
RE-THINKING THE CONCEPTUAL AND NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS
OF THE “CAPABILITY TO BE EDUCATED”:
CHILDREN AND THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY

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As part of the sustained and growing resistance to narrow *achievement*-based approaches to (and measures of) inequality in education, educational researchers of various stripes are once again taking up both conceptual and practical questions concerning inequalities in educational *opportunity*. As Carter and Welner have noted recently, “disparities in certain achievement indicators . . . have dominated policy discussion over the past two decades,” while during that same time no “sustained effort” has been made “to attend to the gaps in sustenance—in opportunity.”¹ Their book—and its collection of authors—attempts, therefore, to give due attention to so-called “opportunity gaps” and, by doing so, to “shift our attention from educational outcomes to inputs—to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes.”² For many educational researchers and practitioners, this is likely to be a welcomed shift in emphasis. For others—philosophers of education, in particular—it is also likely to conjure up the kinds of conceptual and normative questions around, for instance, “equality,” “opportunity,” and “choice” that have long been part of their work.³

The goal of this essay, broadly stated, is to weigh in on these recent trends and enduring questions from the perspective of the Capabilities Approach (CA). This framework for evaluating human well-being and equality has, over the last fifteen years, increasingly been used to explore issues in education, including those related to equality in education. Of particular interest here will be Lorella Terzi’s commitment to a conception of equality in education understood in terms of the “capability to be educated.” Though this particular conception is valuable in various ways, it also suffers, as much educational theorizing from the CA perspective does, from a problematic treatment of children. It fails, or so I argue, to live up to Sen’s concept of “capability” by

¹ Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner, eds., *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ For a brief historical overview of how equal educational opportunity (and related ideas) have been treated in one major journal in the field of philosophy of education, see Sarah M. McGough, “Fifty Years of Equality?” in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 105–114.

failing to theorize a more active (and activist) role for children and youth in 1) helping to fill out and realize a conception of equality of educational opportunity, and 2) exercising agency within their formal education. Theorizing such a role for children and youth points to a more robust and meaningful CA-based conception of equal educational opportunity—a conception grounded in a revised idea of what it means to have sufficient “capability to be educated.” My hope is that this concept, revised and more fully developed, can be usefully applied both to the rich conceptual and philosophical work around equality of educational opportunity and to the identification and remediation of educational inequalities.

I proceed by offering an introduction to the CA with particular attention to Terzi’s development of the concept of the “capability to be educated” and its implications for our thinking about equality in education. Next, I challenge the role of choice and agency for children within this framework, suggesting that Terzi, in her attempt to apply the CA to children and their education, has all but stripped the concept of “capability” of these two essential aspects. In trying to carve out room for children’s choice and agency in CA-inspired thinking about equality in education, I revisit a debate that took place in 1989 and 1990 between Kenneth Howe and Nicholas Burbules, which offered valuable insights into the concepts of opportunity and choice as they might pertain to children. I then look to emerging literature within the CA that treats children as “capable agents” to suggest a revised (i.e., more active, participatory) role for children and youth in the project of identifying and remediating inequalities in educational opportunity.

Ultimately, my revised conception of the “capability to be educated” demands that children and youth have effective opportunities and real freedoms not only to achieve what Terzi calls “educational functionings,” but also *and in the first place* to engage in discussion and decision-making regarding 1) the educational functionings they value and have reason to pursue within their education, and 2) the various inputs and obstacles that enable or prevent their achievement of these functionings. The capability to be educated, in other words, when we take the notion of a “capability” in its best and fullest sense, must include children’s and youth’s participation in the conceptualization and pursuit of valued functionings.

THE CAPABILITY TO BE EDUCATED

At the heart of Sen’s revolutionary thinking about human development and social justice sits a deceptively simple question: “equality of what?” In what space, that is, according to what measure, should we evaluate equality and otherwise assess human advantage and disadvantage? According to CA theorists, what matters most for the purpose of such evaluations are not preference satisfaction or income and other resources—both of which are standard kinds of measures in theories of economics and social justice. The former measure—that of preference satisfaction—fails to account for the phenomenon of “adaptive preference,” that is, the fact that people’s circumstances can have the effect of

limiting their awareness of possible alternative preferences and distorting “their sense of what is in their true interests.”⁴ Income and resources are also limited measures of well-being and equality, largely because neither measure takes fully enough into account the fact of what Sen calls “conversion factors,” that is, the various personal and social circumstances that enable or hinder our ability to convert the income and resources we have into valuable outcomes.⁵

In light of these (and other) limitations of such measures, Sen has developed the concepts of “functionings” and “capabilities.” The former indicate a person’s *achievements*—their actual “beings and doings” (e.g., being well-nourished). The latter call our attention to the real *freedom* (the abilities plus the effective opportunities) a person has to function in ways they have reason to value or, more broadly, to pursue lives they have reason to value. A capability, then, is “the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles).”⁶ For Sen and other CA theorists, one’s capabilities, more so than one’s functionings, constitute the space in which equality matters. The expansion of those capabilities one has reason to value should, therefore, be the goal of human development and justice-oriented politics.

Furthermore, in developing this CA framework, Sen has consistently identified a small number of so-called “basic” capabilities, including the “capability to be educated.”⁷ What makes a capability “basic,” according to Sen, is that it corresponds to “certain elementary and crucially important functionings.”⁸ Such capabilities are, therefore, understood by Sen to be ones that all people have reason to value and that will likely “demand attention in any theory of justice and more generally in social assessment.”⁹ Indeed, “basic capabilities” like education are the more precise answer to the “equality of what?” question. They are, in other words, the primary space in which we should, according to Sen and other CA theorists, strive for equality.

Over the last ten years, CA theorists and educational researchers have sought to draw out the implications of Sen’s thinking for education, with particular attention to how the CA might help us to think about and address issues concerning inequality in education. Terzi’s relatively early efforts in this direction have been especially noteworthy. Of particular interest to me here is

⁴ Harry Brighouse, *Justice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 68.

⁵ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ Amartya Sen, “Dialogue, Capabilities, Lists and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation,” *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (2004): 78.

⁸ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 45, n. 19.

⁹ Sen, “Dialogue,” 78.

her development of the concept of the “capability to be educated” as the foundation of a CA-inspired standard for evaluating educational equality.¹⁰

Terzi generally agrees with Sen’s identification of the capability to be educated as “basic,” but she notes that Sen has left the “conceptual and normative implications of the basic capability to be educated . . . unspecified.”¹¹ On one hand, this should not surprise us given that Sen has consistently resisted the over-specification of even basic capabilities (more on this below). On the other hand, it should continue to motivate us to do the work necessary to clarify the concept of the “capability to be educated” and to draw out its implications for how we think about and pursue equality in education. Terzi herself has done important work in this direction by further specifying both what it means to consider the capability to be educated a “basic” capability and what the provision of this capability for all persons demands of a just society. In particular she has helped to flesh out the general concept, first, by clarifying what it means to call this a “basic” capability; second, by suggesting a systematic process for identifying a subset of capabilities for educational functionings that are “constitutive of the capability to be educated”; and, third, by offering a list of such functionings.¹²

Drawing on the work of both Sabina Alkire and Bernard Williams, Terzi argues that the capability to be educated is a “basic” capability “in two interrelated respects. First, in that absence or lack of opportunities to be educated would essentially harm or substantially disadvantage the individual. Education thus conceived responds to a person’s basic need to be educated.”¹³ In other words, a basic capability, on this account, is a capability to meet a basic need, like being nourished and sheltered. Applied specifically to education, the idea is that those who are deprived of formal and informal opportunities for learning are denied a basic need and, therefore, potentially suffer a “profound harm” and face a “disadvantage that proves difficult . . . to compensate later in life.”¹⁴ “Second, since the capability to be educated plays a substantial role in the expansion of other capabilities as well as future ones, it can be considered fundamental and foundational to different capabilities, and hence inherent to the very possibility of leading a good life.”¹⁵ This argument speaks more explicitly to the unique importance of education as what we can call a “fertile” capability.¹⁶ In other

¹⁰ Lorella Terzi, “The Capability to be Educated,” In *Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, ed. Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter (New York: Palgrave, 2007); see also Lorella Terzi, *Justice and Equality in Education: A Capability Perspective on Disability and Special Educational Needs* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹¹ Terzi, “Capability to be Educated,” 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 44–45.

words, it is a capability the exercise of which expands (multiplies) to varying degrees the other and future freedoms or opportunities that people have. To lack the basic (i.e., fundamental and foundational) capability to be educated, then, is to have one’s present and future capability set—the range of capabilities one enjoys—restricted, thus, again, creating disadvantage.

This understanding of education as a basic capability—that it is *inherently* valuable in terms of one’s basic needs and *instrumentally* valuable in terms of the expansion of one’s other and future capabilities—helps to justify the importance of promoting this capability equitably. For Terzi, the next step is to determine the subset of enabling conditions—what she also refers to as “enabling functionings” or “basic educational functionings”—that are constitutive of the capability to be educated.¹⁷ She acknowledges, following Sen, that the “precise content of education”—understood in terms of basic educational functionings—“should be the result of processes of democratic deliberation” in specific contexts.¹⁸ But she also suggests that “some functionings developed by education appear to be truly foundational, and essential for other, more complex ones, and might be suggested as constitutive of a basic education.”¹⁹ Ultimately, Terzi arrives at a formal list composed of the following basic educational functionings: literacy, numeracy, sociality and participation, learning dispositions, physical activities, science and technology, and practical reason. Each of these is expressed as a capability for functioning—for instance, literacy is expressed as “being able to [i.e., having the capability to] read and to write, to use language, and discursive reasoning functionings.”²⁰

On the whole, Terzi concludes that the basic capability to be educated is 1) “constitutive of an entitlement in education,” primarily on account of its being a basic capability, and 2) composed of a systematically chosen subset of capabilities for basic educational functionings, the achievement of which is essential to a person’s basic needs and to the expansion of their other and future capabilities.

What, then, are the key and potentially unique or useful features of this way of thinking about equality in education? There are at least three such features worth noting here. First, and perhaps most obviously, the CA perspective—grounded in a conception of equal capability to be educated—goes beyond formalist conceptions of equal educational opportunity. In other words, it recognizes that simply equalizing formal access to educational opportunities (e.g., access to a school and other educational resources) is an impoverished view of equal educational opportunity. Consider, as Unterhalter asks us to do, that in some cultures “social customs and the prevailing ethos” demand that girls “do

¹⁷ Terzi, *Justice and Equality*, 191, n. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Terzi, “Capability to be Educated,” 37.

excessive amounts of domestic labour or . . . care for smaller siblings.”²¹ As a result, even when girls’ formal opportunities (including the legal right) to go to school are protected, their capabilities to pursue learning outcomes are limited, both in absolute terms and relative to their peers who are not burdened with such responsibilities.²² In other words, the girls whose formative experiences are influenced by such customs have their “real or effective freedom” (i.e., their capability) to be educated “reduced to a pro-forma opportunity.”²³ Similarly, and not uncommonly in the United States, there are instances in which children are forced for various reasons to assume a large share of responsibility for their younger siblings or elderly relatives, the care of whom demands much of their time both before and after school and on weekends. This circumstance, too, potentially limits children’s capability to make full and effective use of their learning opportunities, even though it does not, of course, mean that they no longer have the formal opportunity to be educated. Importantly, these kinds of experiences—caring for others, doing household chores—can themselves lead to important learning outcomes or, more generally, be part of a child’s conception of a valued life. But they are problematic in so far as they are imposed on children—often out of necessity—and restrict their capabilities to achieve other valued learning outcomes. The capability to be educated, on the whole, is concerned with one’s *effective* opportunities, that is, with one’s ability to make effective use of (or to actualize) one’s opportunities.

Second, and related, the CA perspective, as we have already seen, rejects the idea that equal resources are a sufficient measure of equal opportunity and demands, instead, that we give attention to various factors that affect one’s conversion of resources into valued outcomes. In regard to education, the conversion principle that informs the CA means recognizing that the educational functionings one child can achieve may be quite different from those that another child achieves with the same (i.e., equal) educational resources or inputs. Simply put, personal and social circumstances affect how individual children are able to convert their educational resources into actual beings and doings, that is, how one’s educational (and other) inputs are converted (or not) into learning outcomes or achievements. According to a CA perspective, such circumstances must be taken into account.²⁴ Simply providing the same resources or inputs to

²¹ Elaine Unterhalter, “Education, Capabilities and Social Justice,” paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4: The Leap to Equality* (2003), 4.

²² In many parts of the world, of course, girls do not even have the formal opportunities to be educated. This deprivation, too, would be captured by a capabilities assessment.

²³ Unterhalter, “Education, Capabilities and Social Justice,” 4

²⁴ Here, of course, is where more actualist approaches to equal opportunity open, as Howe puts it, a “Pandora’s box regarding what things go into determining whether an individual has an actual, versus a merely formal, opportunity.” See Kenneth R. Howe, “In Defense of Outcomes-Based Conceptions of Equal Educational Opportunity,” *Educational Theory* 39, no. 4 (1989): 318. I shall have to leave this question aside for now.

all children is not necessarily a sufficient approach to equal educational opportunity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the present paper, the CA points to a conception of equal educational opportunity that also troubles an over-reliance on outcomes-based measures of equality. Here, the distinction between one’s functioning and the capability to achieve the functioning is essential (ironically, as we will see, this is also precisely where most CA theorists concerned with education seem to undercut the uniqueness of the CA). Consider Walker and Unterhalter’s example of two 13-year-old Kenyan girls who fail mathematics.

For one, despite attending a well-equipped school in Nairobi with qualified and motivated teachers offering ample learning support and safe learning environment, a major reason for failure was her decision to spend less time on mathematics and more time with friends in the drama club and other leisure activities. For the other, from a school in Wajir, one of Kenya’s poorest districts, despite her interest in mathematics and schoolwork generally, her results were largely due to the lack of a mathematics teacher at her school. The subject was taught by an English specialist. Private after-school tuition was available, but her parents could not afford this for all their children. They decided to prioritize their son and required their daughter to perform housework and childcare. She had little time to prepare for examinations.²⁵

This example demonstrates that an evaluation of one’s capability to be educated requires attention to one’s freedom to choose which learning outcomes one values and to decide whether to pursue those outcomes or not. In this case, both girls achieve equal—“if regrettable”—outcomes, but only the first is choosing freely not to achieve in mathematics, deciding instead to pursue other learning or social objectives that she values.²⁶ A focus on outcomes alone as the evaluative measure of equality would mask these kinds of differences in choice, agency, and freedom.

Indeed, one’s free choice and agential action—including what one chooses to value and decides to pursue—is essential to the concept of a “capability.” And evaluations of equality in this space require that we give due weight to choice and agency. Yet most CA theorists—including Terzi—tend to strip “capability” of these essential features when dealing with children and formal education. In doing so, I argue in the next section, the concept of the “capability to be educated” is significantly hollowed out.

²⁵ Walker and Unterhalter, eds., *Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

CHILDREN'S CHOICE AND AGENCY

The problem of fitting children into conceptions of equal educational opportunity is obviously not new, especially for liberal political theorists. It has, in fact, often led to some conceptual gymnastics, including Kenneth Howe's idea of "mandatory opportunities."²⁷ Howe utilizes this idea in trying to reconcile that "children need certain knowledge and intellectual skills in order to both have and exercise opportunities in meaningful ways."²⁸ On Howe's account, then, there are some "opportunities" that we simply must make "mandatory," that is, we must force children to actualize them so that they achieve (equally) a threshold level of certain educational outcomes. This is the general view of children and opportunities that seems operative in Terzi's development of the idea of the basic capability to be educated. Children, she argues, simply must actualize their capabilities to achieve certain basic educational functionings. Not to do so could mean severe damage to their present and future lives, and we simply cannot leave children free to choose in regard to matters of such importance. Thus, the capability to be educated—to achieve specified educational functionings—is, we might say, a "mandatory" capability.

Nicholas Burbules takes issue with the idea of a mandatory opportunity, arguing that one essential feature of an opportunity is that it can be passed up—that it is precisely not "mandatory."²⁹ Indeed, the same kind of conceptual oddity Burbules recognizes in Howe's thinking seems to plague Terzi's conception of the capability to be educated: it involves, in fact, none of the essential and unique features of a capability (viz., freedom or choice or agential action). Thus, what Terzi and many other CA theorists have in mind for children and youth is not really "capability" at all. It is simply the forced achievement of specified (and ostensibly basic and universally valued) functionings—functionings they assume will expand future capabilities.

This traditional approach to children within the CA framework—and, indeed, many other liberal political frameworks—has been challenged recently by both theoretical and empirical research. These challenges point the way to the need for a revised conception of the capability to be educated, namely, one that promotes children's agential participation in determining those educational functionings they have reason to value and in the pursuit of the conditions that enable their achievement.

Over the last five years, in particular, an emerging body of scholarship from within the CA literature draws on a sociology of childhood that has developed since the late 1990s.³⁰ This sociological literature has initiated a shift

²⁷ Howe, "Outcomes-Based Conceptions," 317–36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

²⁹ Nicholas Burbules, "Equal Opportunity or Equal Education?" *Educational Theory* 40, no. 2 (1990): 221–26.

³⁰ See, for instance, Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

from a dominant view of childhood whereby children are seen as going through “a process of becoming adults” by “gradually [accumulating] skills, experiences and dispositions that [shift] them out of childhood and towards adulthood.”³¹ The thinking that informed this view “generated a socially constructed dichotomy between childhood and adulthood.”³² It is this dichotomy that new theorizing about children has sought to break down. For instance, Allison James and colleagues have initiated a move “away from thinking only in terms of the chronological maturation of children” and from seeing children simply as “not yet fully-formed adults.” Instead, they argue for viewing children “as socially competent agentic actors *in their own right*.”³³

This shift in thinking about children and agency has informed not only the theoretical developments of the CA’s perspective on children and youth but also the empirical research conducted by CA scholars interested in children’s lives. For instance, Biggeri and colleagues have documented a process through which children between ages 11 and 17 were encouraged to participate in the conceptualization and choice of their own valued capabilities.³⁴ To facilitate this process, the children were asked to reflect on the following questions: “What are the most important opportunities a child should have during his/her life?”; then, using those answers, the children were asked, “How important/unimportant has this opportunity been in your life?” and “In your opinion how important/unimportant is this opportunity for children during their life?”; last, children were asked to choose from the identified capabilities “the three most important” for a child to have in his or her life.³⁵ This work with children became the basis for a list of 14 capabilities that children deemed valuable in their lives. Importantly, the authors of this study understood and treated children “not simply as *recipients*” of these freedoms, “but as *participants* in the process of delineating a set of core capabilities.”³⁶ Thus, they granted children a degree of agency and freedom to participate meaningfully in the important process of conceptualizing and expressing their valued capabilities.

Similarly, Kellock and Lawthom designed a research project intended to help children identify and examine their valued capabilities using a visual

³¹ Caroline Sarojini Hart, “The Capability Approach and Educational Research,” in *Agency and Participation in Childhood and Youth: International Applications of the Capability Approach in Schools and Beyond*, ed. Caroline Sarojini Hart, Mario Biggeri and Bernhard Babic (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 21.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 22, emphasis added.

³⁴ Mario Biggeri et al., “Children Conceptualizing their Capabilities: Results of a Survey Conducted during the First Children’s World Congress on Child Labour,” *Journal of Human Development* 7, no. 1 (2006): 59–83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 69–72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60, emphasis added.

methodology called “photo-voice.”³⁷ Children were asked, among other things, “to take photographs of significant or important parts of the school” as one means through which they could articulate notions of well-being and, more broadly, identify and examine aspects of their school environment and experience that were important to them. They were engaged, furthermore, in discussions about their perceptions of various “barriers” to their enjoyment of these capabilities. Thus, the study helped to reinforce the idea that even very young “children can, through appropriate methods, actively participate to conceptualize their valued capabilities and evaluate services, resources, and barriers to their well-being on matters relating to school and their lives generally.”³⁸

CONCLUSION

This emerging research within and beyond the CA framework gives the lie to the idea that children’s age and maturity are cause enough for excluding them from acting agentially and making informed choices about matters related to valued educational functionings. To exclude children on these accounts, then, would be to perpetuate what Biggeri has called an “age-bias.”³⁹ Instead—and this is the key point here—we must recognize that a conception of the capability to be educated stripped of agency, freedom, and choice regarding which educational functionings children value and wish to pursue is not worthy of the name “capability.” And, as a standard for equal opportunity in education, it leaves off a fundamental aspect of such opportunity, namely, the opportunity to participate in shaping the course of one’s education. Indeed, given the emerging theoretical perspectives and empirical research noted briefly above, we can see our way clearly to giving children far more of a participatory role in determining the content of the capability to be educated—that is, in determining the “educational functionings” that are of value to their lives, both in the present and future—and in pursuing the conditions in which this capability can be exercised effectively.

If we take seriously the notion of “capability” that informs a CA perspective on equal educational opportunity, then we must re-think the concept of “the capability to be educated.” Terzi’s formulation of this concept has been rightly influential and has, in fact, set a kind of conceptual standard for thinking about educational equality from the CA perspective. But it employs, or so I have argued, an impoverished notion of capability—one that amounts ultimately to a call for forced functionings (prescribed achievement) of various kinds. Put differently, it is a notion of “capability” that eliminates the key features of choice and freedom, leaving children with neither relative to their own education and

³⁷ Anne Kellock and Rebecca Lawthom, “Sen’s Capability Approach: Children and Well-Being Explored through the use of Photography,” in *Children and the Capability Approach*, ed. Mario Biggeri, Jerome Ballet, and Flavio Comim (London: Palgrave, 2011), 137–61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

what educational outcomes they value (and for which they wish to have and pursue opportunities to achieve).

This limiting of the scope of the notion of a “capability” when it comes to children follows from the same worry that has plagued theorists of education for decades—a worry that children are simply incapable of reasonable choices and exercises of freedom. There is certainly still room for debate on the issue. But the point here is that we cannot speak of the “capability” to be educated if we intend to use the concept to prescribe certain educational functionings for all children regardless of what they value in and from their education. To do so is not only to misrepresent the idea of a “capability” itself, but also to ignore the reasoned and legitimate choices children can and do make about their lives and their education. Furthermore and related, the achievement of “equality” in terms of the capability to be educated must take account not just of the functionings children achieve, but also of the degree of freedom and agency they have exercised over the choice and pursuit of such functionings.
