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School Choice Policy in England: An Adaptation of Sen's Early Work on Capability

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Since articles on school choice naturally tend to concentrate on outcomes from various "initiatives," they tend to offer little by way of theoretical advance in the manner in which choice policy is understood or in the way school choice is actualized within families and how students are thought to benefit from it. Against a political backdrop in England of growing consensus for what is coming to be known as "the Swedish model," this article integrates Sen's early work on capability into policy discussions on school choice, suggesting that revisiting the field from such an approach may offer a better framework for understanding the relationship between school choice and student well-being.

KEYWORDS *school choice policy, England, Sen, capability, student well-being*

INTRODUCTION

Critics of school choice argue that selfishness by individuals in the education marketplace undermines the public good, but some research suggests that those for whom public schooling is a necessity may also be those best served by its alternatives (e.g., Glenn, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1990; Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001). Supporters of school choice posit that mixed economies in schooling, like those advocated by successive UK and Scandinavian governments, are destined to failure because they defer too much to a doctrine of the public good without addressing the reality of individual disadvantage. For disadvantaged families, having a choice between a "bad" school and a

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“good” school,¹ whereas previously there was only a “good” school, does not increase well-being. And there is little use in having the freedom to choose a better school away from home for those without the wherewithal to organize family life around travel.

Most education policy reforms in England since the election of the first New Labour government in 1997 (and indeed since the 1988 Education Reform Act) have involved efforts to establish an education market because (it is claimed) the exigencies of competition make public systems more responsive:

Since 1997, there have been two stages of reform. In the first, we corrected the underinvestment . . . In the second stage, essentially begun in 2001, we . . . introduced the beginnings of choice and contestability. We are now at the crucial point where the reforms can be taken to their final stage In both the NHS and in education, there will in one sense be a market. The patient and the parent will have much greater choice. (Tony Blair, Speech at 10 Downing Street, October 24, 2005).

The theoretical assumption here is that a free market can more effectively provide the schooling demanded by parents and needed by students and lead to upward systemwide pressure on standards. To opponents, the notion that education can be treated as a commodity is unacceptable—they hold that access and equity across the social divide will be jeopardized by market forces—but of course some people have always had the facility to choose schools. What is new today is the desire among policymakers to extend to the public sector what has long been available in the private.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF POLICY AND RESEARCH ON SCHOOL CHOICE

The facility for parents and pupils to choose² their secondary schools free from government constraint is increasingly popular in developed countries, though it has not been proved beyond doubt to benefit pupils (Glenn & De Groof, 2002; Holmes, DeSimone, & Rupp, 2003). In the United States, for example, the growing number of charter schools being founded by parents has ipso facto created a public school system more responsive to parental demands, and in England most education legislation enacted since 1988 has been similarly geared. This neoliberal view of education, underpinned by the understandable desire of some parents to have the freedom to use their resources to advantage their children, has contributed to the popularity of choice schooling, though some are concerned that it may lead to greater social segregation (Karsten, 1994; Whitty & Edwards, 1998; Goldhaber, 2000). Others see school choice as part of a wider political struggle between social democratic liberalism and neoliberalism or as a manifestation of the debate

between the vested interests of those who work in public education and those who depend on it to reach their material or social ambitions (Jeynes, 2000). Supporters claim that choice offers the best way of generating opportunities for marginalized families and creating better schools for everyone (Kirkpatrick, 1990). Others argue that it provides poor families only with enough education to perpetuate their “domesticity and powerlessness” and promotes a “mindless acceptance of social inequities” (Fecho, 2001, p. 622). Treading a middle path is a phalanx of policymakers and commentators who see pro-choice public school initiatives as a marriage of the best in public and private education and see the state’s role as supporting educational opportunity for all, even if that means going outside the public system.

Parental demand for choice programs among low-income urban families is generally very high (Witte, 1999; Gill, Taylor, & Fitz, 2001; Bulkley, 2005), though research has found that advantaged families “with knowledge of the system” and “the ability to transport children to non-adjacent schools” (Gorard et al., 2002: 368) are more likely to gain places at popular schools. And in England, despite early legislation to strengthen the market, there is little unambiguous evidence that parents make rational informed choices about schooling alternatives (Echols & Willms, 1995); in fact, there are signs that the market may contain a constrained majority who do not or cannot exercise choice (Herbert, 2000), informed or otherwise.

Rational choice theory suggests that parents try to maximize utility when they make schooling decisions, but this assumes that parents have clear choosing criteria, act in full knowledge of the needs of their children, and are aware of all the options available. In addition, it assumes that parents accept responsibility for the advocacy of their children’s well-being and accept that they must reengage with the market should their school of choice come up short in any way. Bosetti (2004) suggests an alternative view, that parents invest *a mixture* of rationalities when choosing schools and that there is a significant difference in what parents from different social backgrounds do when acting in their children’s interests. Others suggests that the benefits of choice may be negated by the fact that disadvantaged sections of society rarely have the right information at the right time to enable them to make the right choices (Willms & Echols, 1992; Wells, 1993; Gorard, 1997), though it may not matter as much as commentators suppose: as schools become more market-driven and despite increasing *institutional* diversity across the sector, they may in fact become *less* distinctive *in what they do* (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Jeynes, 2000) as they follow the “market leader,” so the impact of not being able to distinguish between them may “dampen” findings from multilevel and other quantitative studies.

Opponents of choice suggest that introducing markets into education and turning parents into consumers is not necessarily in the wider public interest (Willms & Echols, 1992) and that since social class and race largely determine access to and benefit from schooling (Gewirtz et al., 1995), greater choice accentuates differences in educational attainment along

socioeconomic and racial lines (Lynch & Moran, 2006), with negative effects on already disadvantaged groups (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Tomlinson, 1997; Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). The contrary view is that school choice *reduces* social inequality (Moore & Davenport, 1989). There is early evidence from Germany and France, for example, that choice is of greatest benefit to minority ethnic and working-class students (Glenn, 1989) and that the self-selection of students so dreaded by opponents does not in reality work against the disadvantaged. And in the United States, families disadvantaged by race generally support school choice programs more than White families (Kirkpatrick, 1990) because they are perceived to provide greater opportunity to advance socially and economically. These conflicting research findings can be reconciled only if we distinguish—as Sen’s Capability approach does but most theory does not—between the *existence* of choice and its *exercise*, recognizing that the issue for those from poorer backgrounds is that they rarely exercise choice in an optimal way, so that merely providing more of it does not necessarily result in any benefit.

School Choice and Attainment

There is some evidence—for example, from early projects like the one in Alum Rock, California (Kirkpatrick, 1990)—that greater choice is linked to gains in student attainment, but overall the research is inconclusive. For example, a correlation has been found between school choice and improvement in literacy and numeracy scores (Powers & Cookson, 1999), especially for African-American students (Gill et al., 2001) and those who need the most help (Jeynes, 2000), but just as it is difficult for opponents of school choice to claim that choice *per se* increases social segregation, so it is difficult for supporters to claim that its introduction, especially when accompanied by other reforms, has a causal relationship with improved attainment. Reports from students *themselves* seem to be consistently good however, especially from students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Colopy & Tarr, 1994), though some of the places held to be models of successful practice in this respect in the United States, like Minnesota and Massachusetts, have low participation rates (Nathan & Ysseldyke, 1994), making it unsound to extrapolate too much from their experience.

School Choice, Social Class, and Risk

Research on the role of parents in school choice has found that there are differences between socioeconomic classes in terms of access to choice and how they deploy their agency (Crozier, 2000; Vincent, 2001; Poupeau, François, & Couratier, 2007), which is a central feature of Sen’s capability approach (Walker, 2005). Knowledge about, and attitude toward, “expert” issues are important factors in parental choice (Denessen, Driessena, & Slegers, 2005): “professional” parents are typically unwilling to leave

education solely to schools (Vincent & Martin, 2000; Vincent, 2001) and accept higher levels of risk with their aspiration (Hatcher, 1998), though of course they have greater social, economic, and cultural resources to make their choices work. Working-class parents, on the other hand, who are by definition resource-poor, see home and school as separate entities, though whereas working-class students can often maintain their social position by merely completing compulsory schooling, professional families risk “social demotion” by trying and failing, which makes middle-class families more favorably disposed toward school choice.

School Choice and Segregation

Middle-class parents typically seek niches in school systems that are likely to “foster privileged access to better examination results” (Fitz, Taylor, & Gorard, 2002, p. 127), but research in the Netherlands by Denessen and colleagues (2005) suggests that support for school choice is not confined to the middle classes; it is also strongly supported by immigrant (especially Muslim) working-class families, though Noreisch (2007) suggests that (in Berlin, at least) this has sometimes been accompanied by the opposite effect of a “catchment area exodus” by indigenous parents. Research in England by Gorard, Taylor, and Fitz (2002, 2003) and others suggests that increased school choice does *not* result in more disadvantaged students attending poorly performing schools nor does it necessarily increase segregation. In fact, it may decrease segregation by encouraging people to choose schools *other than* on the basis of race or residency (Howell, Wolf, Campbell, & Peterson, 2002). Research also suggests that choice and voucher programs may moderate the effects of segregation *where it does exist* (Parsons, Chalkley, & Jones, 2000; Bosetti, 2004), though other research finds to the contrary (Tomlinson, 1997; Goldhaber & Eide, 2002; Stambach & Becker, 2006). In Detroit, Michigan, for example, there is evidence that choice operates in such a way as to exclude economically deprived African-American students from the more popular schools, despite having significant financial incentives to recruit such students (Lubienski, 2005). Similarly, in Spain and Greece, the professional classes tend to congregate in popular (mostly private) schools, while disadvantaged groups get trapped in a declining public sector (Bernal, 2005; Maloutas, 2007).

SEN'S EARLY WORK ON CAPABILITY AND A NEW CONCEPTUALISATION OF PROBLEMS AFFECTING SCHOOL CHOICE

Research on school choice has largely been concerned with the relationship between education as a commodity and students and parents as consumers,

but the judgement as to whether or not the education market is properly supplied is ultimately related to the question of how student well-being is measured. Several different approaches are possible: the extent to which students are happy in school and with their education, how their material prospects have improved as a result of it, the extent to which society is well served by what schools are doing, the extent to which there is enough choice in the system, the extent to which the market can get what it wants and where it wants it, and so on. Of these, Sen regards those who focus on material welfare as being the *least* useful because they ignore the many influences on well-being that have little or nothing to do with wealth (Saito, 2003), though UK and U.S. governments continue to focus much of their education policy on it. As an alternative, Sen developed a “capability” approach that focuses instead on the freedom of individuals to pursue their own values and interests. Choice policies are essentially about linking individuals to society in such a way that desirable *collective* outcomes can be derived from the desirable outcomes of *individuals*, so understanding and contesting the relationship between the selfish and the common is crucial to gauging how well a public service like education is doing in light of the interests of society’s disparate members. For Sen (1985b), freedom is about letting people choose what they value while removing “sources of unfreedom” (Wallace, 2004, p. 7) like deprivation, oppression, and intolerance. However, self-interest can also produce a “pathology” (Felkins, 1997) in state-run services like education, and the arguments against school choice outlined in the first part of this article need to be understood in their proper light. In essence, they suggest that under conditions of choice, “coalitions” form to gain advantage (from the public purse or from legislation) and that such coalitions are rarely formed by the underprivileged in society.

The Meaning of Utility

There is a tradition in education (as in economics) of theorizing with a single utility measure of self-interest and to focus on crude summative judgements of school and pupil attainment. Utilitarian economists define utility either as *satisfaction/happiness* (Crocker, 1992) in line with the classical view of Bentham and others or as *desire-fulfillment* in line with the more modern utilitarianism of Sidgwick, but utility can also represent what a person values most or the person’s *well-being*, however that is judged. Similarly with the provision of schooling in an education market, the fault lies in defining its benefits in different ways at the same time and assuming that what students always choose is their own selfish interest. Sen’s capability approach can help overcome this problem; it does not require us to assume that parents and students act as “rational fools” when choosing schools; that is, assuming that they are unable to differentiate properly between the choices available

to them (Sen, 1973, 1977; Margolis, 1982). The capability approach goes to the motivation behind choice and is allowed to coincide or not to coincide with self-interest.

Well-Being and Advantage

Whereas “well-being” is a way of viewing student self-interest, “advantage” is a way of viewing the fulfillment of self-interest. The former is concerned with achievement; the latter is concerned with the opportunity a student has relative to others. However, while opportunity and advantage are obviously linked, opportunity cannot be judged solely by results, nor can it be judged just by the level of well-being attained. It is possible for a student to have real advantages and not to make good use of them in a selfish sense (Sen, 1977, 1985a). It is possible to have lots of opportunity but not to achieve.

The notion of student opportunity is intrinsically linked to school choice, but the two are not synonymous. Opportunity cannot be defined simply as whether, for example, entrance to an oversubscribed college is a realizable choice for a student but rather whether, say, the student’s family can afford financially to support him or her for another two years at school. There are real (and often unrecognized) opportunity costs for families in having children stay on at school into the postcompulsory phase, most obviously in loss of income and transport. It is no surprise that research repeatedly finds, for example, that geographical convenience is an important reason in choosing schools (Morgan, Dunn, Cairns, & Fraser, 1993; Bagley, Woods, & Glatter, 2001), particularly for working-class parents (Echols & Willms, 1995; Vincent, 2001) who are fearful to engage in something that exacerbates existing differentials in power and information (Reay & Ball, 1997). Setting the issue of cost to one side for a moment, simply having the choice of going to a “good” school is not an opportunity if the student cannot benefit from the type of curriculum on offer there. This is a real difficulty in England with the proliferation of specialist schools.³ It seems on a superficial level that developing localized expertise provides greater opportunity, but this is not necessarily the case. Many do not have the wherewithal to benefit from the expertise.

Measuring student self-interest is crucial to judging both educational opportunity and the benefits (if any) of school choice. It is also important in analyzing disadvantage and developing policies to counteract it. Sen’s early work in economics suggests that it is unlikely that there is any one single measure of benefit superior to all others and applicable in all contexts, and this is particularly likely to be true for student well-being in schools of choice. However, the purpose need not be to find such a metric but rather to “fill in what may well be important gaps in the conceptual apparatus” (Sen, 1985a, p. 7).

Capability

A commodity like education can be seen in terms of its desirable properties and securing a quantity of it gives a “consumer” command over its desirable properties or characteristics. Schooling gives a student access to the commodity that is education, which can be used to satisfy intellectual curiosity, provide social advancement and opportunities for friendship, and open the door to economic prosperity. However, the mere acquisition of a quantity of the commodity does not guarantee the acquisition of its desirable benefits, nor does it reveal what the acquirer can and cannot do with it.

In judging the well-being of students, their “functionings” and not just the desirable characteristics of education—which are anyway unaffected by whether or not students benefit equally from it—must be considered. The functioning of a student is what the student actually succeeds in doing with his or her schooling, and this is one of the difficulties with, say, affirmative action policies (e.g., in the UK, Department for Education and Skills, 2003). It is not enough to discriminate positively in favor of students who have attended underperforming secondary schools in order to open the doors of elite universities to them; there must also be an enhancement of functionings to enable those students to derive the same level of benefit from attending those universities as students from high-performing schools.

A functioning is a personal achievement, what a student *does* with the desirable properties of education under his or her command. It is derived from a desirable characteristic of the commodity, but functioning and characteristic are not the same. Similarly, a functioning is distinguishable from the well-being it generates. Learning is not the same as having a school in which to learn, and the physical act of going to school is not the same as deriving benefit from the intellectual curiosity satisfied by being there. A student’s achieved functionings depend on his or her “utilization functions,” which reflect particular choices of schooling that the student has the freedom to actually make. “Well-being” is the evaluation of this set of achieved functionings and indicates the kind of existence the student is achieving. This evaluation is simply a ranking exercise; in other words, attaching a numeric value to each achieved functioning to represent how relatively good it is.

A student’s set of feasible functionings is his or her “capability,” which represents his or her command over schooling and education; in other words, it represents the various combinations of functionings that he or she can achieve and what kind of choices he or she can make. However, while it is possible to characterize the values of well-being that can be achieved, students will not necessarily choose the highest value. There may be other tensions or altruisms at work.

In gauging capability, it is difficult simply to equate the value of a whole capability set with the value of its biggest (i.e., most favorable) element, even when that element can be chosen. Consider the following two scenarios.

In the first, a student has capability set within which the biggest element (representing the best available secondary school, say) *can* be chosen in order to yield a certain well-being, but a smaller element *is* chosen for some social or familial reason. In the second scenario, the biggest element *is* actually chosen but from a reduced set of possibilities; in other words, the student has fewer choices available than in the first scenario but can and does choose the biggest element. In either case—by not choosing the biggest element or by choosing it from a reduced set of feasible functionings—it is difficult to argue that the student is worse off. Certainly, there are fewer degrees of freedom in the latter case, but that is not of any great practical importance if the biggest element is to be chosen anyway. By analogy, in relation to school choice, having a “good” school available to students who do not have the wherewithal to avail of it does not improve student well-being. What use is the freedom to attend a “good” school outside of the community for those without the means to organize family life around travel? And equally, it is of little benefit to students to increase school choice by giving them the “freedom” to add “bad” schools to their existing capability sets, which is what happens in situations where students can attend *any* school in a poorly performing local authority.

In preparing to make a selection from a capability set, students and parents must assess the relative value of the elements therein. As Sen (1991) observed, it is possible to rank one functioning over another without being able to rank *all* the functionings, even in pairs. An insistence on completeness is unnecessary. It makes more sense to accept *partial* orderings than to insist on arbitrary completeness, and both well-being and advantage fit the partial ordering format more naturally than they do the exacting requirements of completeness. In the real world, parents and students can, and do, *partially order* the schools available to them without being able to rank *all* the schools absolutely. In that sense, the criticism that school choice cannot operate properly when parents do not have complete information about all possible alternatives is as unsound as suggesting that adding an underperforming school to the neighborhood of a high-performing school increases well-being.

Problems with Using Utility to Measure Well-Being

There are some serious difficulties with the utility-based approach of using the amount of choice in an education system as a proxy for how well students are doing (or can do). Students who are poorly instructed, lack confidence, or have unrecognized learning disabilities can be very happy and have a high level of desire-fulfillment as long as they learn to avoid unrealistic ambitions. “Valuing is not the same thing as desiring,” as Sen (1985a, p. 21) put it. Students’ reactions to what they can sensibly expect and what they actually get involves compromise with reality. Adapting Sen’s approach

suggests that the limitations of any utility-based approach to school choice and student well-being are particularly serious when the concern is to examine how the ranking of schools differs from student to student and between expectation and actuality rather than how different possibilities rank for each individual. For example, if a student *wants* to follow a vocational route rather than an academic route after the compulsory phase at secondary school, and if he or she reckons to be *happier* on the vocational route, then the well-being of the student is clear: it is greater having made the choice to go on the vocational route.⁴ But what happens if desire and happiness are the result of low expectations, since “people adapt their preferences and choices according to what they think is possible for them” (Walker, 2006, p. 167)? Consider, for example, a student from a deprived background who has learned not to be ambitious and who is more deprived in terms of quality of schooling and career preparation than another student raised in a well-to-do family but is nevertheless happier than the better-off student *and* has more desires fulfilled. It is not obvious that the disadvantaged student has a higher level of well-being than the affluent one, though that is the assessment of both the happiness and desire-fulfillment views of utility.

Functionings

Another way of judging well-being is as an index of a student's set of functionings, which is what he or she succeeds in doing with his or her education. “Schooling” has many desirable characteristic outcomes, of which “education” is but one. Education in turn can be split into different types related to academic learning, employability, and so on. Schooling also has desirable properties like developing social skills and making friends, so for any given student, having more schooling increases (but only up to a point) his or her ability to function in desirable ways; simply put, it enables him or her to progress to a life more free of economic, social, and intellectual deprivation. However, in comparing the functionings of different students—what they actually do with their “educations”—it is not enough *just* to look at the respective *quantities* of schooling enjoyed by them because these depend on a variety of personal and social factors, a fact often forgotten by governments in their frenetic pursuit of school improvement through greater choice.

Educational functionings depend on such factors as ambition, perseverance, age, sex, commitment, parental interest, the presence of learning disorders, the physical learning environment, and so on (Nussbaum, 2000). In the case of developing social skills, functionings depend not just on the individual but on his or her interaction with others (Saito, 2003) and on psychological disposition, culture, whether or not the school is mixed, and so on. The “utilization function” on which functionings depend is then partly a matter of *choice of function* and partly a matter of *choice of commodity*, each

from their feasibility sets. The sum of all these alternative sets from which a student can choose reflects his or her capability, and it is important to distinguish between choice and nonchoice factors in determining it. For example, a student cannot choose his or her rate of learning, and low academic ability may have to be “reconciled” to an “unfavorable” set of utilization functions, but within that set there is almost certainly room for “better husbandry” (Sen, 2005). This is why increasing the *quantity* of school choice is unlikely *of itself* to result in any great systemwide improvement unless it is accompanied by rising expectations. In recent years, in the United States and England for example, the set of alternative functionings that can be achieved by students through choice has risen, yet it has seemingly failed to result in greater well-being because students from poorer socioeconomic circumstances have become reconciled to underachievement or have acquired an inconvenient set of anti-aspirations and there are only very basic systems of remediation in place to counteract that negativity. There is no evidence, for example, that the problem of *systemwide* improvement is addressed by school choice initiatives that transfer high-flying students from underperforming schools to high-performing schools but do little for those left behind.

Measuring Well-Being and Coping with Differing Valuations

How well a student is doing *should* depend on what kind of *being* the student is achieving and what he or she is succeeding in *doing*. The contrast between the utility view and the functioning view of well-being is best illustrated by the scenario, given already, of two students, one from a deprived background attending an underperforming school who has learned not to be ambitious but is nevertheless happier than a second, more affluent student attending a high-performing school. The student from the poorer background also has his desires more fulfilled despite being more deprived in terms of functionings. As Sen points out, the question of valuation is the key issue. “Being happy with” or “desiring” is not the same thing as “valuing,” which is a reflective activity in a way that being happy or desiring is not. A poorly taught student from a family that does not affirm the value of education may have learned to come to terms with underachievement—“seizing joy in merely coping and wanting no more than what is achievable without much effort,” as Sen (1985a, p. 29) remarked in another context—but these attitudinal shortcomings cannot explain away the sad fact of the student’s disadvantage or the fact that the student would probably welcome the removal of that disadvantage if it were possible. In this respect, the utility view of well-being is fundamentally deficient in a way that the functioning view is not (Sen, 1987).

In some situations, when one set of functionings clearly dominates⁵ another, their valuation is nonproblematic; in fact, in dealing with the educational well-being of disadvantaged students, such dominance is likely to

occur fairly often. In other situations, it will *not* be the case that one set of functionings dominates another, so valuation is more complicated. However, valuation does not need to generate complete orderings, which Sen views as a “tyranny” (Sen, 1985a). The valuation of well-being is *inherently* partial and incomplete. While one set of functionings can be seen to represent a higher level of well-being than other sets of functionings, it may be impossible to rank the other sets in relation to one other. For example, it is often the case that parents and students (think they) know, from instinct or from “hot” information, that one set of educational functionings on offer at a particular school is superior to another set of functionings available at another school, without knowing or being able to measure the value of all the inferior options relative to one another. Parents want and will choose the best available school, limited by family and other circumstances, irrespective of league tables showing how all the (to them) inferior schools rate against one another, so the idea that league tables are needed for school choice to work—to supply “complete” information to consumers—is false. Different schools will be first choice for different families: some will choose a school with a reputation for enhancing vocational skills ahead of another with a better reputation for academic scholarship. For this reason, policymakers should encourage real diversity rather than mimicry in school systems while striving to provide quality education for all. The more alike schools become, the less well served are those families who need something other than a second-rate replica of a high-performing school somewhere else.

Different individuals can rank the same pair of well-beings differently. One student’s belief that a particular state of being is higher than another *can* consistently coexist with another student’s belief in the opposite. Sen concedes that this subjectivist position is legitimate but thinks that it has been unfairly assumed that the *objectivist* view ipso facto claims that ranking must be complete and unique. If objectivity demands only a partial ordering rather than completeness—in other words, that school A and school B both deliver higher well-being than school C without ranking A and B relative to each other—then one student’s belief that school A is better than school B can be consistent with a second student’s belief that school B is better than school A. (For convenience, a list of technical terms and their definitions is set out in Table 1).

USING UNCERTAINTY TO UNDERSTAND PRIVATE SCHOOLING AND ADVANTAGE

Educational well-being is the assessment of the particular achievements of a student, the kind of educational life he or she succeeds in having. Advantage is not the same thing. It takes account of the opportunities offered by chance to a student, of which only one may be chosen at any given time.

TABLE 1 Terms and Their Meaning in Sen's Early Capability Theory

Term	Meaning
Opportunity	<i>Opportunity</i> cannot be judged by results, nor can it be judged solely by level of <i>well-being</i> achieved. It is possible to have <i>opportunity</i> but not to achieve.
Advantage	<i>Advantage</i> is opportunity relative to that of others. It takes account of the opportunities offered by chance. It is a way of viewing the fulfillment of self-interest. The assessment of advantage, which operates under conditions of uncertainty, is an evaluation of the set of <i>potential</i> achievements and not just <i>actual</i> achievements.
Well-being	<i>Well-being</i> is the assessment of a student's particular achievements and what he or she values most. It is the evaluation of his or her set of achieved <i>functionings</i> and indicates the kind of existence the student is achieving. The valuation of well-being may be partial and incomplete.
Functionings	The <i>functioning</i> of a student is what the student actually achieves in/with school; that is, what he or she actually does with the desirable properties of education under his or her command. <i>Functionings</i> depend on <i>utilization functions</i> .
Utilization functions	<i>Utilization functions</i> reflect particular choices of schooling that the student has the freedom actually to make. The <i>utilization function</i> on which <i>functionings</i> depend is partly a matter of choice of function and partly a matter of choice of commodity, each from its own set of feasible alternatives. The sum of these alternative sets from which a student can choose is his or her <i>capability set</i> .
Capability set (or simply, Capability)	A student's <i>capability set</i> represents the various combinations of <i>functionings</i> that can be achieved by the student. It represents his or her command over the commodity, but in gauging it we do not simply equate the worth of the <i>capability set</i> with its biggest element.
Complete ordering	<i>Complete ordering</i> means that all members of a set can be ranked in order, relative to one another.
Partial ordering	<i>Partial ordering</i> means either that a particular relation (or attempt to rank elements of a set) holds only between some elements of the set (or epistemologically, that the ranking relationship between some elements is not known).

The assessment of advantage must therefore be an evaluation of the set of *potential* achievements of a student and not just of *actual* achievements. If a student's advantage is considered and not just his or her well-being, the evaluation of functionings discussed previously is only part of the story.

One of the problems with evaluating advantage in the area of school choice is that it mostly operates under uncertainty, where the student picks a set of feasibilities from which nature or chance then selects one element. For example, a student chooses a school and "chance" then selects the other classmates and hence the learning atmosphere of the class for the next three to five years. The alternative, rare in education, is where the chooser picks both the set *and* a particular element from the set, and this may be the most useful way to view private and homeschooling, as a device to minimize the unpredictable hand of chance.

The problems caused by chance in school choice lie not only with those who would use their resources to avoid it but among those who have their lot worsened by it. For example, adding an inferior school (as judged by the chooser) to an existing set of possible schools makes a set worse off when operating under uncertainty because the student might be given the inferior element by chance. However, if the intention is only to assess student *opportunity*, then adding the inferior school need not make the set worse: whatever could be chosen earlier can still be chosen, as long as nature has no hand in the choosing. If a government widens choice for poorer students by allowing them the freedom to choose schools outside of their communities, and if this includes inferior schools and the final decision is made under uncertainty (which is mostly the case in reality), then students are *worse off* since the risk of going to a bad school has increased. What private schools do for those who can afford them and are not deterred by elitism is to lower the uncertainty risk by reducing the number of “inferior” elements in each set, while offering a greater number of sets. Nothing can remove uncertainty completely, of course, because nature will always have some part to play in selection, but it does help to explain why choice research invariably finds that private schooling controls for the “variables” of greatest concern to middle-class parents.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS WITH EVALUATING CAPABILITY

As mentioned, the value of a student’s set of functionings—his or her capability set (or more casually, “capability”)—*may* be given by the value of its best element. In this view, greater choice is valued because it allows a superior element to be chosen, and where it does not, the widening of the set is of no value one way or the other. This approach can be criticized on several fronts as it relates to school choice. First, choosing may be impossible when the schools in the capability set are not fully ordered. Partial ordering demands some modification to the evaluation process, such as comparing two capability sets by checking whether there is a school in one set which is better (for the chooser) than every school in the other set. Second, it may not be enough to consider what it is that students succeed in doing; consideration might also be given to what students *could have done*. Consider the situation in which a set from which a student can choose a school gets smaller but still includes its best element. In terms of achievement, the student’s position might be unaffected, assuming the student chooses the best school each time, but the student’s freedom has been reduced. In the same way, if a local authority reduces choice for a community as part of a school closure program, say, to a smaller set of options that still includes the optimal choice, parents and students may not perceive that their lot has worsened but their freedom has been reduced.⁶ Sen suggests that a way of dealing with problems like this is to make evaluation take account of *extent*

of choice in addition to using the value of the best element in a set as a measure of quality; that is to say, for policymakers to consider the *number* of schools in a choice set as a reflection of *extent* of choice as well as considering “quality.”

CONCLUSION

The provenance of Sen’s early work on capability is rooted in his attempt to understand poverty, but even in this paradigm he included educational attainment as one of his three indicators. In every sense—economically, politically, and socially—education impacts the ability of people to participate in society, and one of the outcomes of Sen’s approach has been to shift the discourse away from materialism toward broader concepts of freedom and choice, without which a person cannot have a good quality of life. However, Sen’s capability approach is not without its own shortcomings: there is an ethical and theoretical problem in the extent to which it is accepting of poverty and disadvantage as long as the poor and disadvantaged *feel happy*, and it does not allow us easily to address the problem whereof the very existence of certain forms of advantage (like private schools) can diminish the well-being of the disadvantaged as a group, irrespective of other opportunities made available to them. Nevertheless, the approach has the potential to offer a fresh perspective on school choice *and* to provide a unique opportunity to use school choice as a means of interrogating and evaluating the potential limitations of his theory from an educative perspective.

This article makes no claim that adapting a capability approach to school choice *of itself* offers a simple answer to the important question of how best to run a school system so that no one is disadvantaged, but it does recommend a shift in the discourse to make more realistic our theoretical framework and deepen our understanding. Fundamentally, school choice is about freedom. The difficulty for both advocates and opponents is that a deep debate about freedom has not been had in the rush to action by concerned governments facing the prospect of societal and economic decline as a result of inadequate public schooling.

NOTES

1. Of course, “good” and “bad” are not unproblematic notions in education. In this paper, “good” is defined as “regarded as good by choosers using their own criteria.” The terms “underperforming” and “high performing” are used when the criteria are external to the chooser (like league tables of threshold GCSE and value-added measures).

2. Or at least (in England) to *state a preference for* which school they wish to attend.

3. The “Specialist Schools” program is a UK government initiative to encourage secondary schools in England to specialize in certain areas of the curriculum to boost achievement. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) is responsible for the delivery of the program, and currently nearly 90%

of state-funded secondary schools are specialist. To apply for specialist school status, a school must raise money (or donations in kind) from the private/charitable sector, which is then supplemented by additional grants and extra per capita funding from government. Schools specialize in one (or two) of a range of subjects, including the performing arts, music, sports, languages, and mathematics, but must still meet the full requirements of the English national curriculum.

4. It could be argued, of course, that putting students on “tracks” like “vocational” or “academic” hinders choice because it makes change more difficult, but this is not the issue here.

5. One set of functionings *dominates* another set when each element of the dominant set is “better” than each element of the other set.

6. For example, the school closure program implemented in the UK by Southampton City Council in 2008–2009, which established two new “faith-based” academy schools (operated by Oasis Community Learning, a UK registered Christian charity) in place of four closed community schools (Grove Park, Woolston, Millbrook, and Oaklands).

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