional and imaginative functioning. In short, we need information to tell or show us that children are engaging in actions and activities that show they are functioning as, and becoming ‘educated’ persons so that they will have this as a mature capability in adulthood.

We similarly need information to tell us when an absence of functioning means absence of capability. This is a matter of ethical concern. For example if a boy harasses or assaults a girl at school we can argue that he lacks the capability of affiliation, and being assaulted the girl lacks the opportunity for the capability of bodily integrity. There is then a somewhat complicated articulation of capability, functioning, action and direct information for judgements in school about how well we are doing educationally. At issue, as Nussbaum points out, is when ‘requiring functioning is the only way to ensure the presence of a capability’ (2000, p.93). Robeyns (2003b) adds a further dimension to the argument when she considers group inequalities (in her case gender inequalities). She argues that ‘inequality in achieved functioning implies inequality in capabilities, except if one can give a plausible reason why one group would systematically chose different functionings from the same capability set’ (p.22). This in turn would open out the effects of social structures educational opportunities – if most working class children were doing badly in acquiring high order analytical knowledge, we might wish to raise questions about the effects of social class on children’s functioning achievements.

At issue here, is that education which seeks to do the public good would need to take up both the matter of what capabilities are important and valued in education, and the related importance in
But the specificity of education is still rather more complicated than the broader notion of human development and people's autonomous decisions about the lives they choose to lead. The difficulty in focusing on education lies in whether we advocate some idea of the good, or put another way, the tensions between the process of education and its outcomes. Can we think of justice in education without a notion of the good, or rather what is lacking? (Deneulin, 2004). Ricoeur argues that we cannot conceive of justice without a view on what is lacking (the good):

It is from a complaint that we penetrate the domain of the just and unjust. The sense of injustice is not only more striking, but also more adequate than a sense of justice; because justice is often what is lacking and injustice is what is reigning, and humans have a clearer vision of what is lacking in human relationships than the right way of organizing them. It is the injustice that sets thought in motion. (1991, p.177)

Now, Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1992, 1999) as we have seen, do not prescribe to people what lives they must lead, in other words how they use their capability, or that they must choose this good life rather than that, although they do make the case for everyone signing up to human rights and broadly shared democratic principles such as 'liberty' and 'equality'. For his part, Sen places great store by processes of political participation by the communities affected in decisions about freedom and capability and is vague about the content of freedom beyond seeing it as inherently positive (see Gaspar and Van Staveren 2003, and Nussbaum, 2003a). Yet this arguably still leaves freedom underspecified, so that Gaspar and Van Staveren argue for the contribution also of values like democracy, respect and friendship, while Nussbaum (2003a) points out that not all freedoms are good. The educational issue is arguably how through education we develop the capability to make good judgements, but also what we then take to be 'good' rather than not so good or bad judgement. In turn this requires attention to values in education.

This brings us back full circle to the issue of justice in education and a conception of the good. As Brighouse and Swift (2003) point out, education is not a neutral activity; it always embodies a view about what is good in human life, otherwise it might 'seem vapid, even pointless' (2003, p.367). For this reason, like notions of the public good, it is contested. Education, Brighouse and Swift say, is unavoidably normative and requires 'a clear and defensible conception of social justice' in the content and distribution of educational opportunities. In other words, not all versions of the ‘educational good life’ are equally worthwhile and we might argue that education should inform children and young people about what are thought to be worthwhile alternatives (Winch, 2004). In turn this suggest that in schools a somewhat weaker form of autonomy would operate in education but still within the frame of human capabilities so that what counts as ‘education’ is that process and provision which fosters agency, well being and human flourishing.

This discussion begins to open up, in my view, the contested terrain of how far, if at all, we specify a list of universal, cross-cultural human capabilities, as Nussbaum has done (2000), or adhere to the deliberate vagueness advocated by Sen (1992). We might argue that not all rival conceptions of education contribute to human flourishing, and we might not wish to describe as education, a process which encourages prejudice against a racial group, which tolerates or encourages the sexual harassment of girls, or which treats those with mental disabilities as less than human. While Sen (1992) might leave the capability approach deliberately under-specified, nonetheless he does also say that freedom is intrinsically important to a good society and a good society is then ‘also a society of freedom’ (p.41). Thus education which contributes to unfreedoms (exclusion, marginalization, hatreds or prejudice) would be deeply incompatible with the capability approach in which education is understood as enhancing agency, well being and freedom. But we might also argue that there are different conceptions of education compatible with human flourishing in so far as there is not necessarily one right view of the good life and the good society. The key issues here is to be clear that education enhances humanity, agency and wellbeing by ‘making one’s life richer with the opportunity of reflective choice’ (1992, p.41) and life of ‘genuine choices with serious options’ (p.41). In short what we call ‘education’ should not
diminish lives. What I am approaching here is the notion that some kind of ‘list’ of education capabilities may well be appropriate. Certainly some of the examples I have advanced above begin to suggest a perspective on education which contributes to equality and justice.

At issue here is that the capability approach assumes that education is a good and generally sees this as the same as schooling. In this view education by definition ‘does the public good’. But while human capability might be argued to be coterminous with education, it is not always coterminous with schooling (Unterhalter, 2003). In the capability approach, education is a matter of substantive freedom. Sen, (1999, p.42) writes that individual freedoms are influenced by the social safeguarding of matters such as liberties on the one hand, and on the other the social provision of facilities such as education ‘that are crucial for the formation and use of human capabilities’. But we should not equate education with schooling, although schooling may and indeed should expand the agency and freedom of young people. But schools might be places both of freedom and unfreedom (Unterhalter, 2003). Capabilities can be diminished as well as enhanced, and we need therefore to keep checking how well we are doing in schools and education policy implementation. Indeed, if education is valued by a society as a process of expanding agency and freedom, we would then want to locate this in the space of capabilities and ask further what information we need to judge to what extent education as schooling is indeed working in this way for each and every child. We might also argue that schooling is a primary good and essential for the enjoyment of a decent life and to developing those capabilities to live a valuable life commensurate with general social standards of well being. A lack of schooling, or a lack of good quality schooling is then a disadvantage, and one which might persist throughout a lifetime. For example in Gallacher et al’s (2002) study of mature learners in Scotland, they emphasise the continuing impact of earlier experiences on people’s perceptions of themselves as successful learners. They quote one of their interviewees: ‘I had problems with my level of self esteem connected with my past educational experience. The discouraging thing is really inside me. It is this internal stuff that always comes back and beats me up’ (2002, p.506). A deep sense of failure at school might then reduce the chances of further educational agency and freedom.

I argue that the value of taking up the capability approach, with its foregrounding of human development, agency, wellbeing and freedom, lies in the way it enables us to ask a different set of questions about education. It offers a compelling counterweight to dominant neoliberal human capital interpretations of education as only for economic productivity and employment and asks instead about what education enables us to do and be by fostering our human development and our capabilities. It places capabilities in the ‘space of evaluation so that our evidence for what is to count as ‘justice’ is evidence about capabilities. It leads us to ask: are capabilities distributed fairly? Do some people get more opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities than others? Which capabilities matter most in developing agency and autonomy for educational opportunities and choices? In short, it means taking up the ‘crucial’ importance Sen (1999) allocates to education in the formation and use of human capabilities and the central question: are all children, young people and adults being taught that they are equally human, or not?

**Selecting capabilities for educational equality assessment**

Having argued that the capability approach offers the basis for theorising of equality in education, and setting aside for the moment what other theories are needed to complement it, how might we try to operationalise it in practice? I attempt to do this by considering, in the light of the capability approach, a provisional, situated list of education capabilities, with specific attention to gender equity in contemporary South African schools. This provisional list makes no claim to universality or cross-cultural relevance, as Nussbaum makes for her list. Rather it is presented in the spirit of what Sen (1992) calls ‘pragmatic incompleteness’ which involves sorting out those elements we can do reasonably unambiguously. No conclusive ranking or weighting is attempted in order to avoid ‘the danger of overprecision’ (Sen, 1999, p.48). I follow Robeyns’ (2003b, see pp70-71) five criteria for the selection of capabilities: (i) that it should be explicit, discussed and defended; (ii) that the method should be clear; (iii) that the level of abstraction of
the list should be appropriate; (iv) that the list comprises two stages, an ideal list and pragmatic or non-ideal list; and, (v) the listed capabilities should not be reducible to each other. The list is produced in the first instance by considering the capability approach and the specificity of education. I then consider post-1994 education policy in my situated case of South African schooling and in particular matters of gender equity. This step and the next seek to ground my list in the context and experiences of those whom the list concerns, here South African girls. I therefore seek information stemming from the lives of these girls drawing provisionally on my interviews with 40 black and white girls aged 15 to 16 years. I then engage with other lists of capabilities, searching out those elements which might apply specifically to education to see what overlap exists. The final stage involves debating the list with others.

As explored above, the capability approach attaches great importance to agency, and to genuine reflective choice. We might therefore argue that education in any context should promote agency, and as a key element of this agency that education should facilitate the development of autonomy and empowerment, or what Nussbaum describes as ‘practical reason’. Sen ascribes an instrumental role to education for realising economic opportunities which we might provisionally describe as a capability for paid work. (in formal and informal economic spheres) Sen and Nussbaum attach importance to the relations a person has with others, to the social role of education and generally the capability to be full participant in society, so a capability for social relations is arguably important, such that personal independence and choice is understood to be embedded in social networks of care and support (Gaspar and Van Staveren, 2003, Nussbaum, 2003a). In the context of schooling such social relations might take the form of an institutional culture, supportive teachers, care from and to peers in learning arrangements. Thus we already have three provisional education capabilities: personal autonomy, paid work, and social relations.

a) Capabilities from education policy

If we turn to international policy to situate the South African case more widely, we might keep in mind the Universal Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 on education as a human right which ‘shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace’ (quoted in Alkire, 2004, p.2). Especially for the purposes of this paper, there is also the Millenium Development Goal 3 to ‘promote gender equality and empower women’ (Alkire, 2004, p.2). As a signatory to the UN South Africa is arguably agreeing to support this rights-based approach to public policy. However, as Nussbaum (2003b) reminded us, such rights to education for full human flourishing, including gender equality, ‘are all best thought of as secured to people only when the relevant capabilities to function are present’, and further that ‘we should not grant that the society is just unless the capabilities have been effectively achieved’ (p.37). In other words, human rights, Nussbaum argues, must go beyond notions of ‘negative liberty’ prevalent in neoliberalism. At the same time she also acknowledges the real power of a rights discourse in making claims to justice, for example claims to gender empowerment and equality.

Turning now to the specific context of South Africa in order to extrapolate capabilities from education policy, the post-apartheid 1996 Constitution guarantees to everyone the right to a basic education, including adult basic education and commits the state ‘through reasonable measures’ to make education beyond four basic years available to all (South Africa, 1996, p.14). Schooling is now compulsory for all children for nine years. Education policy envisages an education system which contributes to ‘the full personal development of each student’, and to citizenship for the building of a democratic nation. It includes ‘the promotion of gender equality’ and ‘encouraging independent and critical thought’ (South Africa, 1996, p.4). The Department of Education, charged with implementing government policy, expresses a vision for education as contributing ‘towards improving the quality of life and building a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society’ (DOE, 2003). Although not without its critics (for example, Jansen, 1998, Meerkotter, 1998), curriculum revision for schools has culminated in Curriculum 2005 which is underpinned by
principles of learner agency (‘active learners’, ‘learners take responsibility for their own learning’, ‘learner-centredness’), a thin autonomy (‘critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action’), respect (‘constant affirmation of their worth’) and development (‘what the learner becomes and understands’) (see Meerkotter, 1998, p.59). Curriculum 2005 principles emphasise anti-discrimination, human rights, inclusivity, democracy, common citizenship, nationhood, and the redress of past injustices (Chisholm, 2003). The 1996 Act further identifies a purpose of education as ‘the advancement of knowledge’; policy encourages ‘capacities necessary for reconstruction and development and knowledge and values for citizenship’. The Act further introduced a language policy which replaced the two official languages of apartheid South Africa (English and Afrikaans) with the formal recognition of all 11 languages spoken in South Africa. This translates into a commitment to the right of every child to be taught in the language of his or her choice, but only where this is ‘reasonably practical’ (DOE, 2003), and to a vision of education contributing to ‘cultural development’, given that officially recognizing a language ‘symbolizes respect for the people who speak it, their culture, and their full inclusion in society’ (United Nations, 2004,p.20). Of course notions of ‘cultural recognition’ can be problematic where it encompasses more than language rights and works to support oppressive practices which operate barriers to full justice for girls and women, as Okin (1999) has argued with regard to some versions of multiculturalism, or which encourage them to adapt their subjective preferences to second-class status (Sen, 1992, Nussbaum, 2000). But from a point of view of education policy, what is at issue here is the (albeit qualified ) right of a child to learn in his or her first language or to study that language as a subject in school. In 1996 the DOE also established a Gender Equity Task Team to make policy recommendations on achieving gender equity (Wolpe et al, 1997), and the Department has committed itself to ‘a gender sensitive education system that facilitates the development of a non-sexist society as envisaged in the Constitution’ (DOE, 2004). The Tirisano education plan, adopted in 2000, has as stated policy ‘To promote values, which inculcate respect for girls and women and recognise the right of girls and women to free choice in sexual relations’ (Department of Education, 2000, quoted in Unterhalter 2003, p.16). Additionally, corporal punishment for boys and girls, once widespread in black schools, has been officially banned.

Schools of course do not stand apart from society, and we cannot therefore think about education capabilities outside of thinking about the relationship between education and society, between schools and society. Indeed, Sen himself reminds us to situate the individual in context, paying attention to human diversity, and to consider the social constraints on choice. We need therefore to direct our attention to any sources of unfreedom that might constrain genuine choices and how diverse individuals are affected. For example, violence and harassment of female pupils by their male peers and by teachers continues to be endemic in large numbers of black schools (Unterhalter 2003). As Unterhalter convincingly argues ‘the failures of management in schools with regard to providing a safe environment for education places the assumption of education simply and unproblematically enhancing capabilities in question’ (2003, p.16). School, she insists, then cannot be a place of substantive freedom, nor easily a place of ‘active, empowered capability’. Furthermore, South Africa is estimated to have the largest number of people with HIV in the world; the numbers infected represent nearly one quarter of the population. Of those infected, women comprise approximately 56%, with the single largest group are those aged 15-34 (Unterhalter, 2003). It then follows that while all children have the right to be educated, they do not all have the capability to participate in what we understand to be education, that is a process which enhances agency and well being.

Moreover, while the state’s basic per capita allocation of resources has been redistributed in favour of the poor, significant economic inequalities and a historical legacy of political struggle has left urban black schools in disrepair, low morale, a breakdown of head teacher and teacher authority; irregular attendance by students and often teachers; violence in and around schools; and, rape, drugs and gangsterism at schools (Christie, 1998). Using the benchmark of capability equality things are not going well for many South African students in school, and girls are particularly badly affected. We can argue this with greater confidence because we have begun to formulate a list of education capabilities, however revisable, which define what it is we are
assessing in relation to equality and social justice in education. In other words, we have a conception of what counts from the capability approach – agency, well being, human dignity and freedom – and this counts as much or more for compulsory education as a state responsibility. We might go so far as to argue that all children are not truly able to exercise the capability to participate in education or develop their capabilities for the wider benefits of learning if any one of the minimal constitutive capabilities listed below was absent or not being developed.

The capability to be educated is acknowledged as fundamental in the capability approach and in education policy in South Africa. It is operationalised through nine years of compulsory schooling for all, and a policy commitment to lifelong education. More specifically, the following important capabilities for personal and social development emerge from education policy and social conditions in South Africa as constitutive conditions of the fundamental capability to be educated:

1. Independent and critical thought, critical thinking, reasoning, reflection, learner agency and responsibility for their own learning (a thin personal autonomy)
2. Knowledge for values, citizenship, contribution to economic development
3. Bodily integrity and health, safety at school, no corporal punishment, freedom from sexual harassment and violence, choice in sexual relationships, protection against HIV
4. Respect for self, for others, for other cultures, being treated with dignity. (a form of social relations).

From a resourcing and policy implementation perspective we must review the factors that constrain and enable gender equity, capability equality and agency equality in education. It means that we need to consider, as Robeyns (2004) suggests a range of capability 'inputs' (in education this might include financing, pupil-teacher ratio, teacher qualifications, availability of books and computers, school buildings, curriculum and pedagogy, and so on), together with individual conversion factors. In short, how do we enable girls' capability to choose valued educational and life options free of gendered constraints? This is a demanding approach to evaluating equality in education.

b) Capabilities from girls’ lives and voices

Based on statistics of access and school-leaving (matriculation) examination outcome, girls in South Africa are doing reasonably well. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for 2001 is used to show the level of participation in education, understood as school attendance. In 2001 the total GER for primary and secondary school was 103%, with participation higher in the primary phase at 117% and lower in the secondary phase at 86%. The national GER for females was higher than for males for the secondary phase, but lower for the primary phase (DOE, 2003). According to the Gender Parity Index, defined as the GER for females divided by the GER for males, in 2001 the GPI primary and secondary was 1.00 indicating equal participation by girls and boys. The GPI primary was at 0.95 was lower than the GPI secondary at 1.10 which indicates 10% more girls than boys in secondary school. In the Western Cape specifically, at Grade 10 (the first year after the compulsory phase) there were 36,875 girls in school and 31,246 boys. In 2001 in all provinces more girls wrote thematric examination, but the relative pass rate of boys was slightly higher. The national matriculation rates in 2001 showed a pass rate of 60.1% by girls and 63.6% by boys. In the Western Cape the overall pass rate was 82.7% with 82% of girls passing and 83.5% of boys. Generally boys achieved better results in mathematics (51.4% compared to 42.6% for girls), physical science (71.4% compared to 65.6%) and in geography (76.3% compared to 66.2%). But in Biology (69.1% to 66.3%), Accounting (82.5% to 84.6%) and Business Economics (74.5% to 73.7%) results were similar (Department of Education, 2003). But boys are doing better overall and better, even if by a small margin, in certain subjects.

These figures can do no more than sketch the broadest outline of the participation and success of girls and boys in schooling. If theses statistics were taken as the informational space to address equality of what, there would appear to be no significant gender inequality. But the information does not tell us about factors of class, gender and race in student achievement, nor about the
experiences of girls and boys in and out of schools, nor about the success rates of different kinds of schools. They provide important but only very preliminary information to make judgements about education capabilities. Thus the next section of this paper draws on interviews with 40 girls aged 15-16 years in four Cape Town schools in August 2003 to establish what capabilities these girls value to live the lives they choose. Of the 40 girls, 5 were white, 16 African, and 19 of mixed race, reflecting the demographic make up of Cape Town and the Western Cape, with its large mixed race population. The four schools included an African school (School A) and three former white schools, two in affluent areas (Schools B and C), the third in a lower middle class suburb (School D).

The girls’ socio-economic background was diverse. Some were the daughters of professionals; some had parents who were unemployed, or working in unskilled occupations. Their homes varied from small shacks in squatter communities, to brick built two room township homes with outside bathrooms, to solid comfortable homes in middle class suburbs. Some had access to a computer at home and a room or a quiet place to study. Others shared small homes and rooms with relatives and had little or no private space. One girl from School A did her school work in the bus shelter outside her cramped one room family home in a hostel built originally for migrant workers. In interviewing the 40 girls it was clear that they valued many different dimensions of wellbeing and held diverse views of what for them was the good life, shaped socially and by individual circumstances. All of them valued their families, whose support for their education was important. They valued friendships in and out of school, particularly with girls to whom they confide ‘secrets’ and have close emotional bonds but also with boys, who provide access to how they understand relationships and life. They varied in the importance they attached to religion and spiritual practice, to the careers they hoped to pursue, to their valuing of material wealth, their desire to engage in public service, their desire to marry or not, their involvement in aesthetic activities, their love of nature and animals, their interest in fashion, and their desire to have ‘fun’. Many of them clearly valued having strong healthy bodies and participated actively in varied sporting activities (netball, hockey, swimming, surfing) either at school if the opportunities existed, or outside of school if they did not. Some pursued musical, dance or drama interests and derived great creative, imaginative and emotional pleasure from these. This diversity of views then supports the capability of autonomy, which facilitates reflective choices for diverse ways of life. The question is, then, in what ways education contributes to opportunities for reflective choice. Thus one of the black schools studying at School B said that, ‘If I want to do something many doors are opened, like the guidance teacher to guide us. Like the [township] school my cousin goes to, they don’t have guidance teachers, they don’t have computer rooms, so they wouldn’t know, like a child doesn’t know what she wants to be. Ok she might know what she wants but no-one tells her the right direction and guides her’ (Zola). Thus this school offers more favourable opportunities for black girls to develop their options.

The girls valued independence, and see their schooling as contributing to this. As one said, ‘I like my independence, which I really want to have’ (Megan); Pearl who said ‘I want to know here I’m going’, or Zurina who commented, ‘I want to be independent…do your own thing, like for freedom’. They talked of trying to make their own minds up about life choices, for example, ‘I think that a lot of us, or just teenagers in general, don’t know who they are, they’re influenced by a lot of things a round them. I, on the other hand, I try not to be too influenced by friends!’ (Zubeida). Education plays a key role I gaining independence but also in opening up economic and career opportunities, ‘I have to learn so that I can work and support myself’, said Lumka, while Yasmina said ‘the main thing of going to school is so that you can learn and go study [further] one day’. For all these girls education holds out the promise of an independent life. For the African girls at School A, in particular, it offered independence from male partners, or the choice not to marry. Tozi, for example said that what was important to her was that ‘we are free to do what we really want, to be something you want to be because there is not anyone who is going to force you…in these days if I don’t want to be married, I will stop and say I don’t want to, so I have the right to say I don’t want to do this, I’m going to do this, according to my own needs and wants’. A number of the African girls said that as educated young women with opportunities through their education to participate in the labour market, they were not willing to do all the domestic labour for a husband ‘who has two arms, two legs, two eyes, a mouth and everything’ (Nombulelo). Girls at School A spoke of teacher support for the learning that will then enable them to have life choices: ‘They
want us to learn so that we can be something better in our future. We can have a better future [MW: What do they do that makes you know what’s what they want for you?] They give us full explanations, if there’s like something we don’t understand, at lunch break you can go to him or her and she will explain so that you can understand. So that shows that they [teachers] give us more respect and they want us to get an education’ (Thandi).

In speaking about their futures, many of the girls offered articulate and considered accounts of how they hoped their futures would be, and in every case these plans were imbued with aspirations. Thus one of the girls from School C spoke about her future plans in this way: ‘I want to have a knowledge of law basically, but my undergraduate degree would be politics, philosophy and economics and then I’ll go on to do law degree and then I’ll use that as a platform to go into politics...I’m very opinionated and I want to change things, I want to help people, but on a large scale. If you’re in politics or government you have the means to do things’ (Helen). One of her friends explained: ‘I’ve got my future all lined up. I’m going to Stellenbosch [University] ‘cos I want to go into medicine and the medical department there is just the most fascinating thing. I went to an open day and I learned how to extract DNA from wheat germ, and I thought “wow” so I’m going to do immunology’ (Megan). One of the working class African girls from School A said: ‘I’d like to go further..my dream is to be a business woman..I can be an accountant. I can go to Peninsula Technikon ‘cos my friend is there [MW: Why is that what you want to do?] People only see business men so I want to be a special one, to be a business woman. Women can do it and I will do it’ (Thandi). From School B, Zubeida said: ‘I’ve been through the wanting to be a marine biologist and a journalist. For a while I wanted to be journalist but my cousin’s studying that and it just doesn’t seem so attractive any more. I think I’ll go into something like media studies but I’d prefer to go to a Technikon [polytechnic] than a University.’ The girls at School A expect their futures to be significantly different from those of their mothers’ generation. In all except one case these are girls whose families had made the decision and invested resources to send them to the city from small towns or villages in the Eastern Cape so that they might get a better schooling and have a better future. All except one of them had only been in Cape Town for around three years, either joining mothers or fathers already in Cape Town or going to live with close relatives. Most of their mothers had been or were domestic workers with minimal education, and their fathers unskilled or semi-skilled workers. In only one case was a parent a clerical worker. They see their futures being different, and certainly schooling is a key factor in this. Thus Thandi commented: ‘In the old days, if you were a girl, then boys they can make you their wife and you will have no more education. So now we are living a new life, we feel no-one will tell us what to do, except yourself. In the old days our mothers were forced not to go to school, but to be a wife’. Tozi then added: ‘I’d like to say in these days there are opportunities to do what you really like because in the past our mothers were domestic workers, there was no other kind of work they were doing. They couldn’t go further at school because of money, they were poor. But in this case we have opportunities to go further, our parents try to educate us’.

What emerged from these future plans was the importance of the capability to aspire, which might be seen as commensurable with autonomy and planning a life, but which might also arguably stand as an important education capability in itself, not entirely reducible to autonomy. This is slightly tricky point in that one could argue that the capability of autonomy is developed through aspirations. Or that the capability for paid work is fostered through aspirations for a career. But here I am arguing to list it separately because of its critical importance in I redressing women and girls, or poor people’s, adapted preferences to settle for second or third best, or not to aspire at all. Appadurai (2004), for example, argues strongly for the need to strengthen the capability to aspire, especially among the poor. He suggests that this capacity constitutes a resource for poor people (and women) to contest and alter the conditions of their own welfare. For girls the school should make available new aspirational possibilities.. For example, Yasmina, one of the girls from School B talked about careers for women she had never thought of before, saying: ‘At the Women of the World event yesterday at school, they were showing us a whole lot of women who were successful. Like there was one and she was a scientist and I’ve never actually met a woman that is a scientist and also a civil engineer or a chemical engineer because I’ve always thought that civil engineering has got to do with roads and no woman would want to do that’. What was most striking is the way all the working class girls imagined better lives for themselves than had been possible for their parents. Their positive aspirations say ‘I can be this person and do this sort of job’, and so fracture cycles of adapted
preferences in which girls and women settle for less. It is to produce instead new possibilities. Appadurai argues for an expansion of people’s aspirational maps, what we might call a thick rather than a thin capacity, a flexible horizon of aspirations:

Where these pathways do exist for the poor [girls], they are likely to be more rigid, less supple, and less strategically valuable, not because of any cognitive deficit on the part of the poor but because the capability to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and refutation in regard to the future are limited (and this may well be one way to define poverty), it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively undeveloped. (2004, p.69).

Thus education as a basic capability fosters this important capability of aspiration. Without the opportunities to go to school, and to complete 12 years of school, girls would find it difficult to imagine alternative futures to that of their parents, and harder still to realise those futures in their lives. In a country which for so long denied and diminished the aspirations of the majority of its population, and a country in which femaleness is still less valued than maleness, this is arguably hugely important.

Appadurai links the capacity to aspire to voice, arguing that each accelerates and nurtures the other. And voice also supports the capability of autonomy. The intention again of listing it separately even though it is arguably reducible to autonomy is to underline the specific importance of the capability of voice for girls and women. Indeed, one might argue that women who have the mature capability of autonomy may well still struggle with their assertive voices, as studies of academic women suggest (see for example, Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988; and Walker 1997 for South Africa). Thus we begin to see how the capabilities are interwoven rather than strictly commensurable, and how the absence of one diminishes another. Where education schooling fosters voice, here understood as the capacity to debate, contest, inquire and participate critically, it simultaneously nurtures aspiration. Both of these capacities (capabilities) seem especially important in the context of schooling in South Africa. As Bernstein says, ‘To know whose voice is speaking is the beginning of one’s own voice’ (2000, p.12). Where children might be denied a capability for voice in the home or in society, or where their aspirations might be cramped outside of school, there is then a particular ethical responsibility for the school to challenge exclusion, not to perpetuate it. This is especially important for girls from poor homes, but in a sexist and paternalistic society is arguably important for all girls. It therefore seems as the capability of voice is fundamental to education. Sometimes this can be quite literally the ability to speak out and speak back, as Nombulelo points out, ‘If you know how to talk for yourself, you can change things for yourself.’ She then added that black people had struggled, ‘for freedom, for their own voice to be heard by everybody’. Voice and agency intersect with each other. Yet we also need to bear in mind that there are different voices available to us, and the female voices, as feminists have pointed out, that are accepted and recognised are voices which are pleasing, obedient, docile, supportive and submissive, rather than agentic and assertive. But what girls also need under conditions of masculine power in general, and the specific conditions in South Africa of harassment and violence towards girls and women and HIV/Aids are capable, assertive, and powerful, voices to speak back, to challenge and confront. We see some of this emerging from the girls I interviewed, who are learning to stand up for themselves in school, to speak back to boys who show a lack of respect. Here is one example of one of the girls from School C talking about harassment in school:

We had one boy in grade eight and before I’d always thought if that ever happens to me I’m going to report it and when it did happen to me I was quite shocked and I was sort of, I don’t want to talk about this. ‘Then I thought about it and I was like ‘Hang on, it’s wrong they shouldn’t be doing that’. And I spoke to them and it made me very unpopular with the whole group for a while. I said ‘If you ever touch me again, if I ever hear that you touch any girl again, I’m going to report you,’ cos that’s who I am. I give them respect, I don’t do that to them, so they can just give respect to me and back off. (Gillian)

The capabilities of voice and aspiration are something on which other capabilities can all build. The capability of voice, one’s own and hearing that of others, is also one to be exercised in class.
through the curriculum and pedagogy, rather than a practice of silencing and passivity. Voice
might also find expression in confident participation in learning and in dispositions to learn
which are strengthened by successful participation such that knowledge is then gained. Here is
one example from a girl at School B talking about her enjoyment of English lessons, in this case
a study of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night: ‘English is a difficult subject but it is something that I enjoy doing the
different topics she gives us, even though it’s a lot of work, but its things that you enjoy like drawing and answering
questions and performing the play and reading the book in a different way, not just her [the teacher] reading the
book and us just listening, it’s interesting so that I can learn to speak in front of the class and not be so shy but
also form my own opinion’ (Shameema).

As Appadurai suggests, we need to provide opportunities (in school) to practise these capabilities,
that is opportunities to function. By contrast pedagogies of silencing and passive learning do not
contribute to voice, aspiration, or autonomy. Another aspect of voice is involving students in
valued opportunities to develop their organisational skills. This all the different societies at
School C are organised and run by the students themselves. An hour long lunch break each day
enables societies to meet and run events on range of things such as history, current affairs, film
and so on.

School provides girls with access to subject knowledge which will enable them to make future
career choices, or simply enjoy this knowledge as an intrinsic good. In the South African school
system, pupils choose their six matriculation subjects at the end of year 8. Here are just two
examples of the curriculum and knowledge opportunities that school opens up for these girls:

I chose biology because I really enjoy it, I like learning about the plants and the human body and things like that
and geography because I found it easier, it was easy to catch on, and science because I wanted to be a doctor. But
not anymore but it’s still a good subject to have, it opens doors for you and maths because maths is a really helpful
subject. (Pauline)

I choose drama because I enjoy acting. I just love it. It’s just like, you can be whoever you want to be, whenever you
want to be that person’ (Miriam)

The knowledge gained at school may be intrinsically valued, instrumentally valued (work), or
positionally valued (a better university, expanded career options). Having this knowledge and the
credentials that would not be possible without it, expands opportunities, agency and freedom.

But there is another side to school knowledge. There is the difficulty with knowledge diminishing
capability, where girls construct deficit identities for themselves when they are not succeeding in
a key subject, or doing as well as their friends. Thus Megan at School C commented that all her
friends were finding maths ‘easy’, ‘But then I don’t understand why I can find it so difficult, so I just thought
I was dumb’. There is also the problem where pupils may have to study a subject they resent
deeply, or when a subject they would very much like to study is not available. In the particular
instance cited here this issue is politically and historically shaped. Thus at School B two of the
African girls complained about having to study Afrikaans. Not only did they dislike the
language they felt at a disadvantage to the coloured girls who are all bilingual; they then end up
being unfavourably compared in terms of their ability. Additionally, they then resented the fact
that their own home language, Xhosa, was not even offered as a subject at the school.

School lessons can undermine learning as well as support it. There is the boredom with the ‘same
teachers who just drown you in their words; it’s horrible’ (Joanne), or Zurina complaining ‘some of the
teachers just sit there and talk and talk at us; it’s so boring’, which leads children to exercise their agency
in ways which counter their own best interests. Thus one school (School D) starts the day with a
silent reading period in very classroom. Pupils may bring their own books and can read anything
other than a textbook or comics. But often the pupils just find this boring:

MW Does everybody in the school settle down quietly and read?
Pearl No we don’t read
Sandra We just look at the book
Teachers who leave classes to collapse into chaos so that little effective learning takes place do not enhance capability. The same two girls also talked about their history lessons in particular and the difficulty some teachers have in ‘controlling’ a class: ‘I mean to be honest with you, my history class, I don’t know what I’m doing because it’s now near the end of the year and we’ve got nothing…I don’t think she knows how to teach…we’re already in that phase where we really don’t care anymore because it’s so late in the year’ (Pearl). They further pointed out the gender dynamics of their classrooms in which boys end up getting more attention from teachers and from the girls as well: ‘The girls behave better in class. The boys generally do get more attention because they make a noise so they get attention from us as well. Most of the time we scream at them to keep quiet’ (Sandra).

Achievement, aspiration and voice can be compromised by schools. Two of the African girls at School B felt the teachers sometimes expected too little of them just ‘because we are black’. Lillian commented that she felt that teachers ‘don’t really expect us to do better than whites or coloureds’. She went on recount that a friend had not done very well in geography, so she came to a meeting with her parents and the teacher. In this meeting, Lillian said, the teacher remarked, ‘Well this is very good for her.’ But her parents argued that, ‘No, but in her previous school she did better’. And so we all felt that maybe the teacher just said that because the girl was black... [MW So why do you think some of the teachers might not expect black girls to do as well?] It’s what people expect, you know, that black people are domestic workers, the security guards and so on’. The school and its teachers for these two girls are not fostering their educational achievements as fully as they should, or as they do for other girls.

Voice is reduced by teachers who take unfair decisions about girls’ ability, for example, to move girls from a higher to lower grade class without consulting them. Sandra recounted how she had not done well in recent half yearly maths examination so her teacher downgraded her from the higher grade to standard grade (an easier examination but not recognised for university entrance). She said that she assumed that she had no choice (voice) in this matter but then she heard from another pupil that this was not the case. She spoke to her teacher and asked her and explained that she really wanted to be in the higher grade. The teacher then agreed, but as Sandra said, ‘The teachers don’t say this is the reason why, they just tell you, ‘you must go’. In Sandra’s case her voice had been ignored and her aspirations and even her future autonomy potentially seriously compromised as she hopes to study medicine, for which a higher grade pass in mathematics is required.

Schools engage in practices of mis- or non-recognition other than that of language. Being disrespected because of skin colour is fiercely criticised: ‘That makes me really really mad because black and white people, I don’t see what is the big difference, because we are all the same. But people, you will see people treating other people very, very badly’ (Nombulelo). Compassion and a kind of critical attention to inequalities is valued, as Nombulelo’s words shows, and this story from Pearl, as she talks about homeless people who live in her neighbourhood. The girls had been asked to take photographs of their lives before the interviews and to seek permission before doing so:

I wanted to get a photograph of the vagrants in our area because you see them everywhere...When I asked their permission, they were like, ‘Please my darling take a photo of us’, and they were smiling, I was sort of afraid to ask them. You don’t really know what they’re going to do but I asked them and they agreed. I’m a very deep person, I’m very sensitive as well. I feel for things like this... You know what I think? In our society they’re never going to get it right. These people are never going to work, they’re never going to get what they want in their lives because there’s not that many jobs for them.

The capacity for friendship emerges from these girls’ experiences as being much valued, including the differences among themselves: ‘Yeah, we’re so diverse and its wonderful’ (Helen); ‘We’re different but we kind of relate to one another’ (Nadia). Others value what they have in common as well: ‘I like the fact that we’re so much alike. We can delight in each other in so many ways and I can speak to her openly’ (Janine). Sharing and the quality of being ‘warm-hearted’ is seen to be an important value in friendships, ‘everything we share, everything’ (Lumka); mutual support, ‘She’s doing everything for me when I need help and I do everything for her when she needs help’ (Kholiswa); bringing out different sides of somebody, ‘I’m very shy and they are the opposite of me and I like that because they bring out that part of me,'
when I'm around them I also talk and become lively' (Lillian); and offering good advice, 'every time I am in trouble she seems always to have the answers and very time she is in trouble, I have the answers' (Lillian). Loyalty and respect are important: 'she's a very loyal person, and she's good at keeping secrets, she always listens to me' (Miriam); 'friendship means that people 'respect me, they're there for me, they support me' (Helen). The idea of 'having the qualities of a friend' is valued in others and in themselves. School provides significant opportunities to develop the capability and functioning for these kinds of social relations.

However, there is another side to this capability for friendship. Except for School A at which all the pupils were African, there was limited association across ethnic and racial lines at the other three schools. Mostly this did not seem to operate as a deliberate exclusion, but girls did not necessarily go out of their way to form friendships with those from different racial groups. Often this was a matter of language - the African students would speak amongst themselves in Xhosa and without knowledge of the language, communication outside the classrooms was difficult. Close friendships could also contribute negatively to the development of positive learning dispositions where girls sought out others like themselves who had no interest in their schoolwork; this in turn reinforcing their mutual disaffection. Where this is a matter of an education capability becomes clear when we consider the reverse of friendship, where some children are actively excluded from friendship groups. The resulting bullying often destroys learning, and in the cases of some children blights their adult lives. At issue then is what the school might do through its pedagogical strategies and institutional culture to support the development of good groups, while still respecting the growing autonomy of these girls to make their own decisions about whom they associate with at school outside of the classroom.

For all of these girls, however, their capability set is compromised by the sexual harassment of girls, predominantly outside school, but for some inside school as well. They do not go out alone at night, and they need to be careful about walking alone in isolated places even during the day. This severely restricts their freedom of movement and leaves them dependent on parents or male friends. While none of the four schools was characterised by the violence in many South African schools, three of them were nonetheless in some degree marked by a low intensity pervasive harassment of inappropriate touching and disrespectful behaviour ('touching bums', 'touching your waist or your face', 'making odd comments', 'suggestive and rude things'). None of the girls I spoke to found this acceptable, although they did vary in their confidence in dealing with such behaviour. As Sibongile said, 'a boy must talk to a girl nicely and treat her as a human being'. At the all girls school, the girls welcomed the opportunity to learn away from boys because said Zola, 'I feel comfortable among girls', while Lillian added that the all girls school was an easier environment 'now that we growing up'. African girls at School B and School A who had friends or relatives at township schools also mentioned the continued use of corporal punishment at these schools as a reason for not wishing to go there. Indeed the girls at School A remarked on how different their school was from other similar schools. There was no sexual violence or gangsterism at the school; they felt safe while at school. The school is surrounded by a high fence, there is a locked gate and a guard at the gate monitoring who comes and goes. Overwhelmingly the girls or their parents at School A had chosen it for two key reasons, it is safe and it has good results in the matric examination. As one of the girl said when asked why she did not attend a high school near to her home: 'It's not a good school for me, there was a boy who was shot by the gangsters so I said when I go to high school I can go there because I don't think it's safe. So my father's sister said that I should come to this school 'cos it's a quiet school' (Kholiswa). It was clear that these girls valued being safe at school; it made a difference to their learning.

What then emerges is that these girls value learning and the opportunities education will open up for them. They value the knowledge they gain both from the subjects they enjoy and those they find harder or less interesting. They value being respected, having their voices and languages acknowledged and recognised, and find teacher support, care and appropriate expectations affirming and confidence-building. They value their friendships in school and reject their bodily integrity being encroached. Because agency is also central to Sen's ideas of freedom to make choices, a lack of agency or a constrained agency would equate to disadvantage. Thus we might
argue that for a society to be more fair, young people should have access to good schooling, that is schooling which is agency and well being enhancing and a primary good in itself, made up of a bundle of primary ‘benefits’ (the things learnt at school) and agency, the freedom to make choices in their lives (Thomson, 1999).

It also needs saying, however, that important though education and school is for these girls it is not the only source of their identities and their experiences of family and friends also has significant shaping effects which might reinforce or contradict the messages from the school. For example, the action of parents or guardians will also have an effect also on a child’s developing capability.

Where then does this leave us with regard to developing a list of education capabilities? There is a good argument for fleshing out the earlier capabilities to emphasise voice, aspiration, social relations, recognition and friendship. I argue also that for this education list, to reduce the development of any one capability is to reduce the development also of others. All the capabilities on my provisional list are valuable for girls’ education, and all point to essential ‘process’ and ‘opportunity’ (Sen, 1992) features of education in South Africa. If there were not present in South African schools, then we would have cause to question the quality of education, agency formation and wellbeing in those schools. This brings us to the question of the values that schools and education teach, whether explicitly or implicitly. Saito emphasises the role education can play in its attention to values. ‘We need to develop’, Saito writes (2003, p.29), ‘the judgement of the person to be able to value in which way it is appropriate to use capabilities through education’. Saito continues that the education that best articulates Sen’s capability approach is one which develops autonomy and judgement about how to exercise that autonomy. We should then consider how these capabilities are developed through processes of education which support freedom and which contribute to the capability to make good judgements.

We now have this draft list for the specificity of education, but with no attempt at a weighting of the various capabilities:

1. **Autonomy**, being able to have choices, having information on which to make choices, planning a life after school, reflection, independence
2. **Knowledge**, of school subjects which are intrinsically interesting or instrumentally useful for post-school choices of study, paid work and a career, and including knowledge of women’s lives, knowledge for critical thinking and for debating complex moral and social issues, knowledge from involvement in intrinsically interesting school societies,
3. **Social relations**, the capability to be a friend, the capability to participate in a group for friendship and for learning, to work with others to solve problems of tasks, the capability to form effective or good groups for learning and organising life at school, being bale to respond to human need
4. **Respect and recognition**, self confidence and self esteem, respect for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one’s gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practice and human diversity, showing imaginative empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listening to and considering others’ points of view in dialogue and debate in class
5. **Aspiration**, motivation to learn and succeed, to have a better life,
6. **Voice**, for participation in learning, for speaking out, for debating issues, not being silenced through pedagogy or power relations or harassment, or excluded from curriculum, being active in the acquisition of knowledge
7. **Bodily integrity and bodily health**, not to be subjected to any form of harassment at school, generally being safe at school, making own choices about sexual relationships, being involved in sporting activities
8. **Emotional integrity**, not being subject to fear which diminishes learning, either from physical punishment or verbal attacks
c) Engaging with other lists of capabilities

My list begins to trace what we might describe as education capabilities, that is capabilities which we might expect education to foster, such that if they absent or being diminished we might seriously question if schools were developing the capability to be educated as a fundamental human right. My final step is to consider other capability lists to see where they might be any overlap with my education list, even though these lists encompass the whole of human development and not just education. Moreover they are lists based in adult rather than children or young people’s capabilities. Here we need to note Comim’s (2003) argument about the importance of time and hence of becoming, as well as being and doing in the capability approach, together with Biggeri et al’s (2004) similar point that different ages may give different importance to valued capabilities. When we talk about education we usually have in mind that some kind of learning takes place. But learning is seldom linear and immediate; it is more often recursive, new learning builds on existing knowledge, past experience and pupil identities Learning is then a process of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’ over a life course, and through cycles of schooling. We might measure capability by some means or other through learning at a point in time using a specific assessment tool. But at another point that same capability might look different and the learning therefore be more or less successful, deep or sustainable than previously, with effects for an individual’s learning disposition. For example, a child might be a successful mathematics learner in the primary school, only to encounter difficulties with the subject or its teaching in secondary school such that earlier learning and the child’s learning identity is undermined and instead of progressing further the pupil either gives up mathematics altogether or does progressively worse and worse in tests and examinations. It may also be that some capabilities are more or less important depending on the age of learners. Development is necessarily dynamic and expansive so that we need to extend the capability informational space to take account of this. Capabilities are then valued ‘beings’, ‘doings’ (Sen, 1992, 1999), and as Comim (2003) argues, also ‘becomings’. This is not to say that we cannot analytically freeze a point in time of learning and voices of, in and on learning, but we should keep in mind that as a process of development, education will shift and change over time.

I focus briefly now on Nussbaum (2000), Narayan and Petesch (2002), Robeyns (2003) and Alkire (2002, 2004). Nussbaum (2000) has produced a list of ten core capabilities (see pp78-80) (8); a threshold level of all the capabilities taken together is essential she argues to a life worthy of the dignity of the human being. Her list claims to be universal and cross-cultural. Failure of capability in any one aspect would be failure to live a fully human life. Setting aside the importance for Nussbaum of each and every component on her list (nothing can be left out) we might still consider which of the capabilities might be described as education capabilities, while still acknowledging the importance of all those on the list, should we so wish. (But see for example Alkire, 2002 and Robeyns, 2003b for a critique of Nussbaum’s list). Those capabilities she identifies which overlap with my list include capabilities of: ‘practical reason’, ‘affiliation’ (‘being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interactions; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship….having the social bases of self–respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others’); ‘senses, imagination and thought’, ‘emotions’ and ‘bodily health’ and ‘bodily integrity’. Nussbaum explains further:

Among the capabilities, two, practical reason and affiliation stand out as of special importance, since they both organise and suffice all the others, making their pursuit truly human. To use one’s senses in a way not infused by the characteristically human use of thought and planning is to use them in an incompletely human manner. To plan for one’s own life without being able to do so in complex forms of discourse, concern and reciprocity with other human beings is, again to behave in an incompletely human way. (2000, p.82)

Narayan and Petesch’s (9) comprehensive research also presents a list of ten capabilities, many of which overlap with Nussbaum’s list and eight of which seem relevant to educational processes:
Melanie Walker, 2004, ‘Human capabilities, education and ‘doing the public good’: towards a capability-based theory of social justice in education’

‘bodily health’, ‘bodily integrity’, ‘emotional integrity’ (freedom from fear and anxiety, love), ‘respect and dignity’ (self respect, self confidence, dignity), ‘social belonging’, ‘cultural identity’, ‘imagination’, and ‘information and education’. In her evaluation of a literacy project in Pakistan, Alkire (2002) generates a list of capability impacts in which at least four (empowerment, knowledge, work, relationships) seem relevant to educational processes. (10) The capability of empowerment identified by the women as of value has some features in common with the notion of autonomy. Thus the women identified the importance of being able to solve their own problems, of deciding for themselves what is good or bad. Robeyns (2003) (11) in her proposed list of 14 capabilities for gender inequality assessment mentions a number of capabilities relevant to education, namely ‘education and knowledge’ (having the freedom to be educated and to use and produce knowledge), ‘respect’ (enjoying the freedom to be respected and treated with dignity), ‘social relations’ (being able to be part of social networks) and ‘bodily integrity and safety’. She is careful to point out that the capability of education should focus on more than just credentials and degrees, but also pay attention to processes in schools and classroom which produce gender inequalities.

Might there be capabilities drawn from those listed by these writers, which could be added to my list, or add detail to a capability already on the list? Nussbaum’s ‘emotions’ (which includes ‘not having one’s emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety’, p.79) adds detail to what we take emotional integrity to involve in schools and how it intersects with respect. How we feel affects how we learn, or fail to learn. For example, the girl who is told she is ‘too thick’ to learn history; or comes to believe she is ‘too stupid’ to grasp poetry, or says, ‘I’m not clever, I don’t understand anything’, or is so fearful of being beaten that she wants only to flee the classroom. Or the girl so upset at being publicly humiliated for some mistake or failure of understanding that no learning can follow. Emotions also have a positive impact on learning where they are a key source of understanding, awareness and discernment, which as Dunne and Pendlebury (2003) point out is central to wise practice. Discernment is mobilised, they say, through imagination and emotions. We might also wish to place greater emphasis on imagination as an element allied to emotions and emotional integrity.

We might further argue that Nussbaum’s capability of affiliation, with its emphasis on ‘being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship’ adds to the capability of respect and recognition, not least in the idea of imaginative empathy, what Arendt describes as ‘training the imagination to go visiting’. On the one hand autonomy develops our capability to own and take responsibility for our own lives and the consequences for and on others; on the other hand respect and recognition means developing our capability for showing consideration to others, for understanding them, to participate in the human condition. Feminists, as Robeyns (2003, p.22) points out, ‘have argued that the root of our gendered society is the fact that women are systematically devalued and not considered as fully human’. If we take education to be a process of becoming and being a full human being, evidence for the disrespect of girls (or for black children, or disabled children…) in South African schools would raise questions about whether education was indeed taking place in the site under scrutiny.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the list specific to education produced by Terzi (2004) from liberal western scholarship’s ideas on education, in order to address her own concern with what is being distributed when one talks about distribution and redistribution in education. Terzi’s is a list of what she describes as ‘basic capabilities for educational functionings’ and includes: literacy, numeracy, sociality, learning dispositions, physical activities, science and technology and practical reason. Effectively all of these are included in some way in my provisional ideal list, and as I am not aiming for a universal, cross-cultural list but a provisional list specific to girls’ lives in South Africa, her list simply serves as confirmation that key aspects of education are being addressed.

What all these list underline is the multi-dimensionality of the capability approach – arguably all dimensions on my list are important for the quality of girls’ education in South Africa. They
serve as an ideal list which may need revising in non-ideal practical contexts but the multi-dimensionality should not be sacrificed.

**Concluding thoughts**

In education, we also need to think about which additional theories we might draw on to further our understanding of learning, identity formation and the construction of adapted preferences. Theories about the school curriculum help us understand the capability of knowledge in more depth. Thomson (1999) points out that the school curriculum is a political arrangement, a selection from knowledge and a view on whose and what knowledge counts or is excluded or marginalized (whose history, whose science, whose authors and artists, and so on). Therefore, argues Yates (2003), it obscures important issues to have a project to extend education to girls and women and not take up curriculum as part of the agenda. In their comprehensive account of schooling and reform in South Africa, Taylor et al (2003) develop a social theory of schooling which draws substantially on Bernstein’s work (1971, 1977, 2000) in developing an account of children’s access to knowledge and meaning, and which adds to the capability approach in its focus on the specificity of access to meaning and knowledge in classrooms. Famously, Bernstein argued that, ‘How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control’ (1971, p.47). Thus Taylor et al point out the importance of children having access to vertical knowledge structures and strong conceptual syntax, that is ‘powerful’ knowledge. Similarly feminist educationalists such as Paechter (2003) and Yates (2003) have pointed to the relationship between gender, knowledge and power in the school curriculum which works to disbenefit girls. While this may be less true now than in the past as girls in the UK, for example, succeed in subjects like mathematics in greater numbers than boys, it is arguably still very much the case in developing countries with deeply sedimented views of what girls can and should do. At issue is that the capability approach needs to keep in mind how knowledge and power work in schools to produce and reproduce inequalities, and to draw on educational theories that will provide ways of understanding such education effects. As Paechter (2003) points out, we need to devise strategies that genuinely allow girls and young women access to high status knowledge and the power that accompanies it. ‘Students’, as Thomson (1999, p11) argues, ‘form their understanding of the world and their identities at least in part through the knowledges and narratives available to them in the curriculum’.

The issue here is having identified ‘knowledge’ as a core education capability, and having pointed to the importance of conditions of learning which facilitate autonomy and respect, we still need to ask how this occurs and for this we need additional theories, including theories about which pedagogic practices structure educational opportunities for children. Freire (1972) highlights the importance of how knowledge is mediated by teachers when he criticises what he describes as ‘banking education’ in which a teacher deposits knowledge into the blank and empty vessels of his or her passive students. He writes that knowledge instead should be a process of active inquiry: ‘Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [sic] pursue in the world, with the world and with each other’ (p.58). For Freire, a truly learning process is transformative, engaged, critical, curious. We then require theories and concepts of pedagogic practice which enable us to tease out and understand micro classroom interactions in accessing knowledge, and keeping in mind that capabilities intersect, developing other education capabilities at the same time. Taylor et al (2003) pose the question in this way: ‘Which [pedagogic] practice, under the particular circumstances in question, is most likely to result in children acquiring the social and conceptual competence targeted by the intended curriculum?’ (p.83). They point out that middle class advantage extends to having access to a mastery of the cultural and symbolic capital that enables middle class children successfully to access school knowledge and pedagogy, compared to working class children who do not have the coding orientations to make sense and meaning of school knowledge (Bernstein, 1971 and 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997).
At issue is that in the pedagogical relationship produced between teacher and pupils, there is the possibility to enhance agency but also the possibility to deny agency. We need to have the means to know and understand the difference and the impact on capability. To answer this we arguably need both capability theorising and additional theorising about learning and about identity formation. How children’s social identities and biographies intersect with and influence what and how they learn at school calls for a social theory of learning which ‘analyses through identity and biography, a variety of cultural influences in producing the new learner’ (Hughes, 2004, p.405). A social theory of learning recognises both children’s agency and also structures of nation, gender, class, and race. Osborn et al explain as follows:

[we] need to understand what it is that motivates and empowers an individual to take advantage of the learning opportunities available to them; to shift the focus of research concern away from the provision of educational opportunities, from the factors that influence the ability to learn and towards those that impact upon the desire to learn. (2003, p.9; original emphasis)

As Hughes (2004, p.401) points out, the individual learner is central to a social theorization of learning in that the focus of attention is on their life course as they move through and experience education and learning in a variety of institutional or organizational forms. This seems entirely complementary to core ideas in the capability approach, and to the notion of age and stage as also shaping what we take to be valued education capabilities.

Taking all this into account, I now have this revised version of my list:

1. **Autonomy**, being able to have choices, having information on which to make choices, planning a life after school, reflection, independence, empowerment
2. **Knowledge**, of school subjects which are intrinsically interesting or instrumentally useful for post-school choices of study, paid work and a career, girls’ access to all school subjects, access to powerful analytical knowledge, and including knowledge of girls’ and women’s lives, knowledge for critical thinking and for debating complex moral and social issues, knowledge from involvement in intrinsically interesting school societies, active inquiry, transformation of understanding, fair assessment/examination of knowledge gained
3. **Social relations**, the capability to be a friend, the capability to participate in a group for friendship and for learning, to be able to work with others to solve problems and tasks, being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for learning and organising life at school, being able to respond to human need, social belonging
4. **Respect and recognition**, self confidence and self esteem, respect for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one’s gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practice and human diversity, showing imaginative empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listing to and considering other person’s points of view in g dialogue and debate in and out of class in school, being able to cat inclusively
5. **Aspiration**, motivation to learn and succeed, to have a better life
6. **Voice**, for participation in learning, for speaking out, not being silenced through pedagogy or power relations or harassment, or excluded from curriculum, being active in the acquisition of knowledge
7. **Bodily integrity and bodily health**, not to be subjected to any form of harassment at school by peers or teachers, generally being safe at school, making own choices about sexual relationships, being able to be free from sexually transmitted diseases, being involved in sporting activities
8. **Emotional integrity and emotions**, not being subject to fear which diminishes learning, either from physical punishment or verbal attacks, developing emotions and imagination for understanding, empathy, awareness and discernment.

Should a particular community agree that this is sensible list of capabilities to pursue in education, we might then, introduce questions such as asking, who has the power to develop these capabilities, and who has not? Put simply, in the context of girls schooling, which girls and
how? We might wish to check (measure) how successful girls are in bringing about what they are trying to achieve. Finally, if there is unevenness, patchiness and inequality in girls’ wellbeing freedom and agency freedom we might wish to raise political and ethical questions about the society in which some girls can promote all their ends while others face barriers, whether of social class, race, gender, culture or disability. At issue here is that interpersonal variations as well as individual capability must be considered. As Sen notes we need to ask ‘what are the significant diversities in this context’ (1992, p.117, his emphasis).

Finally, there is the puzzle of the dialectic of structure and agency, and the implications for educational and social transformation. As John Field has pointed out (personal communication 10 November 2004), capability development requires a structure of favourable opportunities, for example access to quality, gender-fair schooling in order to realize the capability of being educated and to function as a well-educated person. Capability is required for agency freedom. Without agency, freedom is diminished; without freedom, agency is diminished. Perhaps part of the difficulty lies in the development of the capability approach as a framework for evaluating poverty and inequality, rather than as a theory of change. Here, then, other theories of social and political change might be required. However, it also remains the case, for the purpose of assessing equality in education, that inequalities in the achievement of person’s agency would throw light on the inequalities in people’s respective freedoms (favourable opportunities) enjoyed (Sen, 1992) and in this way might enable an agenda for change in education, if capability equality is taken up by policy makers and practitioners. We might therefore want to see how to use the capability approach not only to measure what has already taken place but also as a means to produce change. How might using the capability approach lead to change and improvement in education both prospectively and retrospectively? How might the capability approach produce as well as evaluate education policy?

To conclude, the issue for those of working in education is that schools, colleges and universities contribute, for many people quite substantially, to the formation of their capabilities to function. Ideally educational organisations ought to equip people with the capabilities to pursue opportunities they value. How valued and valuable opportunities and capabilities are distributed through formal education and to whom, and how this maps over structures of race, gender, class able-bodiedness, religion, and so on is a matter of social justice in education.

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Notes

1. But see Linda Barclay’s (2003) critique of Nussbaum’s claim to political rather than comprehensive liberalism, and Nussbaum’s (2003a) rejoinder.
2. For example, see John Dewey (1916) *Democracy and Education*, and Paolo Freire (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Both take up the role of education in contributing to democratic freedoms and a democratic society, and both point to the importance of learners experiencing democratic processes in their own education in order to foster understanding of how democracy works. In Sen’s terms, they are concerned that learners develop the capability for democratic citizenship and democratic life.
3. I am indebted to Severine Deneulin for bringing this issue and this quote to my attention.
Morrow and King 1998, Kallaway et al 1997 and Taylor et al 2003. The focus on this paper is not on the methodology of the research; this in itself merits a separate paper on issues of positionality, reflexivity and conditions of trustworthy knowledge production. Briefly, however, volunteers year ten girls from four different schools in Cape Town were interviewed over a three week period in August 2003. The schools were selected for their different histories and socio-economic intake. Access was negotiated by writing to the Western Cape Education Department and thence to the head teacher of each school in the first instance, and then producing an explanatory leaflet for year 10 schools to enable them to decide whether or not they wished to participate. Before the interviews a meeting was held with the group of volunteers at each school to explain the project in person. Interviews were conducted with pairs of girls, with each interview lasting around one and a half hours. Prior to the interview each pair of girls were given a disposable camera to take a set of photographs of their lives in and out of school. These were developed and formed the basis of the discussions with the researcher. In analysing the data across all the life narratives, the complexity of lives is clear and interpretation must then deal with what Ball et al (2000. p.16) have described as the 'obdurate diversity' of the data. All the girls’ names mentioned are pseudonyms.

5. School A: 4 girls interviewed; 100% African pupils; majority working class backgrounds; teachers 95% African and school head African female. School B (all girls school): 12 girls interviewed: 8 mixed race, 3 African, 1 white; pupils 80% mixed race, 10% African, 10% white; mostly middle class and lower middle class, small number of working class backgrounds; teachers 90% white and school head white female. School C: 4 girls interviewed, all white; pupils 60% white, 30% mixed race, 10% African; middle class backgrounds; teachers 90% white and school head white male. School D: 10 girls interviewed, all mixed race; pupils 80% mixed race, 10% African, 10% white; lower and middle class backgrounds; teachers 90% white and school head white male.

6. It was the requirement that African children study through the medium of the Afrikaans language, the 'language of the oppressor, that ignited long simmering frustrations with bantu education on 16 June 1976 in Soweto, a turning point in the history of struggles against apartheid in South Africa.

7. Nussbaum’s list is: Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses, imagination and thought, Emotions, Practical Reason, Affiliation, Other Species, Play, Control over one’s environment.

8. Narayan and Petesch’s list is: Material assets, Bodily health, Bodily integrity, Emotional integrity, Respect and dignity, Social belonging, Cultural identity, Imagination, information and education, Organizational capacity, Political representation and accountability.

9. From the literacy project, in dialogue with the capability approach, Alkire produces this list: Empowerment, Knowledge, Work, Life/health/security, Relationships, Inner peace, Religion.

10. Robeyns’ full list is: Life and physical health, Mental wellbeing, Bodily integrity and safety, Social relations, Political empowerment, Education and knowledge, Domestic work and nonmarket care, Paid work and other projects, Shelter and environment, Mobility, Leisure activities, Time-autonomy, Respect, Religion.

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