

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A capability approach to children's well-being, agency and participatory rights in education

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Abstract

This article applies a capability approach to examine how children's agency, well-being and participation rights can be developed and supported in educational settings. We introduce Amartya Sen's concepts of agency and well-being freedoms and achievements to highlight the tensions and trade-offs between risks to children's agency and well-being in and through educational processes. We draw upon selected empirical examples to illustrate this relationship further. By positioning the development of children's agency as an explicit and important goal of education, alongside well-being achievement, we aim to broaden the evaluative space for assessing what constitutes quality in children's education. We conclude with some reflections on implications for policy and practice going forward.

1 | INTRODUCTION

More than a third of the global population is between zero and 18 years of age (UN DESA, 2017),¹ with some of the least developed countries having half or more of their population under 18 (UNFPA, 2014, pp. 2, 3; World Bank, 2017).² Children worldwide frequently perform traditionally conceived adult roles and responsibilities. For example, the total number of children orphaned in sub-Saharan Africa is expanding, reaching 48.3 million at the end of 2005, with around a third orphaned as a result of the AIDS epidemic. These children often halt their education to take on work and caring responsibilities, often acting as heads of households (UNICEF, 2006, p. iv). Children taking on traditionally conceived adult roles also occurs in affluent countries and in the UK, for instance, it is estimated that there are 1 in 20 children and young people taking on mid- to high-level care for an ill or disabled family member (Hounsell, 2013). Thus, our interest in children's participation rights, well-being and flourishing is by no means limited to the global South and our discussion concerns children of all ages, irrespective of geographical location.

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We argue that our contemporary global landscape is scattered with variable judgements of children's legitimate agency, demanding a re-examination of the relationships between children's competences, freedoms and well-being. Children are simultaneously in processes of being and becoming.³ This requires a balancing of their interests as vulnerable beings and as competent and active agents in their lives and those of others. The school, as a primary sphere in which many children develop, grow and learn,⁴ plays a fundamental role in framing how this balance between protection and participation plays off and it is in relation to this space that we locate our discussion.

A capability approach allows us to expand the evaluative space for understanding the role of education in promoting human flourishing (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Hart, 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). By going beyond an outcome-based understanding of schooling, focusing rather on the processes whereby children flourish and the opportunities that the school offers students to be and to become what they value and to what they aspire, a capability approach provides relevant guidelines for alternative education policies that put the children (in all their facets) at centre stage. Thus, we begin by introducing Amartya Sen's capability approach as a framework to assess human flourishing and then bring Sen's approach into conversation with a rights-based account of child well-being and agency. We then explore the relationships between children's freedoms, achievements and competences. In drawing the discussion to a close, we explore the potential implications of the article's argument for educational policy and practices.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH⁵

As a response to approaches to human development that focus exclusively on resources, utility, desire satisfaction and aggregated markers of advantage, Amartya Sen has consistently argued that freedom and a person's own values play a key role in assessing quality of life (Sen, 1985, 1999, 1985, 1999, 2009). Thus, an evaluation of the quality of a human life should look at both the process whereby an individual's outcomes are achieved and the outcomes themselves. Sen intends to expand the evaluative spaces for assessing individual advantage. Whilst a person's well-being is an important aspect of human flourishing, Sen observes that it is not "unique" in this respect; humans have values and "goals other than well-being" (Sen, 1985, p. 186). He considers four key elements as defining the space of human flourishing and value (see Table 1). *Well-being achievement* encompasses the combination of achieved beings and doings that are constitutive of one's well-being (*functionings*). *Well-being freedom* refers to the range of substantial freedoms (*capabilities*) "to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's well-being" (Sen, 1992, p. 57).⁶ Being well-nourished, for example, would be a functioning which contributes to well-being achievement and having the freedom to be well-nourished would be a capability (Sen, 1985).⁷

But human flourishing goes beyond well-being interests. Sen includes agency (freedom and achievement) as two other fundamental features. *Agency freedom* is described as "one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and attempts to produce" (Sen, 1992, p. 57). *Agency achievement* is "the realisation of goals one has reason to pursue" which "need not be guided by her own well-being" (pp. 56, 57). A core tenant of Sen's

TABLE 1 Sen's space of evaluation of human flourishing

	Freedom	Achievement
Well-being	<i>Well-being freedom</i> – the freedom to achieve ways of living one has reason to value (reflecting capability)	<i>Well-being achievement</i> – ways of living that one has reason to value (constituting 'functionings')
Agency	<i>Agency freedom</i> – freedom to pursue goals with influence beyond oneself and that one has reason to value	<i>Agency achievement</i> – achieving goals with influence beyond oneself and that one has reason to value

Adapted from Hart, 2007, p. 35

approach is, thus, that beyond *well-being achievement*, which is the standard focus of concern when discussing human flourishing and quality of life (especially in the case of children), we need to attach value to a person's *well-being freedom*, *agency freedom* and *agency achievement*. This is because: first, people's freedoms and valued beings and doings that do not relate directly to their well-being are as structural to life as being well-nourished or healthy; and, second, because there is concern with a political system that intrudes in what particular individuals consider as valuable and in how they decide to lead their life. We propose that society's duty is to ensure that the conditions, protections and spaces are in place for individuals to choose for themselves how to make use of them whilst avoiding harm to others.

By distinguishing between well-being and agency, we highlight two core features of a person's life that we argue ought to be guaranteed and enabled, whilst clarifying the two different forms in which these two values should be ensured (as achievements and freedoms). This allows us to grasp the diversity of children's interests and the different forms in which our standard conceptions of well-being and participation may be framed and realised. It is not the same to say that a school cafeteria should ensure provision of healthy food choices (potentially supporting well-being freedom) as to say that it should ensure that students actually eat healthy food (potentially supporting well-being achievement). In the case of children, the tension between ensuring their achievements and their freedoms becomes prominent. Should they be free to be healthy? Or should they actually *be* healthy? A key objective of Sen's approach is to ensure that a person's freedom interests are not thwarted, although the particular condition of children, who may not make the best decisions when given freedom, may lead to more protective stances as to the rights and protections that they should have. Sen (2007, p. 9) considers this problem:

...there is a special problem in the case of children, since they do not, frequently enough, take their own decisions. If rights are interpreted in terms of freedoms that the right-holders should have, their usefulness must depend on how those freedoms are exercised. But can children take their own decisions? If the application of human rights to children must involve the children themselves taking well-considered decisions on the exercise of those freedoms then we would seem to be on the threshold of a manifest contradiction. Can children really take these decisions? But is that the right question?

The tension between protecting children's freedoms and achievements is at the core of discussions over children's rights (Lansdown, 2005). For our part, we follow a growing tradition of capability theorists who go beyond the opposition between freedoms and achievements during childhood by conceiving the possibility of framing children as capable social actors in certain fundamental aspects of their life (Biggeri, Ballet, & Comim, 2011; Hart, Biggeri, & Babic, 2014; James, Jenks, & Prout, 2012; Lessmann, Otto, & Ziegler, 2011). We explore how policy and practice could seek to maximise the development of children's freedoms (both *agency freedom* and *well-being freedom*) without overly compromising their *well-being achievement*. Is allowing children to choose whether or not to eat healthy food at school necessarily against their flourishing? Are there learning processes and mechanisms which would sustain their freedoms whilst not compromising their achievements? The dominant assumption that increasing children's freedom correlates with a reduction in their achievements (especially well-being) relies on preconceptions of their ability to effectively exercise freedoms and on an antagonistic understanding of the relation between freedoms and achievements during childhood. Hence, we wish to explore an alternative conceptualisation which does not necessarily oppose them and which shows sensitivity for children's varied competences and potentials. We can then devise alternative pedagogical and policy mechanisms which position children's freedom as fundamental for their life, whilst not leaving aside our concerns for their achievements.

This objective requires leaving aside generalised assumptions about children's incapacities and flaws and recognising their potential as social agents and responsible choosers. This stance also acknowledges that children are not a homogeneous group and that many young people are often able to express views about their values, aspirations and concepts of a flourishing life. Indeed, as they mature and develop communication competences and

the capacity for language, they may express their own desires for what they feel will lead to their own *well-being achievement* and *agency achievement*. Long before this, they may develop internal thoughts even if they are unable to express them. During childhood, young children frequently express a view about how they wish to behave which is countered by an adult who seeks to protect their 'best interests.' In the case of a three-year-old wishing to wear summer clothing in snow conditions, the intervention of an adult to curb the child's freedom in the interest of protecting her physical well-being can be seen as justified. However, the question of when it is in "the best interests" is much less straightforward as an individual's abilities grow and the consequences of poor decision-making are less obvious. We may be more willing to defer to a teenager's judgement in similar circumstances than to the three-year-old's wishes. Indeed, Mortlock (1987) argues that children are much more capable than they are often given credit for, noting, that, "there is a marked tendency in modern society for adults to consistently under-rate and undervalue the general capabilities of the young generation" (p.34). He gives examples of a 16-year-old glider pilot, a 12-year-old English Channel swimmer and a 13-year-old grade IV advanced white-water kayaker, illustrating that children and young people may well exceed adult expectations and achieve extraordinary things. We argue, thus, for going beyond a general presumption of inability and recognising children's potential to be considered as active agents who are able to exert influence beyond themselves and in ways that may enhance or diminish their own well-being.

We agree with Ballet, Biggeri, and Comim (2011, p. 25) that "applying the capability approach to children... entails taking a stand with regard to their capacity for self-determination". Moreover, fostering children's participation and freedom in the present can be fundamental for better ensuring the full set of capabilities that they require later on. This stems from the idea that developing and exercising communicative and deliberative competences and complex thought may be fundamental for children's development as full social and political actors (Biggeri & Karkara, 2014). By promoting participation during childhood, we take into account children's own priorities, values and aspirations in our assessment of what is owed to them (Hart et al., 2014, p. 9). Examples include instances where children take on roles as heads of household, as young carers, as Internet business entrepreneurs or through planned programmes of educational activities.⁸ By exercising *agency freedom*, they may willingly and knowingly make some kind of personal sacrifice to further the interests of others. Nonetheless, we aim to avoid the situation identified by Stoecklin and Bonvin (2014, p. 65) where, "in a reaction to overprotective or paternalistic conceptions of childhood, there is a tendency to consider children as competent agents regardless of their age." We also caution against the possibility that children may unwittingly compromise their well-being or not fully understand the consequences of their choices and actions in the short or longer term and the need to consider the potential risks and harms to others. The dilemma is acute where choices have costs and children having the right to choose ought to entail a capacity to understand the costs and consequences that stem from these choices (Sen, 1992, p. 59). This leads us to ask two pressing questions:

1. How can we ensure that children's *well-being achievements* and the *well-being achievements* of those impacted by them are sufficiently protected whilst at the same time fostering their *well-being freedoms* and *agency freedoms*?
2. What are the particular educational processes and conditions that may sustain a fertile relationship between *well-being freedom*, *agency freedom*, *well-being achievement* and *agency achievement*?

3 | CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: BALANCING ACHIEVEMENTS AND FREEDOMS

A short assessment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 2008) provides a useful starting point to explore ways of overcoming the "tension" between protecting well-being and freedom rights during childhood. Both the well-being and agency facets of a child's life are enshrined in the CRC as having protective (achievements) and

participatory (freedom) clauses. On the protective side, well-being achievement is reflected in various clauses that highlight protection and care for a child's well-being (Art. 3.2), assurance of life, survival and development (Art. 6), protection from physical or mental violence, abuse, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation (Arts. 19, 32, 33, 34, 36), or enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and access to health care services (Art 24.1). On the participatory side, the CRC also serves to protect well-being freedom. Article 17 calls for the provision of information via mass media and children's literature to promote "social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health." It promotes providing children with the information and guidance (appropriate to their particular stage of development; see Art. 5) required to develop the capabilities to pursue their own well-being achievement through the exercise of their own freedom.⁹

Agency freedoms are structural to the CRC. Children are entitled to form their own views and express them in all matters that affect them (Art. 12, 13), they are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and association (Art. 14, 15), their privacy should be respected (Art. 16) and they have right to play, to leisure and to participate in the cultural and social life of their community (Arts. 30, 31). All these are circumscribed and conditioned by the children's own particular "evolving capacities" through the "appropriate direction and guidance" of adults, in order for them to make the best use of them (Art. 5). It is precisely this point where the capability approach can offer crucial insight. Whilst the CRC recognises important protective and participatory rights, in order for children to flourish, they need to be able to convert these rights into capabilities, that is, to enjoy the respective protections and participation, not only a paper promise. We argue that conceptions of "appropriate direction and guidance" are mediated by attitudes and understandings of what constitutes a child's best interest, whether in relation solely to well-being achievement or to Sen's broader evaluative framework of well-being and agency freedoms and achievements. Moreover, a capability perspective emphasises the role of social and environmental conditions and what might be termed foundational, meta- or central human capabilities¹⁰ in order for children to have the possibility of realising the rights enshrined in the CRC.

Since there are numerous examples of children taking on roles as significant agents, it is arguable that the State and its educational processes have the potential and a duty to support child-agent friendly environments and the development of children's skills, knowledge and dispositions to enable them to exercise what Sen calls "critical agency". Sen (2002, p. 258) argues, "what is needed is not merely freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question prevailing norms and values. The pivotal issue is critical agency."¹¹ Indeed, Stoecklin and Bonvin (2014, p. 63) argue that, "participation rights contained in the UNCRC challenge traditional conceptions of childhood." They emphasise the obligation of States in the CRC to listen to children in matters that concern them and this in turn hinges on participation rights and their ability to be enacted. There is an element of scaffolding implied in the CRC wherein parents/guardians are charged with supporting minors in understanding and putting into practice their rights on matters that are of concern to them until they have developed the competence to judge for themselves when their rights are to be activated. The CRC can be seen as offering a normative framework for the way children's roles and entitlements to protection and freedom could be viewed. Of course, not all countries or cultures abide by this framework in whole or in part and thus we must consider how we develop children's critical agency and participation in society with and without it, and how educational institutions in particular may be considered as a source for fostering both aspects of human flourishing.

4 | THE FORMATION OF ASPIRATIONS, FREEDOMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

In order to see how this plural objective of protecting and freeing children can be achieved, we must look at the conditions and processes which allow this to happen. In this section, we explore the role that *conversion factors*¹² play in children's effective protection and participation and the particular relation between competences, freedoms and achievements in a child's development and learning process.

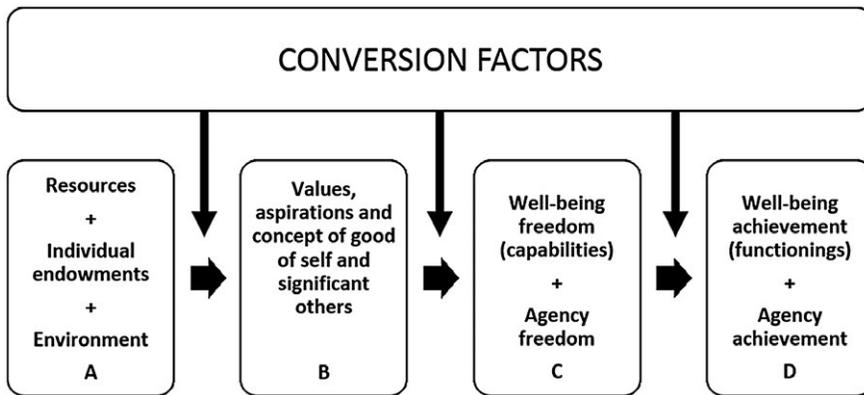


FIGURE 1 The formation of aspirations, freedoms and achievements

4.1 | Conversion factors

Conversion factors can be defined as the particular social, institutional and structural arrangements (preconditions) which allow a person's internal capacities and potentials to become effective options and freedoms. They range from legal structures, environmental and social conditions to the most specific resources and skills needed to exercise freedoms. To be free to read, for example, children not only have to possess particular cognitive skills, but they strongly depend on the appropriate external conditions that allow them to effectively exercise this freedom. First, education may help to convert children's latent capacities and endowments into actual competence as readers; they need access to language-appropriate literature and, very importantly, they need the social and legal system to protect their freedom to read. Beyond these, Hart (2012, p. 80) has written about *the capability to aspire* as a meta-capability and described an individual's "aspiration set" as an important conversion factor to develop many capabilities. The transition of values and aspirations into well-being and agency freedoms will depend on *conversion factors*, including the outlook of children's social milieu, of their guardians in particular and their own judgements of matters over which they aspire to have influence. These processes may be shaped by both the individuals' and their significant others' conceptions of a good life. These are all conversion factors (see Figure 1).

Individuals convert external resources and conditions into competences and freedoms in different ways (Sen, 1992, 2009). The same external conditions that make the streets safe to walk for an adult may not be sufficient for ensuring that children can safely walk. In other words, understanding how children's development processes take place implies a strongly relational understanding of the way individuals function and of the mechanisms with which they convert latent capacities into competences and freedoms (Clark & Ziegler, 2014). A balance must be found between what is required to ensure that children's interests are met (in the abstract) and the peculiarities of the children and their milieu which force a revision of theoretical models in order for them to ensure the conversion of external provisions and protections into substantial competences, capabilities and freedoms (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014; Biggeri & Santi, 2012).

4.2 | Competences, freedoms and achievements

If we wish to defend educational processes that promote a more participatory and active role for children, we must look at the relationship between the *freedoms* that we intend to guarantee, the *competences* that individuals require to exercise freedoms, and the *achievements* (particularly well-being achievements) that we intend to protect. We conceive freedom and its exercise as constrained by the two other dimensions, as illustrated in our "freedom-competence-achievement" model (Figure 2). Depending on the degree to which an individual is able to develop each of the three dimensions, one's potential to effectively exercise freedoms while not unduly harming one's achievements can be assessed.

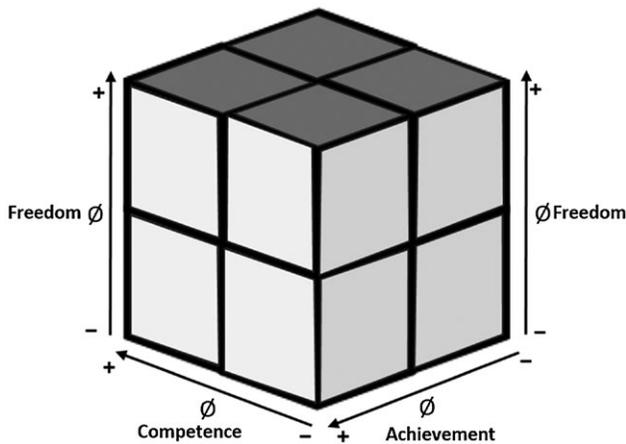


FIGURE 2 Freedom-competence-achievement cube matrix for an individual

Framing the relation between an individual's freedoms, achievements and competences is not black-and-white, but rather a matter of degrees (Crocker, 2008, p. 178). Instead of simply opposing a child's freedoms and achievements as antagonistic, we explore four potential scenarios that highlight the complex relationship between these two valued claims; and instead of conceiving the acquisition of competences as a have/have-not affair, we consider the particular and gradual process whereby competence sets are acquired in order to delimit the optimal spaces in which a child's freedoms may be enabled, whilst not affecting our protection of certain fundamental achievements.

Take the case of a simple freedom. Children who are free to ride a bicycle (assuming that the conversion factors are in place) are constrained (1) by their *competences* to exercise this freedom (Figure 2: front left face of the cube), and by (2) the risk of harm that such a freedom may impose on their *achievements* (Figure 2: front right face of the cube). That is, not only does the children's competences delimit their possibility of exercising this freedom, but, very importantly, our understanding of how much harm to their well-being achievement we are willing to risk also conditions it.

4.3 | Freedoms and achievements

Let us look at the relationship between each of these constraints separately. As we see it, there are four possible scenarios for the relation between achievements and freedoms (see Figure 3).¹³ The vertical axis reflects the scope of freedom that a child is allowed to exercise and the horizontal axis highlights the well-being and agency achievements to which a child has access. The relation between these two axes distinguishes four possible scenarios: \emptyset (stagnant), in which neither freedom nor achievement are ensured; A (coercive), in which there is a negative correlation between achievements (ensured) and freedoms (restricted); F (laissez-faire), in which the opposite negative correlation occurs (freedoms are permitted and achievements limited); and, finally, FA (optimal) in which freedom is enabled and achievements realised.

Children's location in these scenarios is strongly conditioned by how their guardians and teachers conceive their best interests. Neglectful rearing tends to lead to the lower-right space in Figure 3 (\emptyset -stagnant). Low protection from risks, lack in the conditions and resources that allow the children to be healthy and cared for, leave the children in a position in which their freedoms are constrained and their achievements harmed. The F-laissez-faire quadrant (upper-right) is usually enabled by its synonymous rearing style. Without adult control of any kind, children exercise their freedoms without restrictions, being free to choose what to eat and wear, where to go, what to do with their life and with whom to associate. Those falling into this area are not protected from risks that stem from their particularly vulnerable condition, nor provided with what they require for a healthy life.

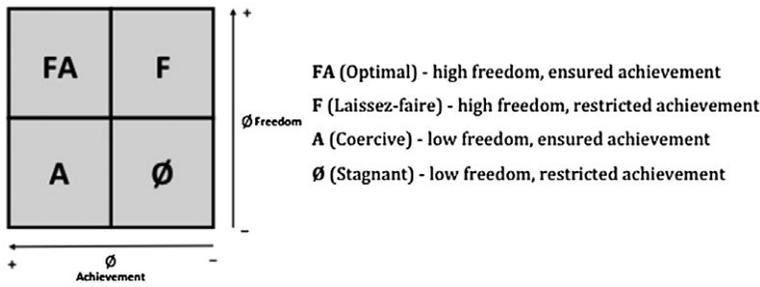


FIGURE 3 Magnification of freedom and achievement interactions

The A-coercive quadrant (lower-left) is how children are commonly viewed in the achievement-protective hegemonic paradigm. They are frequently positioned in this area, at least until they reach their teens, as needing protection from harms, being provided with what is considered by others to be good for them, regardless of the sacrifice to their freedom. This is based on the assumption that there is a *necessary* negative correlation between freedom and achievement: any increase in allowed freedom implies a reduction in the children's achieved well-being. By not being allowed to take risks, to make their own choices, or have a say in their affairs, they are ostensibly protected from threats to their well-being achievement that may come from their exercise of freedom. However, the strict provision of the conditions and resources to ensure well-being achievements comes at the expense of freedom.

There is, however, a fourth possible scenario: the FA-optimal quadrant (upper-left) in which well-being achievement is high, whilst freedoms are not curtailed. Children are not only granted freedoms to take control over their life and voice their claims, but this is done whilst ensuring that they are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy. Enabling children to reach this quadrant seems to be the objective. However, this is easier said than done: even if there is no negative correlation between freedoms and achievements, if we aim to optimise these in school, we must clarify the role played by competences in our evaluation of this optimal balance.

4.4 | Freedoms and competences

Normative conceptions of individuals' right to exercise freedoms are conditioned by their possession of the required competences to do so. When talking about competences, we do not assume that a particular skill is required for each freedom; rather, it depends on the acquisition of complex competence sets. The exercise of any freedom requires diverse competences (physical, emotional, cognitive or valued),¹⁴ which differ depending on the particular freedom at hand (the competences to ride a bike differ from those needed to perform heart surgery). The standard assumption that a freedom should only be granted if the person is "competent enough" to exercise it becomes too superficial: not only is a strict threshold that distinguishes a competent from an incompetent individual impossible to establish in many circumstances, but it may be that certain spaces of freedom are required for an individual to develop competence sets.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) to explain children's competence formation as a way of linking the processes of child development and learning. Our learning abilities and development are strongly conditioned by the transition periods which allow us to move from one "stage" of competence to another. The basic idea behind ZPD is that our potential to move to greater functions and form more complex competence sets is strongly tied to our being positioned in situations in which we do not have the competence but are allowed and fostered the freedom to exercise it in collaboration with others (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 85, 86).¹⁵

In educational practice, this is what Jerome Bruner and his colleagues described as "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1960; Ninio & Bruner, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Bruner claimed that placing children in situations and giving them tasks that are beyond their present level of competence with temporary adult support and guidance foster their engagement with the task at hand, learning through their confrontation with previously non-encountered

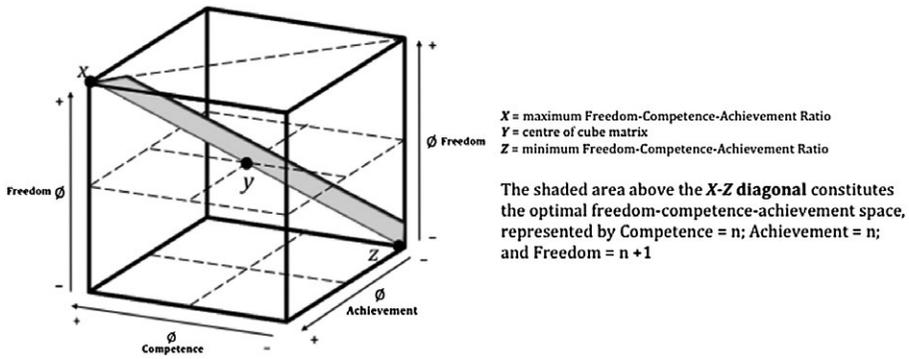


FIGURE 4 Freedom-competence-achievement cube matrix showing the optimal freedom-competence-achievement space for an individual

problems (Wood et al., 1976). Children develop much more stable systems of deliberation, understanding and self-government by being allowed to confront their own incompetence and by learning from it through their exercise of non-achieved freedoms with the support of others (Bruner, 1960, p. 33). Scaffolding thus entails the permissibility (and even necessity) of putting individuals who are yet unable to exercise a certain competence in situations in which they overcome their incapacities through their (guided) experimentation of failures, risks and success.

The structural role that ZPD plays in children's learning process leads us to consider how the educator should make use of these receptive stages in order to make the most of children's freedoms and their active participation. The outcome of a scaffolding pedagogical practice depends on educators' judgement on the appropriate trade-offs between potential harms and permissible risks; how they mediate between the two may lead to different (coercive, laissez-faire or optimal) pedagogical outcomes. Our basic claim is that, in deciding the way in which "the scaffold" must be placed, how much guidance should be given and how much support should be provided, the teacher should take into account not only how the scaffold may threaten the child's well-being achievements (by being too lenient), but also the harms it may cause to the child's active participation and freedoms (by being too strict).

We argue here that an FA-optimal scenario (in which well-being achievement is high, whilst allowing freedom to be exercised) can be reached if a relatively higher freedom as compared to competence is enabled (see Figure 4). The ample empty space in the figure encompasses the situations in which either too much freedom is granted in relation to the child's acquired competences, thus risking achievements (upper-right space in Figure 4); or in which too little freedom in relation to acquired competences is ensured, thus risking the child's freedom (lower-left space in Figure 4). The grey shaded area above the x - z diagonal in the matrix in Figure 4 constitutes the optimal freedom-competence-achievement space and is represented by competence = n , achievement = n , freedom = $n + 1$. If we shift from an assumption of necessary freedom/competence equivalence to one in which a ratio of freedom ($N + 1$), competence (N), achievement (N) is ensured to the child, (well-being) achievement is not only protected, but can even be fostered and guaranteed through the child's effective use of her own well-being and agency freedoms. We wish to consider how to maximise the potential that educators and carers have in fostering this optimal freedom-competence-achievement space.

When a child has not yet developed the full competence set to cycle, it may be agreed by the child and her carers that suffering a few bumps and bruises from learning to cycle in a park or garden without the aid of stabilisers (in detriment to well-being achievement) is acceptable because of its beneficial impact on greater competence-acquisition and freedom. However, the child may not be allowed to learn this skill by cycling on a busy road because of the carer's judgement of the unacceptable risk of the child becoming involved in a road accident (and a corresponding decline in well-being achievement). In this case, the increase in agency (freedom) is not seen as justified.

If one takes the relation between freedom and competence-acquisition seriously, the restriction of other types of freedoms during childhood, such as those linked to participatory rights, seems difficult to justify. The benefits

that children gain in their agency freedom and achievement by having a voice and a vote in decision-making over the school curriculum, for example, can be considered as generally outweighing the harms to well-being achievement that may come with this freedom. The trade-off between freedom and achievement requires consideration of the respective harms that may be inflicted on the child's interests in comparison with the respective benefits that may be yielded for the child's overall development. This applies to all freedoms, but is particularly relevant for those related to children's capacity to develop the competences required for democratic citizenship. With children's social and political development in mind, it is important to reframe our understanding of risk for it to encompass not only potential harms to physical well-being (of the child or others), but also the psychological, social and political harms that come from the children's lack of recognition as participants in their community, and from the arrest in their development as social and political actors.

5 | IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

We now turn to the implications of fostering both children's freedoms and achievements in and through education, with a special regard for the role of competence-acquisition. Here, we offer only a few examples.¹⁶

5.1 | Policy implications

We propose that a paradigm shift is required at a systems level, with subsequent shifts in all aspects of the education system in order to move to a model where children's agency and freedoms stand on par with their (well-being) achievements. In other words, what we articulate in this article would need to be reflected both in national and global education policy and institutional and class level practices. It would impact on the priorities for initial teacher training and continuing professional development and for the way in which school curricula are developed. There would also be important factors to consider when thinking how quality in learning and teaching could be understood. In turn, quality assurance processes would need to be designed in ways that make space to understand capability-driven processes of teaching and learning and how these develop freedoms and achievements and encourage the development of critical agency and the fulfilment of participatory rights.

In assessing the quality and effectiveness of our education systems, this pluralistic outlook on education would mean that it was no longer enough to examine pupil attendance and lateness records, traditional examination achievement or how many pupils leave school and go on to higher education. Boni and Gasper (2012) proposed that a capability-informed approach to assessing quality in (higher) education should entail looking beyond retention, graduation and employment rates and include assessments of learner participation and empowerment, as well as how equitable opportunities are afforded across diverse student bodies. In addition, we could also explore to what extent learners' capabilities to aspire have been nurtured and how effective social and environmental conditions are in supporting the conversion of aspirations into capabilities.

Certain basic competences seem to be prerequisites for any freedom in any given context. Martha Nussbaum's list of central capabilities offers a useful starting point to understand what these are.¹⁷ For example, many of the capabilities in her list may be considered as fundamental features that pedagogy may foster in order for children to develop and acquire the mental states which will allow them to reach their potential as active agents. Of particular importance for educational practice are:

Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life....

Affiliation. (1). Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of

another... (2). 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, 2011, p. 34).

A capacity to reason, to understand the consequences of one's actions and decisions, to act according to one's overall interests and values and to recognise the value of one's life and that of others may support the exercise of freedom.¹⁸ Education can help to develop such skills by offering opportunities to practise moral reasoning and critical thinking such as those taught through Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC).¹⁹ In pursuing these capabilities, the importance of subject knowledge may need to give way to spaces for developing competences that, in turn, help to secure capabilities.

Sen argued that capabilities ought to be developed in relation to specific contexts and to what was valued by those concerned rather than others predetermining what ought to be of value. Whilst there are core capabilities that may well resonate in many teaching and learning settings, it is the process of determining the capabilities, as much as the capabilities themselves, that is crucial. Therefore, although theorists and policy-makers may be tempted to specify capabilities themselves, what is crucial is the extent to which young people can meaningfully and equitably participate in this process. Robeyns (2005, pp. 72, 73) proposes a procedural approach for collaboratively developing lists of capabilities in specific contexts, although others have cautioned about the potential power differentials in such activities (Cameron & Ojha, 2007). Thus, policy-making drawing on a capability approach needs to be undertaken with a critical awareness of how learners can be active participants, avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism.

5.2 | Practice implications

Many sociologists have noted the uneven playing field of education where resources and support are mobilised differently in relation to social class, gender, ethnicity and other forms of social stratification (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Gillbourn & Youdell, 2000; Reay, 2017; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; Skeggs, 2005). Age is perhaps one of the most neglected stratifications, with the dominant assumption that children do not know what is best for them. Stoecklin and Bonvin (2014, p. 78) argue that, "we should not just wait until the child is able to form his/her own views but must see to it that procedures and techniques are developed to include children's voices as much as possible." We must also actively foster educational conditions and teachers' capabilities to support the development of children's freedoms, competences and achievements.

Indeed, several scholars using a capability approach have indicated ways in which higher education curricula and pedagogical approaches could be specifically tailored towards developing capabilities and especially those of professionals (Boni & Walker, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010; Walker, 2006; Walker & McLean, 2013). Teacher training would need to create opportunities for trainees and experienced teachers alike to critically reflect on their attitudes and perceptions of risk in relation to children's well-being. Learning to take account of what is lost and gained through restrictive practices to prevent physical or emotional harm may help to foster more risk-tolerant pedagogies. Teachers who are able to understand their biases in making judgements regarding the feasibility and degree of risk that are inherent in different pursuits will be better equipped to support children's well-being, freedoms and achievements.

Since learners are also pivotal, pupils would also benefit from their own opportunities to reflect on their assessment and attitudes towards risks. For instance, Webb (2008) distinguishes between estimative and resolute hoppers. Whilst the former aim for goals that they feel are within their reach, the latter "strive to realise goals that the estimative hopper would have dismissed as less than fair gambles" (p. 203). Both illustrate different attitudes towards risk, having specific implications for those who make decisions on behalf of them. There is a constant weighing up of what is deemed feasible and what might cause the least harm or greatest benefit and the respective risks involved. This means that attitudes towards risk of those who determine the shape, format and regulations for education are crucial. This also plays out in the way teachers form attitudes to risk in children and how freedoms and achievements are "weighted" as necessary or not necessary for human flourishing.

TABLE 2 Four modes of assessment of well-being freedom, well-being achievement, agency freedom and agency achievement

Present Self-Interests (Well-being freedom/Well-being achievement of oneself)	Present Interests of Others (Well-being freedom/Well-being achievement of others)
Future Self-Interests (Agency freedom/Agency achievement of oneself)	Future Interests of Others (Agency Freedom/Agency Achievement of others)

How should teachers choose the level of risk involved in an educational pursuit? Mortlock argues that “the level of risk should depend entirely, upon the competence and experience of the performer, rather than the artificial device of age limits” (1987, p. 34), and that young people should be allowed to exercise their freedom once they have received appropriate training and they and their parents/guardians understand the risks, “the dangers and their implications” (1987, p. 37). This mirrors the “scaffolding” mechanisms mentioned previously: on the one hand, restricting children’s freedom to bear risk only within their already acquired competence sets may arrest their potential to press the limits to their own capacities and would harm their freedom (falling into the A-coercive quadrant; Figure 3); on the other, allowing children to exercise freedom without support and guidance through appropriate scaffolding mechanisms would put their well-being achievement at great risk (falling into the F-laissez-faire quadrant; Figure 3). The appropriate level of “adventure” and risk demands an understanding of the particular relation between children’s competence set and the respective levels of freedom and achievement they and we are willing to risk in order to foster their development.

Recalling Figure 4, the challenge is to identify an $N + 1$ space that is neither overly safe nor overly risky for a given student. Recalling Figure 3, teachers who implement a pluralistic freedom-competence-achievement model of education would, assuming they are not “stagnating,” need to navigate between being overly restrictive of freedom (A-coercive) and being overly neglectful towards achievement (F-laissez-faire). The optimal model for education from a freedom and agency perspective (FA-optimal) would be one in which both substantial freedoms and achievements are enabled and realised respectively by balancing them with the competence sets available to the student.

One concrete example of how practical reasoning and the development of a concept of good could be facilitated by schooling is offered by the somewhat unconventional Summerhill private school in England. Founded by Alexander Sutherland Neill in the 1920s, he intended to create a school that fitted the children it served, rather than forcing children to fit the school. By respecting the basic principle of equal status of children and adults in the school, Summerhill promotes the governing of the educational environment by teachers and students on an equal basis. It is a system which not only treats everyone’s agency capacities with equal respect, but also fosters them by granting children the freedom of “being able take their own path in life, and following their own interests to develop into the person that they personally feel that they are meant to be” (www.summerhillschool.co.uk/about.php). Children are allowed to choose which classes, if any, to attend, and make use of their time in a way which they consider most appropriate, whilst being constrained by the responsibility of not allowing their freedom to overstep the boundaries of the equal freedoms of others (Neill, 1966). Whilst there is a danger of shifting too much towards the laissez-faire quadrant depicted in Figure 3, it seems that a strong sense of community and affiliation in Summerhill, with plenty of space for discussion and participatory decision-making, keeps an appropriate balance between freedoms and achievement.

The social nature of human beings implies that education practice should take account of how children could interact with other individuals in and beyond school. Indeed, there is a strong interdependence between the capabilities of one individual and others, requiring a brokering of priorities between individuals and groups in the present and the future (Hart, 2007). We represent this in Table 2, recognising that, beyond seeking balance between *well-being freedom*, *well-being achievement*, *agency achievement* and *agency freedom* interests of a single

individual, we need to take into account the broader context. Factors related to local or global ethics, law, conflict, cost, priority, equity, sustainability, perceived feasibility, relevance and power may all impact on how priorities for human flourishing are judged (Hart, 2016).²⁰

Regarding the role of schools in fostering capabilities for affiliation, empathy and wider agency freedoms, schools that follow the “Round Square”(www.roundsquare.org) philosophy, inspired by Kurt Hahn, offer a useful example. One of these, Gordonstoun, illustrates the potential role of educational institutions in balancing a child’s freedoms with larger personal and social interests and responsibilities. The relation between freedom, achievement and competence does not only pertain to the risks that affect the individual actor, but must include the influence and impact that they may have on the freedoms and achievements of others. Gordonstoun, in this respect,

is concerned with fostering and developing a sense of responsibility and a feeling of care towards all fellow beings’...it involves each student demonstrating a willingness to give up his or her time and effort to benefit another individual or group without expecting return or reward. (www.gordonstoun.org.uk/service).

Schools that follow the “Round Square” philosophy of education are strongly oriented around opportunities for pupils to develop experience in service to others. In other words, empathy and an ethic of care²¹ are explicitly fostered through the school curriculum and opportunities to engage in active service beyond the school itself. This is an example of the kind of school culture and practice that may help to broaden the evaluation of human flourishing beyond personal well-being achievement to encompass affiliation with others and inter-dependent notions of agency and well-being with fellow humans (other species and the environment).²²

6 | CONCLUSION

The capability approach helps to expand our view of the factors that may contribute to human flourishing and the limitations of a solely rights-based discourse. It recognises not only widespread group entitlements, but also individually-valued ways of being and doing, even when these are not articulated as rights. Perhaps the most significant implication for educational policymakers and practitioners is the argument for working locally with key stakeholders, in particular children and their carers, to identify shared understandings of what constitutes a capability-driven notion of human flourishing and how this can be realised among children. This may include reaching some agreement on capabilities that could be deemed “mandatory” in a specific context, for example, helping a toddler to learn to walk, talk, eat solid food, understand the need for personal hygiene and so forth. Shared agreements may also be reached on the discouragement, or even prohibition, of certain capabilities to children at certain stages of their development. Most capabilities will fall somewhere in between the “mandatory” and “prohibited” ends of a spectrum. We have argued that what children ought to be allowed to be free to be and do may best be subject to assessments of individual maturity and competence to function, understanding the potential consequences of such action on oneself, other humans, other species and the environment. Even the most extreme cases, such as fighting for one’s country or the right to euthanasia, are contentious subjects and there are clear examples where children may show competence to determine their choices even in these circumstances. There also needs to be leeway in acknowledging that we are often unable to fully anticipate the consequences of our actions; striving to overcome the seemingly impossible or doing what seems unthinkable have accomplished some of the most astonishing acts of human endeavour.

Our discussion has foregrounded four key contributions of the capability approach in re-examining children’s agency, well-being and participation rights in education. We considered school as a platform that may enable a child’s exploration and development of the values and aspirations that foster both well-being and agency, in tandem. We have shown how Sen’s capability perspective enhanced a rights discourse, recognising that having rights does not ensure the real opportunity to enact them. Our consideration of children’s agency and capabilities highlights the

need to facilitate their participatory rights from the earliest possible age and not to regard minors as monolithically unable to exercise freedoms. The discussion has also recast the false dualism of agency versus well-being to position children's freedoms in multiple potential relations with their achieved well-being.

ENDNOTES

¹Around 2.3 billion people.

²We follow the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) definition: 'child means every human being below the age of 18' (CRC: Art. 1).

³See Biggeri, Ballet & Comim (2012) and Hart, Biggeri & Babic (2005) for further discussion on the nature of childhood, agency and participation.

⁴We acknowledge that, globally, around 60 million primary aged children and over 65 million lower secondary-aged children are not accessing education (UNESCO, 1978).

⁵Martha Nussbaum (2005b) and many others are also strongly associated with the development of capabilities approaches but there are distinctive features which warrant a principal focus on Sen's approach in developing the evaluative framework and arguments presented here.

⁶'Functionings' are linked to actual beings and doings that an individual has achieved; 'capabilities' refer to the set of possible functionings which a person is free to achieve. An analysis of well-being requires looking beyond achieved functionings to the capability set which frames the functionings that are available to an individual (Sen, 1992, 1999, Ch. 3). For a further explanation of these concepts in relation to education, see Hart (2012).

⁷Sen's concepts are discussed extensively. See for example, Sen, 1992, 1999, 2002, 2005 ; Alkire, 2013; Agarwal, Humphries & Robeyns, 2005; Robeyns, 2017, 2014 ; Hart 2009, 2012, 2014, 2014 ; Comim, Qizilbash & Alkire, 1989.

⁸For example, those promoted by the Round Square (www.roundsquare.org) to develop youth skills in community service, democratic participation, internationalism and self-reliance through adventure.

⁹The variation in capacity of individuals to make use of these resources and convert them into agency or well-being achievements is not explicitly mentioned. We will analyse the external conditions for conversion of resources into capabilities later in this article.

¹⁰Terzi (2017), Nussbaum (2006), Hart (2014) and others have tried to identify certain 'super' capabilities, those that are seen as crucial to securing other capabilities and supporting human flourishing, e.g., the capability to be educated and the capability to aspire.

¹¹For further discussion see Hart (2012, p. 192).

¹²Conversion factors can broadly be understood as the necessary pre-conditions that enable individuals to make use of the formal opportunities that are granted to them, transforming them into actual freedoms.

¹³This is a simplified diagram of the relationship between freedoms and achievements, made with the particular focus of this article in mind. We must note that the actual interaction is more complex if the distinctions between i) well-being and agency freedoms and ii) well-being and agency achievements are fully expanded.

¹⁴The competence-set is not only objectively defined, but also conditioned by the child's own perceived competences (strongly related to emotional competences). It may be that a child has a competence-set required for cycling, but her own conception of her capacities and potentials may restrict her competence to cycle.

¹⁵As mentioned before, this is strongly conditioned by conversion factors. Whether the newly-acquired competences can be converted into effective freedom depends on a further interaction with environmental and social conditions. This may involve the individual (or others) seeking or creating such conditions as may be necessary for this conversion, as well as the pre-existence of such conditions in the first place.

¹⁶See Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Drèze and Sen, 2013, Chapter 5 (The Centrality of Education); also special journal issues on the capability approach and education include *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* (2012), 13(3) and *Cambridge Journal of Education* (2012), 42 (3).

¹⁷Nussbaum defends a list of ten central capabilities as the fundamental freedoms and achievements that ensure a dignified human existence: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, sense, imagination, and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, relation with other species, play, and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2011:31-34).

¹⁸See Hart (2018) for a deeper exploration of the formation of aspirations and the criteria that may be brought to bear on judging them, identifying the challenges and trade-offs therein.

- ¹⁹See Hymer & Sutcliffe, 2012; Fisher, 2000, Biggeri & Santi, 2012; Santi & Masi, 1985 and Hart, 2016 for a further discussion of P4C and the practice of reasoning and Wallace et al., 2008 for further discussion of TASC.
- ²⁰See Crocker (2013) for deeper discussion of development ethics and a wide range of issues related to agency, democracy, ethics in development and ramifications for applying the capability approach to both policy and practice.
- ²¹See Held (2013) and McLoughlin (1987) for a further discussion of the ethic of care.
- ²²See Martha Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice* (2010) for a further discussion of affiliation with other species and the environment.

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