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Situating education in the human capabilities approach

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As many specialists have rightly argued, Amartya Sen made a remarkable contribution to social sciences and humanities by pioneering the capability approach. Sen led us to re-examine contemporary social theory by arguing that we need to look at what people are able to do or to be, when making normative evaluations. This contrasts with the fact of measuring people's feelings or material possessions. Without denying the importance of income or commodities, Sen helped us to "direct our attention" to other important types of information when we talk about development, well-being and quality of life (Des Gasper, 1997).

The notion of capability basically consists in identifying people's functionings, which represent the achievements of a person: that is what he or she manages to do or to be (Sen, 1985). These achievements may vary, as Sen argues, from elementary (being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease) to "very complex" activities or "states of existence" (being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect). According to Sen:

A person's capability refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles (Sen, 1999:75)¹.

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¹ On the foundation bases of the capabilities approach see Sen, 1985, 1999 and Nussbaum, 2000. See also Alkire and Black, 1997 and Cameron and Gasper, 2000 for a critical review. Stimulating points of view can be found in the archive The Capability Approach: www.fas.harvard.edu/~freedoms/ca_conference_fourth.html

Although Sen's capability approach has had a considerable impact on empirical social-science literature, as Alex Callinicos (2000) noticed, in the field of education there are still several questions that remain unanswered. For instance, is education still related to freedom as classical thinkers remarked? In which way has the enlargement of capabilities been analysed from an educational perspective? Is it sufficient to claim that, by receiving formal or informal education, a person expands automatically her or his "freedoms"? Which other factors could intervene in the expansion of capabilities of an academically trained individual? Addressing these four questions is the primary aim of this paper, yet, what eventually I intend to do is to open up a reasoned discussion on how education can be situated within the capability approach.

I. Education and humanity: A short historical account

*Los agentes del destino son los hombres y los hombres
conquistán la libertad cuando tienen conciencia de su destino²*

Octavio Paz

Historically, education has been intimately connected to human capabilities. From Socratic times until our days an array of voices have lucidly explained how knowledge helps us to clear our minds, "awake" our consciousness, inform our actions and enrich our lives. According to Martha Nussbaum, the Stoics, for example, argued that the central task of education was to confront the passivity of the pupil, challenging the mind to take charge of its own thought. The ancient Greek philosophers claimed that, "people who have conducted a critical examination of their beliefs about what matters will be better citizens - better in emotion as well as in thought" (Nussbaum, 1997:29).

Much later, during the Renaissance, Desiderius Erasmus, a man profoundly influenced by the classical philosophers, defended the idea that reason ought to be the driving force of human nature and that the function of education was to enable human beings to enjoy life to the full. As a humanist, Erasmus called for an end of cruel practices commonly employed in sixteenth-century schools and rejected rote learning. There is no reason, he said, to make school experience a tough and joyless process (Curtis & Boulwood, 1966).

Two centuries after Erasmus' considerations, in *l'age des lumières*, the intrinsic relationship between education and humanism was profoundly enriched by the work of some of the greatest thinkers. John Locke, for instance, the precursor of liberalism, published in 1693 *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* where he explained that, although Nature might be a persistent factor to the formation of human beings, it cannot be taken as the controlling factor to the sum total of human traits. Being academically trained could help the pupil to learn how to use her\his reason in making decisions. For this, Curtis and Boulwood have argued that Locke's general principle lies in the assumption that "true education is the gaining of self-control by the individual" (1966:243). In other words, personal autonomy.

2 "Men are the agents of destiny, and men win freedom when they are conscious of their destiny". This is a fragment of the opening speech delivered by the Nobel laureate at the Conference: *El siglo XX: La experiencia de la libertad*, *Vuelta* magazine, 167, Mexico, October 8th 1990. Translated by the author.

Locke's ideas found clear opposition in the writings of another thinker. In 1976, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Émile*, a novel that described how human beings should be taught within a corrupt world. Here, Rousseau adopted an idealistic vision of human nature and developed controversial arguments regarding women's conventional roles³. However, for Robinson and Zarate, *Émile* was a "revolutionary" book since it examined the whole concept of childhood thoroughly and it stressed the necessity to stimulate compassionate feelings by means of education. *Émile*'s "nature feelings of pity", it is said, needed to be transformed into "imaginative empathy" for others in order to become in a "truly virtuous" citizen of the world (Robinson & Zarate, 2001:70). It is quite remarkable that for Rousseau, being educated implied becoming a "loving and tender-hearted"⁴ individual, capable of understanding why others succumb unintentionally to miseries. It was necessary "to perfect reason through feeling," he said.

Influenced by Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, reflected too on whether "man" is, by nature, morally good or bad. He concluded that: "He is neither, for he is not by nature a moral being. He only becomes a moral being when his reason has developed ideas of duty and law" (in Curtis & Boulton, 1966:296). Kant thought that as human beings are rational creatures, they could learn through nurture, discipline, moral training and instruction. This is not to say, however, that human beings are free from having inclinations to vices. Kant, as opposed to Rousseau, recognised that people may have "natural inclinations to every vice" and that those inclinations and "instincts" could urge them one way. Notwithstanding, the German philosopher also noted that reason could however drive them in another direction. Education, therefore, should aim at promoting reasoning abilities in order to distinguish between virtues and vices and then to *act* accordingly.

Reason, then, seems to be a central element to situate education within the capability approach. Both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have stressed the importance of reason in the expansion of capabilities. On one hand, Sen speaks of "reason to value" which means, according to Robeyns (2002), that people need to scrutinize motivations to value specific lifestyles. On the other hand, Nussbaum, considers "practical reason" as one of the central capabilities for functioning and suggests that practical reason and affiliation⁵ have special importance since they both "organize and suffuse" all others capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000:82). Seeing reason with a predominant role in the process of capabilities' enlargement - and as a capability in itself – lead us to ask under what circumstances education could privilege reasoning abilities. I will take up this point later (see section III-B).

If reason can be achieved by means of education, as remarked by classical thinkers and by

3 According to Robinson and Zarate (2001), *Émile* "infuriated" some women of those days such as Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote *The Rights of Woman* as a response to Rousseau's novel.

4 These terms belong to Jacques Rousseau (in Curtis and Boulton, 1966:282).

5 This refers to: (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction, to be able to imagine the situation of another, and (B) 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 (Nussbaum, 2000).

those Renaissance and Enlightenment, and if this faculty serves to better human beings in an ethical way and to enrich our lives, then it can be said that education and human freedom have been inextricably linked for ages. Nevertheless, the long-standing relationship between education and capabilities raises many questions that, as it was said, remain unanswered. It seems that we, educators, have gazed on such connections with unseeing eyes.

Apart from redirecting our attention to consider reason as a driving force of capabilities, the historical account given above leads us to claim that the notion of capabilities developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum re-captures the humanistic view of education, which had been partially eclipsed by the simplistic application of modernist theories of education (see, for example, the human capital theory, manpower planning, or knowledge-based economy⁶). The restoration of the humanistic vision to the academic debate constitutes a good reason to engage in the analyses concerning the links between education and freedom (understood as capability). In doing so, previous approaches⁷ need to be carefully re-examined in order to envisage their wise use in global environments.

II. Possibilities, uses and gaps of the capability approach. An educational review

As we advance in the understanding of the capability approach, its chances of being wisely applied may be greater than before. For this reason, this part will present and comment on analyses carried out by some specialists, who have discussed the merits and the weaknesses of this approach within the educational field.

In her documentary analysis, Elaine Unterhalter (2001) argues that education appears “undertheorised” in Sen’s human capabilities approach. She rightly notes that in the formulation of his approach, Sen considers education as: (1) a social opportunity, (2) a valuable outcome (literacy skills) and, (3) a causality of freedom. She questions the mere fact of widening educational opportunities because this process does not always go in the same direction as the process of expanding human capabilities. Unterhalter explains that, despite increasing student enrolment (“social opportunities” in Sen’s terms⁸), the human capabilities of women are far from being expanded. To illustrate this, she gives as an example the educational system of South Africa, in which a high proportion of young black girls who by attending school, are at risk of being raped by their teachers and even by their schoolmates. Under an “unregulated social facility,” she concludes, academic environment can literally end a girl’s life, thus destroying her capability (Unterhalter, 2001:7). Unterhalter continues with her critique to the capability approach by saying that Sen’s approach entails “two different senses of education that are sometimes confused”

6 A critical review of these approaches can be found in Flores-Crespo, 2002, 2004.

7 See, for instance, Paulo Freire’s *Education: the practice of freedom* (1967) and *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In the latter, the great pedagogue pointed out that: “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world” ([1970] 1993:62).

8 Social opportunities, according to Sen, “refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, health care and so on, which influence the individual’s substantive freedom to live better” (1999:39).

(2003:5). Firstly, education can be seen as a form of functioning or well-being achievement, for example completing four years of basic education, commonly known as schooling. However, education can also be thought of as part of the process of exercising agency, that is using reflection, information, understanding and the recognition of one's right to exercise these capacities in order to formulate the "valued beings and doings" (Unterhalter, 2003:5). This is what I would call reason, which seems to be the unexplored element in the analyses on capabilities achievement and education.

Unterhalter's claims are very useful because they help us to avoid simplistic uses of the capability approach and urge us to think more broadly about the educational process and the supporting conditions that exist within an academic context. It would be pretty daft to assume that education promotes "doings" and "beings" automatically. But, equally, it would be silly to overlook the other side of Unterhalter's argument: The three "senses" of education shown in the capability approach (social opportunities, schooling, and the development of reason) can complement each other in order to achieve valuable capabilities. If a person has an equal educational opportunity, her or his practical skills and human agency can be shaped up in a fair way.

Indeed, in an applied study Flores-Crespo (2002) sought to provide a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between education and development in Mexico by using an evaluative framework. This framework was formed by two key elements: firstly, a list of seven functionings for university graduates which were defined by following Nussbaum's list of central capabilities, and secondly, two "instrumental freedoms" proposed by Amartya Sen (see Box 1). Instrumental freedoms (or "capability enhancers") contribute, as Sen (1999) argues, directly or indirectly to the overall freedom that people have to live the way they would like to live. He identifies five distinct types (political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security). Surprisingly, some educational commentators have not properly discussed the role of these "means of development" in their analyses (see, for example, Unterhalter, 2001, Saito, 2003).

In methodological terms, it is worth saying that three technological universities were selected as case studies, and alumni's functionings were evaluated by means of a questionnaire⁹. The survey was followed by a qualitative analysis. More than a hundred semi-structured interviews were conducted with employed and unemployed graduates, employers and educational officers with the aim of extending the structured data gathered through the questionnaire.

⁹ The higher education institutions selected were: (1) The Technological University of Nezahualc6yotl in the state of Mexico; (2) The Technological University of Tula-Tepeji in the state of Hidalgo; and (3) The Technological University of Aguascalientes in the state of Aguascalientes. The sample was made from 717 graduate questionnaires which were distributed proportionately in the three localities.

Box 1. Proposed framework to evaluate the capabilities of university graduates

Proposed functionings	Sen's instrumental freedoms	Nussbaum's central capabilities
<i>Personal achievements ("beings")</i>		
1. Being able to feel confidence and self-reliance		Being able to avoid unnecessary and non-beneficial pain, so far as possible, and to have pleasurable experiences
2. Being able to visualise life plans	Social opportunities and economic facilities	Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life ("practical reason").
3. Being able to develop further abilities	Social opportunities and economic facilities	Being able to think and to reason and to do these things in a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education...
4. Being able to transform commodities into valuable functionings	Economic facilities	
<i>Professional achievements ("doings")</i>		
5. Being able to acquire knowledge required in a job position	Social opportunities	Being able to think and to reason and to do these things in a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education...
6. Being able to look for and ask for better job opportunities	Economic facilities	Being able to move from place to place Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life ("practical reason").
7. Being able to choose desired jobs	Economic facilities	Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.

Source: Adapted from Flores-Crespo, 2002. *An analysis of the relationship between higher education and development by applying Sen's human capabilities approach...* PhD thesis, unpublished, Politics Department, The University of York, UK

Flores-Crespo showed that most graduates obtained valuable personal and professional achievements thanks to the education provided by the selected universities¹⁰. That is, education had a positive impact on graduates' functioning capabilities. Nevertheless, through a comparative analysis between the three cases, it was also found that graduates' capabilities varied significantly as a consequence of pre-existing circumstances. In short, as "instrumental freedoms" vary, individuals' functionality does also. According to Flores-Crespo (2002) the impacts of education can potentially be maximized if social opportunities and economic facilities are generated simultaneously and, conversely, a lack of these instrumental freedoms will constrain educational endeavour.

Although the merits of this study should be subjected to a wider discussion, it can be said

¹⁰ The technological universities were created with the primary purpose of offering educational services to those people who had been excluded from higher education. Because of this, some of these colleges are situated in relatively poor areas (e.g. Tula-Tepeji and Nezahualc6yotl).

that Flores-Crespo's analysis highlighted the multidimensionality of the capability approach¹¹. That is, human well-being is multidimensional, and it should advance many different kinds of capabilities at the same time. It was shown that professional achievements and even monetary benefits overlapped with personal functionings. For example, a female graduate argued that going to university helped her find employment, which was crucial for earning a wage that could be used for improving her life as an independent person. Otherwise, she said, "I would be a housewife only devoted to looking after many babies" (cited in Flores-Crespo, 2002:262).

Another feature of the capability approach shown by Flores-Crespo was the necessity to broaden the informational basis when speaking about the "virtuous cycle" between education and economic growth or development. Being academically trained, employed and relatively well paid does not necessarily imply *development*. It was found that, although most graduates received an income, they were still facing other type of inequalities (in Sen's words, "unfreedoms") such as long and exhausting shifts (in some occasions, illegal) and gender discrimination during the process of personnel selection and hiring. Moreover, the lack of broader educational opportunities in the most disadvantaged localities (Tula and Nezahualc6yotl) stopped the aspiration of many graduates to continue their professional studies beyond the technical degree. As technicians in Mexico are relatively badly paid and do not have a high social recognition, the majority of graduates wished to study further for a bachelor's degree. However, such reasoned aspiration could not be met since the supply of tertiary education in poor areas is still insufficient. Families cannot afford the cost for their young people of travelling to other cities to study, and there were no institutional arrangements to upgrade technical expertise into bachelor degree within the higher education system of Mexico.

Lastly, I will comment on two general limitations of this study although more voices should undertake such a task. Firstly, Flores-Crespo's study says little about social stratification and, therefore, further work needs to be done in this regard. Although university graduates gain a valuable personal position in comparison to their counterparts who did not study, it is not clear to what extent someone born in a relatively deprived area and who attended a technical college could achieve a middle or upper class position. Secondly, a more accurate way of defining functionings is needed in order to choose relevant variables that, eventually, could be included in the survey. The question is how the list of functionings shown above is a complement to the established learning objectives of the selected universities.

In summary, this work sought to mark a difference from common analyses which normally relate education to economic development by considering educated people as an end of the development process and not just a means or instrument of the progress, as suggested instead by the human capital perspective. In doing so, Sen's definition of development and his capability approach were very illuminating indeed.

¹¹ I thank Dr. Flavio Comim for drawing attention to this point.

Madoka Saito is another commentator who has contributed to the discussion of the capability approach in the field of education. In her analysis, she raises two interesting points, among others, which help us to reflect more deeply on future possibilities of Sen's capabilities approach. First, she asks "how can we apply the capability approach to children, since children are not mature enough to make decisions by themselves?" (2003:25). Sen addressed this question by saying that "when you are considering a child, you have to consider not only the child's freedoms now, but also the child's freedom in the future" (in Saito, 2003: 25)¹². Furthermore, according to Sen, his approach can be applied to children since we can judge their well-being in terms of their functionings rather than on mental attitudes. But, in addition, "the freedom aspect may be important for a child because: A) a child makes some decisions, like whether he or she is being unhappy, wants milk and so on; and B) a child's future involves the time when the child will actually exercise some freedom" (Sen in Saito, 2003:26). Saito concludes that "as long as we consider a person's capabilities in terms of their life span, the capability approach seems to be applicable to children" (Saito, 2003:26).

Secondly, Saito points out that "the kind of education that best articulates the concept of Sen's capability approach seems to be the one that makes people autonomous and, at the same time, develops people's judgement about capabilities and their exercise" (2003:29). I agree with Saito, though I would add that the type of education that seeks to encourage the achievement of personal autonomy usually is known as "liberal education"¹³. So, if education needs to be coherently situated in the capability approach, it is necessary to comment on the foundations of such type of education.

III. Liberal education and the capability approach: Towards a renewed perspective

Liberal education is called so because it seeks to liberate the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, according to Nussbaum (1997). This type of education lies on the assumption that human beings should not be directed by other "voices" nor become "instruments on which fashion and habit play their tunes" (to use Nussbaum's terminology), since they possess their innate capacity of reasoning and questioning. According to Alan Ryan, an education can be identified as "liberal", if it is aimed at preparing autonomous, argumentative and "tough-minded individuals" who eventually will become "good liberal citizens" (1999:84). Reason, then, appears to be a precondition of personal autonomy and, thus, both elements form part of the concept of liberal education.

But, once having shown that reason, personal autonomy, and independence¹⁴ are elements

12 According to Sen, "the main argument for compulsory education is that it will give the child when grown up much more freedom and, therefore, the educational argument is a very future oriented argument" (Sen in Saito, 2003:27).

13 We should remember that personal autonomy is the fundamental value underlying all other claims under different versions of liberalism, according to Harry Brighouse (2000).

14 In this sense, Dearden (1972) raises an interesting question: "Is autonomy the same thing as freedom, or perhaps independence? He explains that all three are closely interrelated, but the three are distinguishable. Freedom, he argues, consists in the absence of constraints or restraints relevant to what we do want or might

that help us situate education in the capability approach, we confront other problems: How can reason and, thus, personal autonomy be achieved? Are there some pedagogical guidelines to make liberal education a reality in times of “economic anxiety”¹⁵? It is fair to recognise that the capability approach can enable the revival of the liberal education as it stresses reason, personal autonomy?¹⁶ Despite this possibility, it seems that there are several elements that need to be discussed in order to more broadly understand the role of education within the capability-based approach.

A. The philosophical side. The search for substantive freedoms

Speaking of liberal education awakes an old debate: Is this type of education totally incompatible with vocational-oriented training? Are the aims of liberal and vocational education completely irreconcilable? Christopher Winch and John Gingell (1999) pointed out that there are different ways of categorising aims of education. One tradition, they explain,

[...] emphasises the importance of education as an individual, liberal good with intrinsic values. Another tradition sees education as a public, as well as an individual good, with **instrumental**, as well as, or in contrast to, intrinsic value. Broadly speaking, the former tradition is called ‘liberal’, the latter ‘instrumental’. Instrumental aims can be further classified into vocational, societal and personal (Winch and Gingell, 1999:11 authors’ emphasis).

The insightful distinction between the two purposes of education has been obscured by the belief that these aims are mutually incompatible or in constant rivalry. Alan Ryan (1999), for example, says that the sharpest challenge to the liberal ideal of education is posed by a commercial and vocational ideal of student competence. On the other hand, Winch (2002) notes that some philosophers have failed in recognising the significant aspect of vocational education. It is assumed, as Winch and Gingell note, that there is a “complete dichotomy” between vocational and liberal education. However, they argue, this is a fallacy because although two things do not share all the same characteristics, they certainly can have something in common. Vocational educators “may espouse liberal aims like personal fulfilment, while liberal educators may espouse vocational aims like employability as a form of personal fulfilment” (Winch and Gingell, 1999:247). This view supported in part by the results of the empirical study carried out by Flores-Crespo (2002), where an overlap between personal and professional achievements was identified clearly.

As the capability approach is increasingly studied and applied in the field of education and,

want to do, and it is not sufficient condition for saying that a person is autonomous. “A person might be given more freedom in his job, but lack the relevant knowledge, skills, initiative, experience which are necessary for an appropriate exercise of autonomy in this enlarged role [...]”. Autonomy, meanwhile, “is invulnerable to the constraints or restraints of others” and an autonomous agent must be independent-minded, though some kinds of independence will be matters of our external relations to people and things (Dearden, 1972:450-452)

15 This expression belongs to Martha Nussbaum (1997). Nussbaum observes that many institutions that call themselves liberal art colleges have adopted a vocational orientation.

16 We also need to remember that both personal autonomy and liberalism perspectives are grounded on individualism, understood as “an outlook which assigns primacy to individual human beings”, according to the Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy (2000), not as an egocentric position.

consequently, the revival of the liberal education seems to be approaching¹⁷, the reconciliation of intrinsic and instrumental aims of education is needed to make wise use of Sen's and Nussbaum's ideas.

I would also claim that promoting personal autonomy through liberal education does not necessarily imply a sense of detachment from the reality (or that it is exclusively for the gentry). On the contrary, liberal education endorses the view that human beings must think and act in a complex environment, and thus, they must be equipped with relevant knowledge and independent-minded attitudes to deal with such complexity. In this sense, the great pedagogue Paulo Freire wrote in *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, that only by developing a permanently critical attitude could people overcome a posture of adjustment in order to become integrated to reality (Freire, [1967] 1973).

Doubtless, Freire's ideas bear a close resemblance to those of Sen and of Nussbaum. The Brazilian pedagogue, the Indian economist and the American philosopher depart from the assumption that, as people are succumbing to poverty, inequality, exploitation and ignominy, something needs to be done to reverse this situation. However, these authors do not seem to be trying to save the poor as they conceive human beings as responsible agents who can alter their destiny. So, Freire, Sen and Nussbaum rely upon the human agency of individuals to transform their realities. This leads us to a stimulating discussion concerning the way in which formal or informal education could shape our human agency to exercise it ethically. It is precisely in the connection between substantive freedom and education where educational commentators need to put further attention if we want to advance in the understanding of the capability approach and its relation to education.

B. The pedagogical side. Under what conditions the liberal education could be realisable

*Mala es una educación en la que no cabe la compasión;
mala la que, llevada por el culto a la racionalidad, pretende que
la existencia humana sea cabalmente inteligible e ignora sus contradicciones.*¹⁸

Pablo Latapí Sarre

Martha Nussbaum, unlike Amartya Sen, has given some normative pedagogical guidelines on how to promote freedoms by means of education (specifically, higher education). According to Nussbaum (1997) three *capacities* are essential to the "cultivation of humanity" in today's world. First, is the capacity for critical examination of oneself. The Stoics, according to the American philosopher, claimed that people who conduct a critical examination of their beliefs about what

17 Interestingly, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, led by Jacques Delors, has emphasised that: "One of education's principal functions is [...] that of fitting humanity to take control of its own development. It must enable all people without exception to take their destiny into their own hands so that they can contribute to the progress of the society in which they live [...]" (Delors et al. 1996: 78-79). Even some international financial agencies such as the World Bank has shifted, as Lynn Ilon (1996) noted, its rationales concerning educational policies: now they focus more on welfare issues rather than on productive purposes.

18 Bad is an education that leaves out compassion, bad is an education which follows the cult of rationality and assumes that the human existence is totally intelligible ignoring its contradictions (Latapí, 2001. Translated by the author). Pablo Latapí is an emeritus researcher of the National System of Researchers of Mexico and professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

matters will be better citizens – “better in emotion as well as in thought” (Nussbaum, 1997:29). Argument helps students not only to clarify their ideas, but it also helps them to act rationally in one way rather than another. The second capacity refers to the necessity of conceiving ourselves as citizens of the world. That is, to adopt, as educators and as students, an attitude of mutual respect, “we must educate people who can operate as world citizens with sensitivity and understanding,” says Nussbaum (1997:52). This capacity needs to be nourished in higher education in the classroom itself as well as in its reading material. Here, the role of educators is also crucial because we need to show our students,

the beauty and interest of a life that is open to the whole world, to show them that there is after all more joy in the kind of citizenship that questions than in the kind that simply applauds, more fascination in the study of human beings in all their real variety and complexity than in the zealous pursuit of superficial stereotypes, more genuine love and friendship in the life of questioning and self-government than in submission to authority (Nussbaum, 1997:84).

This capacity has a high relevance in contexts where large minorities and indigenous groups try to coexist with the majority. Intercultural practices are perfectly entailed in this capacity. It is important to remember that the goal of education, according to the Stoic norm of world citizenship, is not the separation of one group from another, but respect, tolerance and friendship (Nussbaum, 1997). But, despite the value of this capacity, reality is more complicated. Phenomena such as bullying, racism, homophobia, or gender discrimination can easily penetrate school’s walls affecting the humanity of specific groups of individuals. I will return to this point later (see subsection C).

Lastly, the third capacity proposed by Nussbaum, which is closely related to the first two, is narrative imagination. “This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (1997:10-11). This capacity can be encouraged by means of arts, specifically literature. “Higher education should develop students’ awareness of literature in many different ways”, since it will foster an informed and compassionate vision of the different (Nussbaum, 1997:88). Compassion, she adds, requires a sense of one’s own vulnerability to misfortune.

Nussbaum’s normative ideas on higher education, as well as her list of central capabilities, represent a step forward in the design of “just pedagogies which can be tested and adjusted empirically”, as Melanie Walker notes. Unlike utilitarian “key skills conceptions of team work”, Nussbaum’s capabilities offer a comprehensive idea of a pedagogy of inclusion, according to Walker (2002:5). Highlighting the possibility of the capability approach in pedagogical terms requires us to look at others aspects, such as how knowledge is provided. In this sense, educational contents, written and visual materials, commonly used in the classroom, can present images or assertions that are far from Nussbaum’s idea of cultivating humanity. By examining

illustrations, images and language of didactical instructional material for science courses, Mary T. Hardy (1989) found a manifestation of gender bias in the science curriculum in primary texts, particularly those associated with the physical sciences. She noticed that male were more frequently represented in cards of such material than females. Women's images were often derogatory (doing silly things), and boys' "interest" was appealed to more than girls'. This could explain, according to Hardy, the shortage of girls taking up the science option. This pedagogical error shows, on one hand, that although educational opportunity may exist, gender inequity can prevail. On the other, it shows that, in the future girls may have less freedom to choose an academic course in science. Ingrid Robeyns confirms this point by saying that in England "career aspirations are still highly gendered, and boys are frequently found to be dominating the classroom environment and monopolizing teacher's time" (2002:18).

Apart from the necessity of designing appropriate material to encourage pupils to learn in a environment of mutual respect, it is clear that further work needs to be done to understand the process of capabilities expansion from a pedagogical perspective. With the aim of contributing to this debate, I will raise the following questions:

- Do learning aims say something useful for the design of valuable functionings? If so, could a curriculum be based on functionings rather than on educational objectives? Will there be an innovative approach in doing so?
- "Should we generate a core curriculum in education in order to enhance the capabilities in children?" (Saito, 2003:29).
- Are skills, competence and professional functionings meaning the same? Can learning outcomes be deemed as a capability?
- Is it illogical to think that the results of academic assessment processes could help us evaluate functionings?

As we could see, several issues are awaiting to be investigated to grasp a coherent picture of how education promotes capabilities.

C. The institutional side. Schools as capabilities-oriented institutions?

To complete the three-dimension framework that may help us to situate education in the capability approach, I will suggest to look at schools from an institutional side. Schools in particular and education systems in general constitute social settings where changing patterns of behaviours, customs and values take form and are reproduced. Some of these habits, irrespective of the educational supply, could affect both pupils' development of reason and their acquisition of skills. In this regard, Lucy Trapnell (2003) reports that in Peru, as schooling was expanded, a reverse effect was generated. While Ashaninka people thought that school education would help improve their life conditions, they then became aware that school education was not offering them the

opportunity they had hoped for. This was because:

Their children were taught everything from a western world view, but were actually acquiring very little western knowledge. When they finished primary school the majority could hardly read or write, and lacked basic mathematical skills. Many had a very limited command of Spanish – yet their own indigenous culture was being ignored, even vilified. As a result, children grew up with negative attitudes towards their cultural heritage and with a very low sense of self-esteem (Trapnell, 2003:9)

But expressions of superiority are not exclusive of developing countries. Human Rights Watch¹⁹ has documented the “devastating impact of pervasive animus” towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth (between the ages of twelve and twenty-one) in seven states of the USA. Each day, most gay youth walk into their schools wondering what they will have to face – taunts, food thrown in the face, lewd mockery in the locker room, being slammed against lockers or walls. “Not surprisingly, they lose their focus, their grades drop, some drop out, and a few commit suicide” (HRW, 2001:174). For HRW, the public school system in the United States is failing systematically to protect these students. It adds:

The burden these students bear is exacerbated in many cases by the rejection of their families, condemnation within their communities, being demonized by individual teachers and administrators, and rejection by members of the adult lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities who are too scared of being identified themselves to offer support to gay youth (HRW, 2001: 4).

Academic environments are not prevented from family prejudices, social indifference and impunity for school officials and this urges us to pay careful attention to how educational institutions function within their particular contexts. More specifically, how homophobia, bullying²⁰, discrimination, whether based on gender, identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, immigration status, economic situation, or disability, and violence have been engendered and reproduced in educational systems. Looking at the institutional side of the learning process might be useful since:

- Our understanding of the way in which educational processes can expand (or restrict) our freedoms is broadened. We should not overlook that, as Amartya Sen reminds, individuals live and operate in a world of institutions and that our “opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function” (Sen, 1999:142).
- Policy issues are underlined²¹. Governments that use the capability approach, according to Unterhalter, have “an obligation to establish and sustain the conditions for each and every

19 Human Rights Watch was founded in 1978 as an independent, nongovernmental organization, supported by contributions from private individuals and foundations worldwide. It defends freedoms of thought and expression, due processes and equal protection of the law, and arbitrary imprisonment, discrimination, and other abuses of internationally recognised human rights. Its goal is to hold governments accountable if they transgress the rights of their people.

20 According to Rigby, bullying is a repeated oppression, psychological or physical, on a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons (1996:15). It is widely prevalent in schools, and it can be greatly reduced, if not entirely eliminated, principally by actions taken by schools and also, to a lesser degree by parents. The most common types of bullying are physical (hitting, beating, kicking, spitting, throwing stones) and psychological (verbal abuse, name calling, threatening gestures, stalking behaviour, malicious telephone calls to a student's house, repeatedly hiding another's belongings, leaving people out of desired activities and spreading malicious rumours about someone).

21 Aimed at reducing bullying at schools, the project Kids Help Line (KHL) was implemented in Australia as a free service for children with problems who want to talk to a counsellor by telephone. It is worth saying that during a twelve-month period, KHL received over 7000 calls from children about bullying (Rigby, 1996).

individual, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race or regional location, to achieve valued outcomes" (Unterhalter, 2003:4). But, in addition to policy formulation and even more importantly, is the need for a theory of justice, as Harry Brighouse argues, "to tell us whether a policy is liable to promote, be consistent with or violate justice, what ought to be" (Brighouse, 2002:1).

Revising institutional settings could allow us to take measures in order to counteract the reaching effects of perverse cultural manifestations and regressive social mores. Renewed perspectives are required to enable educational institutions to operate with the aim of pursuing human development.

Concluding remarks

In order to situate education within the capability approach, it is necessary to recognise the simple but important fact that the educational process normally occurs within institutions, that knowledge is achieved through written and visual material, that pupils are guided by teachers and that generally students are educated by having an intense social interaction with others mates. The school environment, therefore, entails diverse factors that may condition the acquisition of knowledge, the development of reason and, therefore, our present and future human freedoms. As education can certainly contribute to the expansion of capabilities, and under certain conditions, it can also function with the opposite result.

In analysing the expansion of capabilities from an educational angle, it has been suggested to consider a three-dimensional framework, which is basically formed by a philosophical, a pedagogical and an institutional part. Through this heuristic exercise it is possible to think more carefully about a renewed concept of the liberal education and about previous approaches that have lucidly associated education with freedom. Arguably, there are important lessons to be drawn from this literature.

Furthermore, the proposed pedagogical normative ideas can be considered as a step forward to inform didactic practices in the classroom. Notwithstanding, several questions remain open on curriculum design, on the appropriate use of educational jargon and how people learn. Clearly, much work needs to be done in this sense.

Finally, looking at the institutional side of the educational systems helps explain why the capabilities of an academically trained person can be expanded or restricted. This may encourage a reflective move by society and governments and, consequently, capability-based policies could be formulated.

As we can see, there are many issues awaiting to be investigated to make education a *real* driving force behind the enlargement of human freedoms.

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