

On Education as a Basic Capability

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Abstract

Sen includes education among basic capabilities: the most minimal 'beings' and 'doings' that are fundamental to well-being. However, the conceptual and normative implications related to education thus defined have not been explored so far.

In this paper I outline a possible conceptualisation of education as a basic capability. I argue that the capability to be educated can be considered basic in two ways. First, in that absence or lack of education would essentially harm the individual. Second, since education plays a substantial role in the expansion of other capabilities, as well as future ones, it can be considered a basic capability for the further reason that it is fundamental and foundational to different capabilities. I then outline the functionings and capabilities constitutive of education thus conceptualised. In the process of the discussion, I analyse some methodological criteria, which are then operationalised in selecting the subsets of enabling conditions basically foundational to the capability to be educated.

Finally, I discuss how this conceptualisation of education as a basic capability constitutes a fundamental entitlement in education, and the reasons why its provision becomes a matter of justice.

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Introduction

Sen identifies basic capabilities as a subset of all capabilities. Basic capabilities, in his approach, are 'a relatively small number' of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being (1992: 44). The capabilities to be well-nourished and well-sheltered, to escape avoidable morbidity and premature mortality, to be educated and in good health, and to be able to participate in social interactions without shame, are all examples of basic capabilities.

Education is included among these fundamental capabilities. In his analysis of development and poverty, Sen highlights the contribution of education to the quality of life and the formation and expansion of human capabilities. However, despite this important role, in Sen's approach education is generically referred to as basic, elementary education, and mainly expressed in terms of levels of literacy. Hence, the conceptual and normative implications of education defined as basic capability remain unspecified.

In this paper I address some of these implications by outlining a possible conceptualisation of education as basic capability. I argue that education, broadly understood both in terms of learning and schooling, can be considered a basic capability in two ways. First, in that absence or lack of education would essentially harm and disadvantage the individual. Second, since education plays a substantial role in the expansion of other capabilities, as well as future ones, it can be considered basic for the further reason that it is fundamental and foundational to different capabilities. I furthermore argue that thinking of education as basic capability entails selecting specific subsets of enabling conditions, which are foundational to the capability to be educated. These conditions are derived through the operationalisation of methodological criteria and with reference to concepts and frameworks of liberal education. Finally, I argue that this conceptualisation highlights how education as a basic capability constitutes a fundamental entitlement, and why its provision becomes a matter of justice.

The paper is organised in three sections. In the first section I analyse two important understandings of the idea of basic capability: Sabina Alkire's operationalisation of basic capabilities as capabilities to meet basic needs (2002), and Bernard Williams' understanding of basic as fundamental and foundational capabilities (1985). I highlight how these perspectives provide important theoretical specifications, which help in considering the case of education. The second section presents elements of a conceptualisation of education as basic capability. This relates to a selection of

enabling conditions and to a set of methodological criteria. Finally, in the third section I discuss the proposed subset of basic enabling conditions and briefly outline the reasons why it constitutes an educational entitlement.

1. Understanding Basic Capabilities

The question of determining basic capabilities relates to the possibility

that some capabilities may be so basic to human welfare that they can be identified without any prior knowledge of the particular commitments that are held and expressed by an individual or group. (Alkire, 2002: 154)

Sen has addressed issues of basic capabilities in his analysis of poverty. (Alkire, 2002, Robeyns, 2001) He maintains that, rather than in terms of income inadequacy and relatively to the position enjoyed by others in society, poverty is best addressed in terms of 'basic capability failure', namely the absolute 'inability of individuals and communities to choose some valuable beings and doings that are basic to human life.' (1992: 109) Basic capabilities are therefore a subset of all capabilities (Robeyns, 2001: 11) and refer to the possibility to satisfy 'certain crucially important functionings up to certain minimally adequate levels'. (Sen, 1980: 41, 1992: 45, Robeyns, 2001: 11). Sen does not provide a definite list of basic capabilities, nor a fully justified account of how to identify them, but he mentions several elementary capabilities, which include the capability to be sheltered, nourished, educated and clothed. (Sen, 1999: 20; 1993: 36) He furthermore specifies that, given the 'ambiguity of the concept of basicness' (1992:45), the term basic capability is open to different interpretations.

There are different conceptualisations of the idea of basic capability, both within the capability approach and in its empirical applications. In what follows I shall analyse two important specifications of the idea: first, Sabina Alkire's operationalisation of basic capabilities as capabilities to meet basic needs (2002), and, second, Bernard Williams' understanding of basic as fundamental capabilities (1985). Robeyns' further specification of the latter understanding is also considered (2001). I maintain that these perspectives provide interesting theoretical frameworks, which can be fruitfully applied in the conceptualisation of education as basic capability. Let's consider them.

Sabina Alkire's work on the operationalisation of capability for poverty reduction (2002) presents an understanding of basic capabilities in relation to the idea of human needs. Alkire's account provides us with an important perspective on the

wider theoretical reach of the capability approach over theories based on needs. Alkire rightly points out how Sen's definition of poverty as absolute capability deprivation, independent of a relative account or knowledge of the circumstantial picture, necessarily implies addressing the criteria for selecting and identifying those basic capabilities whose absence constitutes poverty. (2002: 157) Alkire aims to follow procedures less controversial or less theoretically incomplete than referring to areas of consensus or material dependence. She appeals, on the one hand, to the literature on human needs, and, on the other, specifically to the work of David Wiggins, and develops

a conception of basic human needs that closely relates to Sen's work. It defines basic need with reference to absolute harm rather than to wants, 'needs', desires or preferences. (2002: 157)

Alkire understands basic needs in terms of those *enabling conditions* or *prerequisites* to the full life that, in her view, inform both Rawls' idea of primary goods and Sen's concept of capability. (Alkire, 2002: 158) In her account basic needs are described, firstly, with reference to the substantive functioning that is harmed if the basic need is unmet. For example, not meeting the functionings of being well nourished or being clothed fundamentally harms the individual. Secondly, basic needs are expressed at a sufficient level of generality, in that they refer to '*what is needed at a general level*', for instance, and following Sen's own indication, shelter, nutrition, education and clothes (2002: 160). Therefore expressing the basic need to be nourished at general level implies reference to dietary requirements rather than to a specific account of the food to be provided. Alkire's two criteria for identifying basic capabilities relate to what is fundamental in order to avoid harm, and to a level of generality, which allows basic capabilities to be applied to different situations (2002: 160). While fulfilling the demand of ascertaining capability in 'absolute' terms, i.e. without any prior knowledge of the relative picture, Alkire maintains that this set of criteria nevertheless has to be specified when applied to certain societies rather than others. This complies with Sen's important emphasis on the element of culture-dependency of basic capabilities. (Alkire, 2002: 161)

Based on these criteria, Alkire sets forward the following conceptualisation of basic capability, which includes a specific concept of basic needs but inscribes it in the framework of capability. Hence,

If y has a basic need for x (defined generally) and f is a basic functioning which entirely and only reflects the relationship between y and x , then x is a basic functioning. Likewise, if c is the capability to f then c would be a basic need capability. It is this sort of capabilities which will represent basic needs. (2002: 160)

And furthermore

A basic capability is a capability to enjoy a functioning that is defined at a general level and refers to a basic need, in other words a *capability to meet a basic need* (a capability to avoid malnourishment; a capability to be educated, and so on). The set of basic capabilities might be thought of as capabilities to meet basic human needs. (2002:163)

Notice here that Alkire's reconceptualisation of basic capability retains the strong sense of needs as one's fundamental requirements while, at the same time, grounding it on the important concept of potential for intentional choice implied in the idea of capability. (Alkire, 2002: 163) This allows for people's deliberate choice to refrain from meeting certain basic needs in order to enjoy other goods, providing they still retain the relevant capabilities of meeting basic needs. As she illustrates,

For example a hunger striker or a Brahmin may regularly refrain from eating, because they personally value the religious discipline or the exercise of justice-seeking agency, but the side effects of pursuing these is that they will not be well nourished. ... while the Brahmin's 'functioning' of being well-fed would indeed be blighted by fasting, her *life* might be regal and radiant. (2002: 171)

Thus, what Alkire brings to the fore is the fundamental element of choice, constitutive of and explicit in the concept of capability, and its relation to the pursuit of people's valuable ends and objectives, hence of their well-being. Both are fundamental dimensions that the capability approach explicitly provides with respect to accounts based on basic human needs.

Alkire maintains, furthermore, that another crucially important element highlighted by the capability approach is to make explicit the fundamental dimension of participation. She illustrates this point by providing the example of two countries, A and B, whose goal is identified in terms of meeting basic needs such as nourishment, sheltering, education and health. If country A had higher increase in meeting these basic needs than country B, we would say that A is better than B. And we would have to reach this conclusion even when A had achieved its increase by means of people's coercion, for instance by the government. To evaluate this situation differently, we should reframe the initial aims to include among the basic needs also elements of choice, participation and freedom, all elements fundamentally implied by the concept of capability. (Alkire, 2002: 170) The important insight of the capability approach, when compared to needs based theory, consists exactly in this explicit and crucial focus on people's choice and participation related to the element of freedom, which is constitutive of the concept of capability.

These considerations allow Alkire to conclude that the capability approach, when compared to human needs perspectives, and in operational terms, 'is a wider,

philosophically more rigorous way of conceiving poverty reduction in relation to the full life'. (2002: 167) This is due to the explicit and consistent value it assigns to people's choice and participation and their relation to freedom in the pursuit of well-being. (Alkire, 2002: 170) I maintain that Alkire's account has important implications for conceptualising education within the capability framework. More specifically, her account of basic capabilities helps in reconsidering how concepts of educational needs may be subsumed within the wider and theoretically more rigorous concept of educational capability. However, here some further, albeit brief reference to the relation between theories based on needs and the capability approach are due.

Sen has outlined a number of critiques of theories based on human needs and claims that the concept of basic needs is subsumed in the capability approach. (Sen, 1984; Alkire, 2002: 166-170) The relation between the two approaches is a matter of debate and Alkire herself, among others, has counter-argued some of Sen's critiques with reference to the literature on human needs. Nevertheless, two aspects of this debate are particularly significant. The first relates to the supposed passive element inscribed in the concept of needs when compared to capability, while the second concerns the lack of philosophical foundations in needs theories. (Sen, 1984, 514) Sen's argument on the alleged passivity encouraged by the language of needs has similarities with the critique put forward, for instance, by disabled people's movements with reference to concepts of special educational needs. Sen maintains,

Needs is a more passive concept than 'capability' and it is arguable that the perspective of positive freedom links naturally with capabilities (what can the person do?) rather than with the fulfilment of their needs (what can be done for the person?) (1984:514)

However, as Alkire notices, this critique is valid insofar as the language of needs does actually assign passivity and helplessness to the needy, a condition which she does not ascribe to theories on basic human needs. Moreover, even if valid at semantic level, the passivity inscribed in needs has to be analysed, since 'to say that one has a need is not to say that one lacks the capacity to go out and fulfil it'. (Brighouse, 2004, personal communication)¹ Hence Alkire's understanding of basic capabilities seems to better capture this element of opportunity for fulfilment both theoretically and operationally.

¹ Thanks to H. Brighouse and T. McLaughlin for this insight.

Sen's second critique concerns the alleged absence of philosophical foundation and accounts of well-being and the 'good life' from theories of needs. Although a thorough analysis of this critique is beyond the scope of this paper, I shall briefly outline two considerations. First, Alkire maintains that this alleged absence of philosophical foundations from theories of needs appears to be substantive at least with reference to development economics, where theorisation followed more practical responses to contingent conditions (2002: 170). Second, this seems to be generally consistent also with some aspects of theories in education, and in particular with perspectives on special educational needs in the current educational debate. An example is the 1978 Warnock Report on Special Educational Needs in England (DES, 1978). The Report aimed at addressing issues of pressing concern related to the discrimination and segregation of disabled children. Despite a reference to the attainment of educational aims as an account of what is valuable, the Report's rather unspecified theoretical framework has led to a lack of common definitions of special educational needs. This seems to support, albeit only generally, Sen's and Alkire's positions with respect to the absence of explicit philosophical foundations in accounts of needs.

Let us now sum up the main elements of the argument addressed so far. Analysing Sen's concept of basic capability and its specification by Alkire has highlighted how the idea of basic capability, understood as the capability to meet basic needs, whilst implying a precise idea of needs, inscribes it in a substantial philosophical perspective. Fundamental elements of this perspective are the overall aim of well-being and individuals' choice and participation. These elements are absent from, or at least implicit, in theories of human needs. I maintain that Alkire's account of basic capabilities presents interesting implications for a possible understanding of education as basic capability. Before addressing this aspect, however, I shall analyse Bernard Williams' understanding of basic capability, which, as I shall argue in the next section, is also particularly relevant in thinking of education.

Williams understands basic as fundamental capabilities in the sense of some invariant, underlying capabilities, which are 'derived from some universal and fundamental facts about human beings'. (Williams, 1985: 101) His reference to the capability to appear in public without shame is particularly useful in understanding the precise meaning of fundamental capabilities. Williams recalls Sen's use of Adam Smith's example of the man who cannot appear in public without shame, given the cultural and social arrangements he lives in, unless he can wear a linen shirt. In Williams' understanding, although the requirements in order to appear in

public without shame depend on specific contexts, the invariant, fundamental capability at play here is the capability to 'command the material of self-respect'. (1985:101) And it is in this sense, according to Williams, that certain capabilities are basic, in that they are fundamental to human well-being. Moreover, these capabilities are distinct from more trivial ones, like those associated to the commodities of choosing from an increased range of washing powders. (1985:98)

Ingrid Robeyns suggests that in Williams' use, basic capabilities have to be understood as 'deeper, foundational, generic, general, aggregated (not over persons but over different capabilities in one person) capabilities'. (Robeyns, 2001:12) Robeyns notices that the use of basic in the sense of fundamental capabilities is implemented in several empirical studies based on the capability approach. Drawing on these, she argues that

we could think of fundamental capabilities as including the following: being sheltered and living in a pleasant and safe environment; health and physiological well-being; education and knowledge; social relations and interactions; emotional and psychological well-being; safety and bodily integrity. (Robeyns: 2001: 12)

How do these fundamental capabilities compare with those outlined as basic in the sense of meeting basic needs? Here Robeyns' suggestion appears particularly interesting. She maintains that

A person's capabilities consists of a number of fundamental capabilities which are each made up by a number of more specific capabilities, some of which are basic and some of which are non-basic. The basic capability of a person is then some kind of aggregate of the basic capabilities in each of these different fundamental capabilities. (2001:13)

According to this conceptualisation, we can think of the fundamental capability of being sheltered and living in a pleasant and safe environment as including basic capabilities like having a place where to live, living in a safe area and having access to water, and non-basic capabilities like choosing one's water supplier. Hence fundamental capabilities are broader than basic capabilities, but retain the foundational importance for well-being expressed by basic capabilities.

Let me now summarise the main points of the discussion. First, through the analysis of Alkire's work, I have outlined how basic capabilities can be conceptualised as capabilities to meet basic needs. Here the idea of basic capability retains the fundamental requirement associated to human needs, whilst inscribing it in a philosophical approach concerned with people's capabilities and well-being. Second, analysing Williams' understanding of basic capabilities has highlighted the fundamental and foundational dimension of capabilities. I maintain that these

perspectives provide us with a framework for conceptualising education as a basic and fundamental capability, essential to the expansion of future capabilities, and upon which to outline elements of an entitlement in education. Next section will explore this conceptualisation.

2. On Education as a Basic Capability

In this section I outline a conceptualisation of education as basic capability, which draws on the perspectives presented so far. More specifically, I argue that the capability to be educated can be considered basic in two interrelated respects. First, in that absence or lack of education would essentially harm or substantially disadvantage the individual. Education thus conceived responds to the basic need of the individual to be educated. Second, since education 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. Following this conceptualisation, I maintain that the capability to be educated entails the selection of specific subsets of enabling conditions, which are fundamental to it. It also requires a set of methodological criteria for the selection. Let's analyse this understanding in more detail.

The first facet in which education can be considered a basic capability relates to its crucial importance for people's well-being. The capability to be educated is basic, since absence or lack of education would essentially harm and disadvantage the individual. This is specifically, albeit not solely the case for children, where absence of education, both in terms of informal learning and schooling, determines a disadvantage which proves difficult, and in some cases impossible, to compensate in later life. Perhaps the most striking example of this need to education is represented by the case of feral children. Studies of feral children², children who lived in the wild or in cages, and deprived of any form of learning for a substantial part of their childhood, show the profound harm caused by the absence of education. In these cases, not only language functionings and broader communicative functionings are substantially harmed, but also reasoning and learning functionings are compromised. This highlights the importance of education for the formation of human capabilities and, more generally, appears to confirm our

² See for example Curtiss (1997) Candland (1993) Lieber (2001)

understanding of the capability to be educated as responding to a person's basic need, in its specification in terms of avoiding harm and disadvantage.

However, a further aspect of the capability to be educated relates to its more context-dependence if compared, for instance, to the capability to be well nourished. It seems that the capability to be educated, in order to avoid disadvantage to the individual, implies considerations on the design of social arrangements, which are more relevant in the case of education than in that of hunger. Hence, determining the level at which a person is considered well-nourished seems more straightforward than adjudicating the level at which a person is educated. This relates to considerations on the complexity of education, which are well captured in the second understanding of education as basic capability.

Education is basic also in the sense of being a fundamental capability, and foundational to other capabilities as well as future ones. Consider, for instance, the case of learning mathematics. Learning maths not only expands the individual's various functionings related to mathematical reasoning and problem solving, but also widens the individual's sets of opportunities and capabilities with respect, on the one hand, to more complex capabilities and, on the other, to better prospects for opportunities in life. The broadening of capabilities entailed by education extends to the advancement of complex capabilities, since while promoting reflection, understanding, information and awareness of one's capabilities, education promotes at the same time the possibility to formulate exactly the valued beings and doings that the individual has reasons to value. On the other hand, the expansion of capabilities entailed by education extends to choices of occupations and certain levels of social and political participation. Learning maths may lead to choosing to become an accountant or a maths teacher, for instance, as well as promote one's civic participation in different forms. These considerations lead to an understanding of education as fundamental capability, which includes basic capabilities, in terms of those enabling beings and doings that are fundamental in meeting the basic need to be educated but equally foundational to the promotion and expansion of higher, more complex capabilities.

Thinking of education as fundamental capability in the above meaning, relates substantially to an understanding of education as a complex good entailing instrumental and intrinsic values. (See Brighouse, 2000; Saito, 2003; Unterhalter and Brighouse, 2003; Swift 2003) Education has an instrumental aspect, since it is a means to other valuable goods, like better life prospects, career opportunities and civic participation. It improves one's opportunities in life. In this sense education,

and specifically schooling, promotes the achievement of important levels of knowledge and skills acquisition, which play a vital role in agency and well-being. On the other hand, education is intrinsically good, is valuable in itself, in that being educated, other things equal, enhances the possibility to appreciate and engage in a wide range of activities which are fulfilling for their own sake. For instance, being initiated through education into the appreciation of poetry, or aspects of the wildlife in natural environments, or different kinds of music, relates to a personal fulfilment which is not instrumental in securing better jobs or positions, but brings about a more fulfilling life. Ultimately, the instrumental and intrinsic aspects of education relate to the enhancement of freedom, both in terms of well-being freedom and agency freedom

The fundamental contribution of education to the flourishing of individuals and their quality of life is well attested by empirical researches. Sen highlights, for instance, the benefits related to the education of women, both in broadening their freedom to exercise agency and its correlation to a reduction in infant mortality. (1999: 198) Numerous studies show significant statistical correlations between education and changes in different aspects of people's lives: more educated people live longer, healthier lives and transmit more material and cultural benefits to their children (Ferri et al. 2003). A recent qualitative study in the UK on the wider benefits of learning shows that education impacts on people's psychological and physical well-being, family life and communication between generations, as well as people's ability and motivation to take part in civic life. The study furthermore highlights the benefits of education both for agency freedom and well-being freedom. As Schuller et al. write

The important function it [education] provides is enabling people to have a sense of a future for themselves, for their families and perhaps also for their communities, which they can to some extent control or influence. Several of our respondents spoke about having a sense of agency which they did not have before. In other words, education provides a kind of choice in life ... the notion of choice (and therefore some degrees of personal autonomy) is present in ways which did not previously exist and horizons are extended beyond what might have been imagined. (Schuller et al. 2004: 190)

These empirical studies confirm the value of education as fundamental capability as well as foundational to different capabilities. They show the role of education as having sustained and transformative effects as well as highlighting the interconnectedness of the effects of learning.

Let's now reconsider the initial question related to how we can think of education as a basic capability. I have outlined how the capability to be educated is basic in two interrelated ways. First, since absence or lack of education would essentially harm or

disadvantage the individual, hence the capability to be educated is essential to well-being. Second, and following from the previous reasons, education is a fundamental capability whilst being foundational to the expansion of other capabilities.

Having addressed, albeit only very provisionally, the ways in which the capability to be educated can be considered a basic capability, my task is now to outline what functionings and capabilities are constitutive of education thus conceptualised. This task has two interrelated dimensions. The first consists in determining what is the subset of functionings and capabilities basically constitutive of education, whereas the second refers to the criteria for determining these constituents. It is, in short, the problem of providing a possible list of basic functionings and capabilities in education and of determining the principles underlying it. This is a debated problem, since, as known, on the one hand, Sen has not provided a definite list of valuable capabilities. He maintains that such a list should be the result of a democratic process involving debate and participation by those who will be affected by the choice. In this sense, the list would be context-dependent. On the other hand, however, Sen has also recognised how basic capabilities imply an absolute level, which is not related to the specification of the context and which can be therefore identified independently of the relative picture. Robeyns argues that Sen's approach, as general normative framework, is not in conflict with specifying a list of capabilities aimed at a determined purpose. (Robeyns, 2003: 15) In this sense, my task is trying to ascertain what functionings and capabilities are constitutive of education as basic capability, hence a priori of determined contexts, whilst also aiming at operationalising capability for the purpose of education. Finally, this task highlights how the criteria for selecting relevant functionings and capabilities play a fundamental role. Let's start by analysing the criteria.

In order to address how criteria are fundamental for selecting functionings and capabilities and what criteria we should adopt in education, I shall refer again to Alkire's monograph. (2002) Recall here Alkire's two main principles in outlining basic capabilities for poverty reduction: capabilities should be identified in terms of capabilities to meet basic needs, hence avoiding harm to the person, and they should be expressed at a general level. I maintain that these two principles by which education is selected as a basic capability are workable also at the level of identifying the subset of capabilities constitutive of it. If education is basic in terms of fundamental for well-being, then its components are equally fundamental to it, since they all contribute to avoid harm or disadvantage, thus meeting the first criterion.

Furthermore, they can be expressed at the requested level of generality, thus meeting the second criterion (an aspect that I shall address in more detail below).

However, applying these two criteria at the level of identification of functionings and capabilities constitutive of a capability –education – that is already expressed as basic implies explicitly addressing a potential theoretical problem. This consists in avoiding the possibility of an infinite regress³ to basic and yet more basic components. Say we think of education as basic capability and then subsequently specify among its fundamental components thinking, and we then proceed to define thinking as a functioning that depends on a more basic functioning, that of wanting to think, and so on, we are caught in a conceptual infinite regress. We need to make sure that the functioning specified is basic and does not imply more basic components to it. Here the identified criteria for selection are crucial in that they have to determine specifically those functionings and capabilities, which are absolutely constitutive of education. It is in this sense that the two criteria chosen by Alkire are necessary and applicable to my task, yet perhaps not entirely sufficient to it. In my view, in order to avoid the potential danger of ‘infinite regress’, the criteria have to explicitly include the principle of exhaustion and non-reducibility, as presented by Robeyns in her account of relevant capabilities for gender inequalities. The criterion of exhaustion and non-reducibility requires the elements of the list to be comprehensive, thus including all the important ones, and not overlapping. (2003: 17) True, the criterion of avoiding harm could necessarily and sufficiently select only those elements that are basically constitutive of education. Yet, given the complex dimension of education, it seems that a principle explicitly eliciting elements that are exhaustive and mutually exclusive, hence elements that include all the important and relevant components and that are non reducible to others, can more effectively select basic capabilities in education.

There are interesting intersections between Alkire’s criteria and Robeyns’ ones. Robeyns lists five principles upon which to select functionings to address gender inequality. (2003) They entail: explicit formulation, methodological justification, sensitivity to context and level of generality as well as exhaustion and non-reduction, mentioned above. The first criterion expresses the necessity to formulate the list explicitly and to defend it theoretically. The second refers to expressing the method

³ See Crocker, D. (1995) in Nussbaum, for a clarification of this theoretical problem, p. 154 n.1

that has guided the selection for the list, and the third implies acknowledgment and engagement with the debate to which the list itself is relevant. (2003: 15-18) In theorizing basic capabilities in education, we should therefore formulate a list that is explicit and defended also with reference to the methods adopted in devising it and to the relevant educational debate. The first three principles have been indirectly addressed in considering issues of education as basic capability and, to a certain extent, can be thought of as subsumed in that. However, the fourth, identifying the appropriate level of generality, which is in common with Alkire's position, is specifically important in determining the basic constituents of education. Robeyns suggests that we can think of the generality of the list at two levels: an ideal level, drawn on procedural aspects, and a more empirical level, where considerations derived from sets of data can modify or alter the original ideal selection. (Robeyns, 2003: 17) In this sense, a list of subsets of capabilities basically foundational to education can be devised at an ideal level, based on principles such as that of avoiding harm and disadvantage to the individual and with comparisons to broad curricular requirements. The same list, however, could be devised at a more empirical level, taking into account the specificity of a certain situation and the availability of sets of data upon which to formulate the selection. Given my aim of theoretically determining a subset of capabilities fundamental to education conceptualised as basic capability, a certain ideal, general level of specification seems appropriate.

To sum up, the criteria for identifying basic functionings and capabilities in education include the following:

- ✍ Functionings and capabilities should be identified in terms of meeting basic needs, hence avoiding harm and disadvantage;
- ✍ They should be identified at an ideal level of generality;
- ✍ They should be exhaustive and non-reducible.

These criteria for selecting relevant functionings and capabilities in education provide us with a methodological basis on which to proceed to the core of the task at hand, which consists in determining what subsets of enabling conditions – beings and doings – are fundamental to education. This is what I shall address in the final section of this paper.

3. Selecting Capabilities in Education

What subset of enabling conditions is fundamental in education? Selecting basic capabilities in education is a complex task hence my account of this aspect aims necessarily at indicating some possible developments, rather than at providing a complete and exhaustive account. Moreover, selecting basic capabilities in education means looking at what beings and doings are at the same time crucial to meeting basic needs, hence avoiding harm for the individual, and foundational to the enhancement of other beings and doings both in education and for other capabilities. We are looking here at certain enabling conditions whose absence would put the individual at a considerable disadvantage. At the same time, moreover, we are looking at enabling conditions whose exercise is particularly, albeit not solely, important in childhood, since, as Nussbaum notices, ‘exercising a functioning in childhood is frequently necessary to produce a mature adult capability.’ (Nussbaum, 2000: 90) Interesting insights in this sense can be drawn from the concept of ‘serving competencies’ and the relative list developed by Charles Bailey (1984) in his analysis of the aims and contents of liberal education⁴.

Bailey suggests that a considerable part of education, and especially much of the elementary one,

must of necessity be instrumental, not in the sense of serving specifically prescribed purposes beyond ... education, but rather in the sense of making the more substantive objectives of such an education attainable. This is especially the case in the early stages ...when young pupils must learn how to learn, by acquiring the appropriate means, skills and dispositions. (1984: 111)

Bailey identifies these means, skills and dispositions as the ‘serving competencies’ needed to achieve subsequent educational aims and claims that there is indeed little dispute over their choice and relevance. I maintain that the concept of serving competencies presents similarities with that of basic capabilities in education and that the list can provide a useful reference for the selection of basic capabilities. In this sense, considering serving competencies as functional capacities, which allow the attainments of subsequent objectives, implies that their absence would substantially put the individual at disadvantage. The similarity between the two concepts resides here in the fact that both relate to constitutive elements, necessary to the achievement of further aims in education and beyond it. However, the clearly cut instrumental value that Bailey ascribes to serving competencies cannot be referred to

⁴ Thanks to Terry McLaughlin for this suggestion.

basic functionings and capabilities in education. It seems plausible to argue that, given the intrinsic and instrumental value of education (see above), beings and doings fundamental to it are both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable as well. Moreover, this claim appears substantiated when analysing Bailey's list of serving competencies.

In Bailey's account, serving competencies include literacy, numeracy, logical reasoning, appropriate dispositions, physical fitness and computer skills. The list, contextualised within liberal education and drawn up when computers' technology was still at an initial stage, includes basic elements foundational to education, whose value, however, seems to go beyond the purely instrumental one that Bailey assigns them. Literacy, to mention but one, whilst being a basic constituent of education and whilst instrumentally allowing the achievement of other educational aims beyond reading and writing as techniques per se, certainly has an intrinsic value as well. Hence serving competencies, understood beyond the level of learning techniques, present an instrumental and indeed an intrinsic value, in that showing a further similarity with basic capabilities in education. However, the interesting insight provided by serving competencies resides primarily in the outlining of some foundational elements, and in their selection in a list. The latter constitutes a useful element of reference and comparison upon which building an account of basic enabling conditions.

What are, ultimately, these enabling conditions constitutive of education? I suggest the following list of basic capabilities for educational functionings, at the ideal level:

- ✍ Literacy: being able to read and to write, to use language and discursive reasoning functionings.
- ✍ Numeracy: being able to count, to measure, to solve mathematical questions and to use logical reasoning functionings.
- ✍ Sociality and participation: being able to establish positive relationships with others and to participate without shame.
- ✍ Learning dispositions: being able to concentrate, to pursue interests, to accomplish tasks, to enquire.
- ✍ Physical activities: being able to exercise and being able to engage in sports activities.
- ✍ Science and technology: being able to understand natural phenomena, being knowledgeable on technology and being able to use technological tools.

- ✍ Practical reason: being able to relate means and ends and being able to critically reflect on one's and others' actions.

While presenting relevant similarities with Bailey's serving competencies, this subset of basic capabilities in education complies with the principles outlined as important to its selection, in that absence of these elements would constitute disadvantage for the individual. Moreover, none of the capabilities appears essentially reducible to others and the list is fairly exhaustive with respect to the foundational elements relevant to education. Furthermore, the list is expressed at a certain level of generality, hence allowing for more specific lists to be drawn from it in relation to the relevant context. Finally, the use of 'being able to' in expressing capabilities implies here also the opportunity, the possibility entailed by the concept of capability, rather than simply the common understanding of 'to be able to' in terms of ability. A more detailed analysis of each capability can help in better substantiating this position.

There is indeed little dispute about literacy as fundamental in education. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are all essential functionings as well as constitutive of communication functionings and entailing discursive reasoning at different levels. Furthermore, being able to express oneself in different forms, with respect to thoughts as well as imagination, creativity and belief, is also constitutive of literacy broadly conceived. In this sense, as Bailey notices, 'here is the first great practice of human agents into which children must be initiated.' (1984: 111) Numeracy, also, pertains to the core of education, and with it functionings such as counting, ordering, comparing, estimating, measuring, and all the functionings related to logical reasoning as one of the ways of making sense of the world and of one's agency in it. Sociality and participation are fundamental functionings in education in different, but related ways. Establishing positive relationships with others allows for personal and social development, which is consistently proven by educators as fundamental to learning. Much learning is promoted and sustained by social functionings such as cooperating, being part of a group, supporting or being supported by others. Related to sociality, participation is also crucial in education and more so, when considering the essential role it plays in the exercise of agency. In this sense, the capability of positively participating in educational activities, may well promote the adult mature capability so important for Sen's approach. Learning dispositions entail functionings related to the actual learning process, thus possibilities to concentrate, accomplish tasks and achieve aims, as well as enquiring and imagining. Physical activities play the important role of maintaining health and general bodily well-being, while also developing bodily awareness and mobility. Science and technology apply to all those

possibilities to engage in the understanding of the natural world and its manifestation, as well as developing functionings related to the knowledge and use of technology. Finally, practical reason. Analysing what constitutes practical reason and its role as an educational capability would take this discussion too far from its topical point. However, some considerations may help in justifying its inclusion in this subset of enabling conditions. Nussbaum suggests a notion of practical reason in terms of 'the ability to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' (2000: 97). She furthermore assigns practical reason a central and crucial role among capabilities, maintaining that it is this kind of reason that makes a life truly human. Although I endorse Nussbaum's position on the importance of practical reason, hers is a substantial notion, whose promotion through education would entail complex and high levels of capabilities. It appears, therefore, that in selecting basic constituents of education, a 'thinner' understanding of practical reason may comply more with the task, whilst still retaining its crucial importance as a capability. Hence practical reason in this context is specified as the ability to relate means and ends and to reflect on actions. This, on the one hand relates to the ability to evaluate and to form independent judgements, whilst, on the other, establishing the prerequisites for the more mature capability to exercise practical reason in terms of forming a conception of the good and planning one's life.

Having analysed the elements of the list let me now address three sets of considerations: a comparison with Bailey's proposal, a further one with Nussbaum's list of Central Human Capabilities and a broader objection to some elements of the list.

There are evident overlaps between this list and Bailey's serving competencies, as well as notable differences. Among the latter, one needs to be addressed. Bailey selected logical reasoning among the competencies he deemed necessary for a certain kind of liberal education. I have instead maintained reasoning as subsumed in literacy and numeracy, thus presenting it contextualised in terms of discursive and logical reasoning. Furthermore, I have included the capability of practical reason in terms of relating means and ends and evaluating actions, thus implying a form of logical reasoning, albeit more morally oriented. This is a debatable position, since some educationists argue that learning reasoning skills has to be done per se, as well in association to other skills. However, at a basic level the reasoning entailed by literacy and numeracy, as well as by other capabilities like sociality and practical reason seems to respond adequately to the task of identifying educational enabling conditions.

Comparing this list of basic educational capabilities with Nussbaum's Central Human Functional Capabilities (2000: 78-79) appears also interesting and shows consistent overlaps between the two. In particular, two insights derived from considering Nussbaum's 'Senses, Imagination, and Thought' and 'Practical Reason' are significant in this context. The first relates to the similarities between capabilities constitutive of 'Senses, Imagination and Thought' and the capabilities selected at an educational basic level. More specifically, Nussbaum refers there to capabilities such as imagining, thinking, reasoning, as well as using imagination and thought in relation to self-expression. Moreover, Nussbaum connects these capabilities and their cultivation to the role of an adequate education, consisting of, albeit not limited to, 'literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training'. (2000: 79) The second insight relates to the understanding of practical reason and more generally to the possibility to include capabilities concerned with the acquisition and development of a conception of the good as well as of critical reflection on one's life. As seen, I have included practical reason in terms of reflecting on the relation between means and ends and on actions, rather than in the more substantive terms of forming a conception of the good in relation to one's life. This latter understanding appears as pertaining more to higher levels of capabilities, both in terms of educational and general capabilities. However, the level identified can be considered a first initiation to the more demanding aspect required by forming a conception of the good. This is certainly a debatable issue and my discussion in this context, as said previously, aims primarily at identifying questions, rather than providing a comprehensive account.

There is a consistent objection that can be raised with respect to the subsets of enabling conditions identified as constitutive to the capability to be educated. This relates to the possible understanding of the elements of the list as expression of a 'dominant' conception of education. For instance, literacy as expressed in the selection may be considered 'elitist' in the sense of reflecting the norm of the people in power. The objection relates also the possible use of literacy, or any other element of the list, as a means of discrimination and reproduction of structural inequalities⁵. I maintain that the answer to this objection rests on providing a justified account of the

⁵ Perspectives in sociology of education relate the use of hegemonic forms of culture and education to the oppression and subordination of groups of people, for example disabled people, or people in lower socio-economic classes. Among the vast literature on this aspect, see, for instance, Ball S., Evans K. (2003), Freire P. (1998) Oliver and Barnes (1998).

kinds of opportunities for functionings required to be participant members of specific social arrangements. Literacy, in the specific, plays a substantial role in our society, and its inclusion in the subsets of enabling conditions appears necessary precisely in order to avoid inequalities. The 'specific' form that literacy will take is evidently context-dependent, and more complex social and economic arrangements will require certain forms of literacy rather than others.

Finally, a last comment on the reasons why this subset of capabilities for educational functionings constitutes an educational entitlement and its provision a matter of justice. As seen, the capability to be educated relates to the need of education in order to avoid harm or disadvantage to the individual. It is also fundamental and foundational to different and future capabilities. Since absence or lack of education would essentially harm the person, or put her at a considerable disadvantage both for present and for future capabilities, the basic capability to be educated, specified in a subset of enabling conditions, is an essential component of well-being. Since within the space of capabilities, justice and equality relate to the substantive freedom people have to choose the life they value, hence their substantive well-being freedom, the basic and fundamental capability to be educated, and its constitutive elements, are crucial part of this account of justice.

A concluding comment concerns the provisional nature of my account. The conceptualisation of education as basic capability, and the subset of capabilities for educational functionings that ensues, are intended as very preliminary and subject to discussion and revision. I maintain that the fundamental role education plays in people's well-being demands further and more extensive analysis of these and related issues.

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