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Sen and the art of educational maintenance: evidencing a capability, as opposed to an effectiveness, approach to schooling

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There are few more widely applied terms in common parlance than 'capability'. It is used (inaccurately) to represent everything from the aspiration to provide opportunity to notions of innate academic ability, with everything in between claiming apostolic succession to Amartya Sen, who (with apologies to Aristotle) first developed the concept. This paper attempts to warrant an adaptation of Sen's capability theory to schooling and schooling policy, and to proof his concepts in the new setting using research involving 100 pupils from five English secondary schools and a schedule of questions derived from the capability literature. The findings suggest that a capability approach can provide an alternative to the dominant Benthamite school effectiveness paradigm, and can offer a sound theoretical framework for understanding better the assumed relationship between schooling and well-being.

Keywords: capability; schooling; Sen; proof of concept

Introduction

There are many different approaches to gauging the effectiveness of a schooling system and how well society is served by what schools are doing: changes in pupil attainment over time; employment levels and other econometrics; progression rates to higher education; self-efficacy, social mobility and 'happiness' indicators. In data-rich systems like the UK, it is possible to gauge effectiveness in a utilitarian way at pupil and school level, taking account (or not) of context, but it is difficult to extrapolate from the 'individual' and the 'institutional' to how parents and pupils are (or are not) maximising personal outcomes and well-being. And since there is a tendency among policy makers to blame schools for economic failure, without crediting them with economic success, it is important to consider carefully how such maximisation is theorised and how it relates to schooling. Until Sen developed his capability approach, well-being relied on macro-measures of societal wealth such as Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), though these fail to capture how income is distributed and do not take account of the many influences on well-being that have little to do with income (Sen, 1992, 1999). Sen's approach focused instead on the freedom of individuals to pursue their own values and interests, and this in essence is what is meant by 'capability'.[1] The approach emphasises functional capabilities, such as the ability to engage in economic

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activity and act politically, and these are assessed in relation to the substantive freedoms that people value. The emphasis is not solely on how people function, but on having the capability (and practical choice) to function in ways they regard as important. This paper extends that theoretical framework (with its interlinked notions of capability, well-being and choice) to schooling, though Sen never specifically addressed that area in his work. Some 100 students randomly selected from five schools in three Local Authorities in England were interviewed in focus groups using a schedule of questions devised from the capability literature to test the principles of its application to schooling/schooling policy (see Appendix)[2]. The findings are presented at appropriate places in the discussion below.

The component parts: utility, well-being, advantage and opportunity

Sen (1985a, p. 3) suggests, as an alternative to the classical views of utility as satisfaction or desire-fulfilment, that utility can represent what people *value*. The difficulty with using utility as a mechanism for analysing the provision of schooling in an education market is that of giving it more than one meaning at the same time; for example, if both students' perceptions of their own self-welfare and the choices they make are each called 'utility' simultaneously, then it is implicit that what students always choose is their own selfish interest. Our research suggests that this is not the case. Almost all students interviewed said that they would 'very frequently' put a classmate's learning ahead of their own learning,[3] in spite of individual competitive pressures, though friendship groups and school characteristics were found to have an effect[4].

The value of a capability approach to schooling is therefore in the warranted way it looks at the *motivation behind choice*, treating it as a parametric variable that coincides, or not, with the pursuit of self-interest, which shifts the focus away from choice *behaviour* (Basu, 1984; Margolis, 1982; Sen, 1973, 1977/1982) towards the *self-interest behind* behaviour. In adapting it to schooling, 'well-being' becomes the way of viewing student self-interest, and 'advantage' the way of viewing relative opportunity, which itself should no longer be judged solely on pupil attainment (and the level of well-being attained) as is usual in a school effectiveness paradigm. It is possible for a student to have real advantages and not to make good use of them (Sen, 1977/1982, 1985a, p. 5) or not to make use of the freedom to achieve a higher level of attainment. It is possible to have opportunity but not to achieve. Opportunity is intrinsically linked to choice, but opportunity and choice are not the same thing. Opportunity is not simply whether, for example, entrance to an oversubscribed Sixth Form college (16–18 years) is a realisable option for a student, but includes whether (say) the student's family can afford to support the student for another two years beyond the school-leaving age. And simply having the option of going to a good school is not an opportunity if the student cannot benefit from the curriculum on offer there (Kelly, 2010). This is the unrecognised difficulty in the UK with the proliferation of Specialist schools.[5] At a superficial level, developing local markets of curriculum specialisation provides greater opportunity, but many students do not have the wherewithal to benefit from that specialism. In our student interviews, for example, more than 50% of students reported that they did *not* consider themselves as having benefited specifically[6] from the curriculum specialism on offer at their school, and a significant additional number reported that 'it meant nothing at all'. As Sen (see 1985b) would say, advantage is about freedom, but freedom must be even-handed.

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Assembling the parts: functionings, well-being, capability and completeness

Schooling gives a student command to some extent over the desirable properties of education as a commodity: satisfying a desire for learning; providing opportunities for friendship; and opening the door to economic prosperity. However, the mere acquisition of a commodity does not guarantee the acquisition of its desirable properties nor does its possession reveal what can be done with it. A student with special educational needs may suffer from poor educational outcomes even though he or she attends the same lessons as another student who benefits in all the desirable and predictable ways from the same exposure (Kelly, 2007). So in judging the well-being of students in a capability (as opposed to a school effectiveness) paradigm, their 'functionings' – what they actually succeed in doing with their schooling – and not just the desirable properties of the schooling they receive, must be considered (Kelly, 2010). It is not enough to discriminate positively in favour of those from poorly performing secondary schools or disadvantaged backgrounds. There must also be a commensurate enhancement of functionings to enable those students to derive the same level of benefit from attending elite institutions as students from better schools or more advantaged backgrounds.

A functioning is a personal achievement (Sen, 1985a, p. 10); what the student does with his or her schooling. It is derived from desirable properties but is distinguishable from the well-being it generates. Just as the literature refers almost exclusively to the link between capability and 'education' (see the excellent edited collection by Walker & Unterhalter, 2007a; and within that e.g. Flores-Crespo, 2007; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007b), as opposed to capability and 'schooling', so we must distinguish between 'learning' and 'having a school to attend'. The physical act of going to school in the morning is not the same as deriving benefit from attending, though we must be careful to distinguish between the freedom to achieve, and the achievement of, well-being. While the combination of a person's functionings represents their actual achievements, their capability set represents their freedom to choose between alternative functioning combinations (i.e. their 'opportunity freedom'). Functionings consist of 'beings' and 'doings', and together constitute a person's existence in that sense; from the most simple, like having food and shelter, to more complex things like having self-respect.[7] And capability reflects the freedom to achieve, through choice, functionings that are valued. Having a school meal is a functioning, but this is not the same functioning if it is an entitlement that results from crippling poverty at home. The *functioning* is having the free school meal,[8] but the *capability* to 'choose' food free of any associated social stigma is the key to evaluating the student's well-being. In essence, a school effectiveness paradigm does not distinguish between functioning and capability, whereas a capability approach makes that distinction.

A student's achieved functionings depend on 'utilisation functions' which reflect particular choices that students make, and well-being is the *evaluation* or ranking of this set (indicating the kind of existence the student is achieving). A student's set of feasible functionings is his or her 'capability set' and represents his or her command over schooling and the various combinations of functionings he or she can achieve … and ultimately his or her freedom to decide what kind of life to lead (Dreze & Sen, 1995); and as we have seen students will not necessarily choose the highest-value element. There may be other social tensions and altruisms at work, as Sen predicted:

> [The] highest value [of well-being] will not necessarily be chosen … since maximizing one's own well-being may not be the only motive for choice. Given other possible objectives and possible 'deontological' requirements (related, say, to one's obligations to others), it is quite possible that a non-maximal may in fact be chosen. (1985a, p. 14)

A capability set comprises the alternative combinations of functionings a student is able to achieve – in other words, both functionings and the opportunity freedom to pursue different combinations of functionings – so it denotes a student's opportunity and ability to generate valuable outcomes, taking into account relevant personal characteristics and external factors. The distinguishing feature of Sen's approach is the importance of 'freedom to achieve'. Sen's view is that if freedom has only instrumental value to a person's well-being (i.e. is only valuable as a means to an end) and has no intrinsic value, then the value of the capability set would be simply the value of the person's actual combination of functionings, which would not capture the whole of what he or she is capable of being and doing. Capability in schooling is not just about attainment/achievement – freedom of choice has intrinsic and direct impact on students' quality of life – so in gauging capability, it is unwise simply to equate its value with the value of the biggest element in the set, even when that element can be chosen. Consider the following two scenarios. In the first, a student has a capability set within which the biggest element (representing the best available school in an effectiveness paradigm) can be chosen in order to yield a certain well-being, but a smaller element is chosen for social or family reasons. In the second, the biggest element *is actually* chosen, but from a smaller 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 functionings – it is difficult to argue that the student's 'freedom' has been reduced in the sense that he or she is worse off. Certainly, there are fewer degrees of freedom in the latter case, but accepting again the distinction between the freedom to achieve well-being and its actual achievement, this is not of critical *practical* importance in relation to school choice if the biggest element is to be chosen anyway. We know from experience in UK cities like Southampton (see below) that:

- the freedom to attend a good school anywhere in a city is of little use to those without the means to organise family life around travel;
- having a very good school available to students who do not have the 'capital' to avail of it does not increase their capability;
- it is of little benefit increasing the choice available to students by adding poorer performing schools to their choice sets.

Additionally, an insistence on completeness is unnecessary when making a selection from a capability set (see Majumdar & Sen, 1976; Sen, 1982, 1984, 1985a). It *is* possible to rank one element over another without being able to rank *all* the elements (even in pairs), and partial ordering suits a capability approach better than arbitrary completeness. Our research suggests that parents and pupils *do* usually partially-order available schools without being able to rank them all absolutely: none of the students interviewed reported being able to rank all their schooling options relative to each other at the time of selecting their secondary school, but the majority reported being satisfied that they had enough information to choose a

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school, typically from three or four options, even if they had concerns about the quality and truthfulness of the information put out by schools.[9] In that sense the criticism of school choice that it cannot operate properly without parents having complete information seems unjustified, and again we can see the difference between the capability approach and the traditional school effectiveness one in this respect.

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Taking the Sen view: a real-valued approach to utility

If a student's choice function – in other words, how he or she makes specific choices from his or her set of options – is consistent (Richter, 1971; Sen, 1971; Suzumura, 1983), then it can be represented by a binary relation, and all subsequent choices can be seen as maximisations of that relation. Whether or not the binary relation captures well-being depends on the motivation behind the choices made and the student's ordering of his or her own well-being, but it is an 'heroic simplification', as Sen (1987, p. 13) calls it. Students who are poorly instructed, lack confidence or have learning disabilities can still be very happy (and have their desires fulfilled) as long as they have learned to avoid unrealistic ambitions and be resigned to their lot. As Sen (1985a, p. 21) says, considerations of practical possibility 'enter into what we dare to desire and what we are pained not to get'. A student from a deprived background who has learned not to be ambitious can be happier than a more affluent pupil *and* have more desires fulfilled *and* have a higher level of well-being, and our research suggests that this is indeed the case in practice: two-thirds of the students interviewed reported that they had frequently 'adapted their preferences and choices according to what they thought was possible'[10] as opposed to what they wanted. In the words of one student, 'being realistic is an important consideration'.

Diagnosing functionings

The well-being of a student is an index of his or her functionings; in other words, an index of what he or she is succeeding in doing with his or her schooling. Having more of it can increase the student's ability to function in desirable ways and to live a life more free of socio-economic, cultural and intellectual deprivation. Yet in comparing the functionings of different students it is not enough just to look at their respective quantities of schooling. The conversion of schooling into personal achievement 'depends on a variety of personal and social factors' (Sen, 1985a, pp. 25–26), a fact often forgotten by governments in pursuit of their effectiveness agenda. Research suggests that educational functionings depend on such factors as prior attainment, the presence of learning disorders, gender and level of parental education, as well as on personal traits like ambition and perseverance; and the development of *social* functionings at school depends on age, interaction with others, psychological disposition and culture. The sum of these 'various alternative functioning bundles' (Sen, 1985a, p. 27), which the student can achieve through choice, is his/her 'capability', but it is important to distinguish between school-choice and school-non-choice factors in determining it, to reflect the fact that students cannot choose their own rate of learning. A student with low academic ability may have to accept an unfavourable set of utilisation functions, although within that set there would almost certainly be 'room for better husbandry' (Kelly, 2007). This is why in an effectiveness paradigm increasing school choice is unlikely

of itself to result in any lasting increase in system-wide attainment if it is not accompanied by a raising of expectation. Too often, the set of various alternative functionings that can be achieved by students through choice is increased yet fails to result in greater well-being, because students, especially those from poorer socio-economic circumstances, have become reconciled to under-achievement (and their teachers less questioning of it perhaps) or have acquired an inconvenient set of anti-aspirations, and there are only very basic systems of remediation in place to counter that deficit (Kelly, 2010). For example, approximately half of the students interviewed as part of this research reported that greater local choice in schooling *per se* had done 'little' or 'nothing' for them in terms of changing their view of schooling or raising their life-aspirations, though they agreed that attending a particular school might impact on 'what type of university' they went to eventually, and thus the jobs they could get. Certainly, there is little evidence in the literature that the problem of low expectations is addressed by school choice initiatives that facilitate the transfer of high-performing students from bad schools to good schools but do little for those left behind in poorer communities where school functionings like 'avoiding truancy' and 'being ambitious' are likely to have greater variation from student to student.

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Diagnosing well-being

The valuation of functionings, as in the school effectiveness paradigm, is one measure of well-being – how well a student is doing *should* depend on what a student is achieving because poorly taught students can otherwise learn to live with under-achievement, 'seizing joy in merely coping and wanting no more than what is achievable without much effort' (Sen, 1985a, p. 29) – but it cannot explain away the fact of being disadvantaged or the fact that the student would welcome the removal of disadvantage whether or not he/she is 'content'. For Sen, the question of valuation is key so even in the capability paradigm the measurement of school performance (and data to inform subsequent permutations of options) is critical. Of course, in some situations, when one set of functionings clearly dominates another, valuation is non-problematic, and as we have noted already in other cases valuation need not generate complete orderings so that parents and students know that one set of educational functionings from a particular school is superior to another set of functionings from another school, without knowing the value of all the inferior school sets relative to one another. Parents in essence want (and generally choose) the best available school limited by family and other circumstances, irrespective of league tables showing how all the inferior schools rate against one another, and different schools will be 'first-choice schools' for different families depending on how they judge the relative importance of the various desirable outcomes of schooling on offer at each institution, but it is a mistake to infer from this that we should abandon the complex metrics, like contextual value added (CVA), that inform league tables, as the UK government has recently done (Department for Education, 2010, p. 68).

Inferences and criticisms of a capability approach to schooling

The school effectiveness paradigm is grounded in a utilitarian/Benthamite approach while recognising that it overlooks the more affective-conative (as opposed to cog-

nitive) aspects to schooling and some of the things we value most, like students being conditioned to come to terms with disadvantage as a means of 'survival'. The problem of 'adaptive preferences' – that habituation to adverse socio-economic conditions can induce people to endure their disadvantage – lies at the heart of the capability approach. It was originally introduced by Elster (1982) and expanded by Sen (1984) and Nussbaum (2000) as a critique of utilitarianism. Sen, in particular, suggested that inequality survives:

> through making allies out of the deprived and the exploited [and that] the underdog learns to bear the burden so well that he or she overlooks the burden itself. Discontent is replaced by acceptance, hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet, and … suffering and anger by cheerful endurance. (1984, p. 309)

A capability approach avoids many of these pitfalls because it focuses on capabilities and opportunities, but a number of criticisms still demand our attention, as Clark's (2005) lucid exposition makes clear. Some were recognised by Sen himself at the time of his development of capability; others emerged as he and others progressed the approach; still more result from a fundamental divergence of philosophical views among academics working in the field.

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Schooling and uncertainty

Unlike well-being, which is the assessment of particular achievements, advantage takes account of the opportunities offered to a student by chance, so the assessment of advantage is necessarily an evaluation of *potential* (and not just *actual*) achievement. One of the problems with evaluating advantage *in schooling* is that it always operates under uncertainty: the chooser picks a set of feasibilities and then 'nature' or 'chance' chooses one particular element from the set. For example, a student chooses a school and chance then chooses his/her classmates, and hence the learning atmosphere of the class for the next three-to-five years. In schooling, unlike other areas in which capability has been applied, it is impossible to avoid uncertainty – to have the chooser pick both the set and the particular element from within the set – so that adding an inferior element to an existing set of feasibilities often makes a set *worse* off, since the student might be given the inferior element by chance when nature makes its selection (Kelly, 2007). If choice is widened for poorer pupils by giving them the freedom to attend more schools outside their traditional catchment areas, and if that wider choice includes inferior schools and the final decision is made under uncertainty (which is the case in reality), then pupils are made *worse off* by greater choice since the risk of going to a bad school has increased. This perspective can be used to reconceptualise a theory of private schooling, away from the tired notion of middle-class social reproduction: what private schooling does is lower the risk from uncertainty by reducing the number of additional 'inferior' elements in the set of possibilities. Nothing can remove risk completely of course because nature will always have a part to play, but insofar as it is possible in a free society, private schooling controls for the variables that most concern middle-class parents about state education.

Freedoms and futures

Since a student's capability can be represented by the value of the set's best or biggest element, greater choice is valued because it gives the student the freedom to choose a superior element. Yet the notion of 'freedom' is problematic for schooling if we must also look at what students *could have done*? Consider the situation in which a set from which a student can choose gets smaller, but still includes its best element. In terms of 'achievement', the student's position is unaffected, assuming he/she chooses the best element on both occasions, but the freedom enjoyed by the student has been reduced. In the same way, if a Local Authority/School District reduces school choice for a community (as part of a school closure programme, say) to a smaller set of options that still includes the optimal choice, parents and students may not perceive their freedom to have been reduced, but it has been. Capability must take account of *extent* of choice, as well as the value of the best option, and in adapting the capability approach to schooling, we might interpret this as saying that the quality of the schooling students enjoy is not just a matter of what they have achieved, but also of what options they have had available. Research for this paper found no difference between high- and low-achieving students within the same school in how they perceived the benefits they had acquired (or not) through choice, but a difference *was* found between students in different schools: the more extensive the choices available to them, the greater their levels of satisfaction. So a 'good education' is not one in which a student is forced into a good school or on to a good course, but is about having genuine choice; and irrespective of what view of freedom is taken, it is impossible for students to know how they will rank their choices in the future, or how they will feel retrospectively about their present rankings (see Sen, 1985a, p. 65). A related difficulty remains however; that of avoiding Arrow-type impossibility in aggregating different valuations for different students in a cohort, or for different parents in the same local community, and further research is required here.[11]

Insufficiency

It is acknowledged, not least by Sen (1999, 2005) himself, that the capability approach alone cannot provide a complete theory of justice and development for all contexts; note needs to be taken of other principles such as personal liberty and efficiency (Clark, 2005, p. 5). His approach has also been criticised for failing to provide an objective universal list of capabilities (see Nussbaum, 1988; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Qizilbash, 1998),[12] though others (e.g. Alkire, 2005; Sugden, 1993) have suggested that Sen goes *too far* in insisting that certain capabilities (like literacy) are universal, and that generating a universal list of capabilities misses the point of Sen's holistic approach to human well-being. Sen's view, and the author's view in relation to adapting capability to schooling, is that a warranted ranked list would be impossible for two reasons: the necessity to contextualise/personalise such a list; and the desirability of having these matters dealt with ethically and politically by public debate/scrutiny (see Sen, 1993).

Comparing well-being and informational requirements

The usefulness of the capability approach in making comparisons between the well-being of individuals in circumstances where there is disagreement about valuation

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has been called into question (Beitz, 1986; Kelly, 2007). In his defence, Sen (1985a) has suggested that in practice most individuals rank capabilities in a similar way; a view supported by Clark (2002, 2005, p. 8), who found that most people 'share a common vision' of capability that is 'not fundamentally at odds with' the capabilities advocated by theoreticians. However, the informational requirements of a capability approach can be, as Clark puts it, extremely high. It depends on collecting and analysing large amounts of data on many different functionings, and in some cases the 'relevant social indicators' are unavailable. This poses a problem for any adaptation of capability to school choice; specifically, in trying to extrapolate measures of capability from school effectiveness data without the benefit of (CVA) measures to contextualise effectiveness.

Obligation

Sen's conceptualisation of democracy and public action may be overly optimistic in underplaying the effect of political power (Qizilbash, 1996) and critics have suggested that the approach is too circumspect about identifying the *means of securing* freedom (Qizilbash, 1996, p. 161) and the role of capability in facilitating social change. It is therefore a concern that a capability approach to schooling would err on the conservative side despite education systems being in need of a radical overhaul in the face of potential world economic and ecological meltdown (Clark, 2005, p. 11; see also Alkire, 2002, pp. 177–178). At the local level, attempts at reforming schooling provision have sometimes failed because of an over-optimistic belief that the democratic process is itself sufficient to bring about change. For example, in 2007, Southampton (UK) Local Authority reviewed its schooling provision and decided, with effect from August 2008, to close four secondary schools and establish two new independent Academies. Despite a consultation exercise, the restructuring has proved very controversial (*Daily Echo*, 2008; Marley, 2008; Smith, 2008). Initially, the plan was simply to reopen two of the four closed schools to allow greater staffing flexibility across the remaining schools, but the city authority underestimated the interest that an open competition to run the new Academies would generate, so that it then had to decide whether to compete for the new schools or to withdraw and adjudicate on the competition. Eventually, in the midst of local political upheaval, it decided *not* to bid, and awarded both Academies to a faith-based registered charity. The decision was called in by the government's Scrutiny Panel, but was subsequently confirmed. Two of the four closed schools were among the five worst-performing schools in the city, but the other two were not. There was (and remains) considerable disgruntlement in the city as a result of the reorganisation, which has not been helped by the fact that the two new Academies have 'poached' some of the most successful staff (including heads) from the remaining schools. As far as schooling is concerned, the democratic process appears to be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for capability to drive change. It seems to require parallel measures to remediate the loss experienced by some groups as a result of other groups gaining.

Conclusion

The provenance of Sen's early work on capability is rooted in his attempt to understand economic disadvantage, but even in that paradigm he included educational

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attainment as one of his three indicators. Schooling impacts on the ability of people to participate meaningfully in society and what Sen's capability approach does is lift the discourse towards broader concepts of freedom and quality of life. For Sen, the purpose of the capability approach is to fill gaps in our conceptual apparatus of self-interest, advantage and well-being (Sen, 1985a, p. 7), and our research suggests that applying it to schooling does advance our theoretical understanding of how schooling policy is actualised within families and how students are thought to benefit from it. Sen's capability approach may be vulnerable to cultural indoctrination (Qizilbash & Clark, 2005; Sumner, 1996), but in contrast to theorists like Nussbaum, Sen (1985a) has at least argued that negative freedom has intrinsic as well as 'instrumental significance' and that 'capability failure' can stem from the absence of positive freedoms (see Clark, 2005). The greater problem, in this author's view, lies with the extent to which its adaptation to schooling does or does not allow us to address the fact that certain forms of advantage for one group *ipso facto* diminish the well-being of other groups, irrespective of the opportunities made available to them by way of remediation, but (as Sen himself might say) this may be context-specific to particular societies and schooling systems like those in the UK.

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Notes

1. Sen also developed a measure of poverty that took relative deprivation into account, and in collaboration with Nussbaum, Anand and Foster, a measure of social welfare (the Human Development Index) that went beyond GNP and GDP to take account of various other observed features of opportunity and well-being, including education.
2. The response data were captured and summarised in note form *in situ* and manually analysed afterwards by the author.
3. *None* of the students interviewed reported that they would 'never' do this.
4. Mixed-gender class groupings were perceived by students to be better with regard to learning altruism, but some students responded that their schools made them 'feel angry enough not to do anything for anyone' and others reported that 'teachers discouraged "too much" cooperation'.
5. The Specialist Schools programme encourages secondary schools to specialise in certain areas of the curriculum (including the performing arts, music, sports, languages and mathematics) to boost achievement.
6. Defined as 'any more than you would if you attended another school with a different (or no) specialism'.
7. 'Agency' – the ability personally to choose the functionings one values – does not always correlate with well-being; for example, one may choose a local comprehensive school as a matter of philosophical principle, even when such a choice decreases physical well-being. Agency is critical to the assessment of capability because it captures whether or not socio-economic (or other political) barriers restrict a person's ability to pursue substantive freedoms.
8. Entitlement to free school meals (FSM) is the standard proxy measure for socio-economic deprivation in UK schools (and in education research in the UK). Eligibility is linked to income and parents/guardians must be in receipt of one of a range of social welfare benefits to qualify (e.g. Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, etc.). The FSM scheme is administered by the Local Authority but the qualifying rules are set by central government. It is closely related to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

(IDACI), which is based on student home postcodes and is essentially a measure of the proportion of children under 16 living in families in receipt of the same entitling social welfare benefits.

9. Some respondents reported being disinterested in school choice information because they had not passed the entrance exam for a local selective grammar school and/or were attending the secondary school in question simply because an older sibling was attending or had attended the school.
10. As Walker (2006, p. 167) phrased it.
11. Arrow's (1951) Impossibility Theorem states that when there are three or more choices, there is no general way to aggregate preferences without running into some kind of unfairness – more accurately, no system of aggregation meets the criteria of 'non-imposition', 'monotonicity', 'independence of irrelevant alternatives', 'unrestricted domain' and 'non-dictatorship' – but although this is often a criticism levelled at capability as an approach, it is no different from the alternatives as far as schooling is concerned.
12. Nussbaum (2000, 2003) suggests 10 capabilities for a democratic society: life; health, food and shelter; bodily integrity, including the freedom to move from place to place, to be free from violent attacks and to have choice in matters of sexual activity; freedom of expression; the capability to form emotional and loving attachments; critical reflection and religious observance; dignity and affiliation with others; being free to have concern about the natural world; recreation; having control over one's environment and the right to property.

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Professor Kelly is Head of the School of Education, University of Southampton. He lectures and researches in the general area of education policy, governance and school improvement/effectiveness, and is particularly interested in the development of theory and methodology in these fields. His most recent books are on the use of game theory in decision-making (Cambridge University Press), conceptualising a theory of intellectual capital for use in schools (Kluwer Academic Press), the use of effectiveness data for school improvement (Routledge) and adapting Sen's capability theory to school choice (Palgrave Macmillan). Kelly serves on the board of several peer-reviewed journals and national steering groups. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Physics, the Institute of Mathematics, the Royal Statistical Society and the New York Academy of Sciences, and has recently appeared as an expert witness before the (UK Parliamentary) Select Committee on Education.

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Appendix. Focus groups: target populations, prompts and data sought

School, tutor and cohort identifiers:

1. *For all pupils*

(a) Have there been circumstances where pupils have put classmates' learning before their own?

[Data sought: frequency (of any occurrence) and underpinning reasons]

(b) Do pupils think the school they attend has an impact on this?

[Data sought: yes/no; if 'yes', what aspects of school culture have an impact, positive or negative?]

Tutors/teachers: Religious Education; Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE); Citizenship; and others.

2. *For all pupils*

Have pupils consciously made choices according to what they thought was possible, as opposed to what they wanted?

[Data sought: yes/no and what are their feeling re same?]

Tutors/teachers: Religious Education; PSHE; Citizenship; and others.

3. *For pupils attending Specialist Schools only*

Do pupils think they have benefited from the curriculum specialism of their school?

[Data sought: yes/no and in what ways?]

Tutors/teachers: Any teachers not in that particular specialism; Year Heads.

4. *For all pupils*

(a) How many schools did pupils consider or have the option of attending before they settled on this one?

[Data sought: an average for the class, 1, 2, >2]

(b) How much did they know about each school?

[Data sought: pupils seem to know a lot; just the minimum information; pupils seem not to have any information or not to care]

(c) Do they think they and/or their parents had enough information to make an informed choice?

[Data sought: yes/no, and any remarks made in relation to this]

Tutors/teachers: Any.

5. *For pupils who considered more than one school*

For those pupils who did think about several schools before choosing one – has that fact affected how they think about school or their ambition? Or would they have thought the same way anyway, no matter what school they attended?

[Data sought: generally choice has made them more aspirational/generally choice has not had any significant effect on their aspirations]

Tutors/teachers: Any.

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6. *For older pupils, Year 10 upwards*

Do pupils perceive that there are any benefits in having a choice of schools? Discuss.

[Data sought: what is the general feeling why/not and if there are benefits, what are perceived to be?]

Tutors/teachers: Any.

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