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# **Beyond development: applying the human development paradigm to identifying children with special needs and disabilities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores two aspects of development in relation to children's learning: cognitive developmental theories and the human development paradigm. In doing so the aim of the paper is to put forward first a critique of how developmental theories have been applied to construe what and how children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities learn; second to put forward how the human development approach, based on the capability approach, can broaden our understanding of development; and third to suggest a way in which both types of development can be brought together to foster a valuable and meaningful education for all children. In doing so the paper argues that relying on one single way to understand and measure children development is not only short sighted, but counterproductive in as much as it can serve the purpose of stigmatizing and labelling children and thus narrowing the opportunities for learning and flourishing. In relation to freedom, a notion of development which is too structured and focused on cognitive outcomes only delimits, and consequently, limits the opportunities and potential for learning of any child, but particularly children with learning difficulties.

## **Introduction**

Recent policies, such as the revised early years foundation (DfE, 2012a) and the new development in relation to children with SEN stress the issue of early identification (DfE, 2013). While early identification of difficulties in learning has its merits in supporting children before problems become intractable, the process of identification can also result in mis-identification, stigmatization, and a limitation of the children's future potential for learning and development.

This paper explores the issue of identification by focusing on two aspects of development in relation to children's learning: cognitive developmental theories and the human development paradigm based on Sen's (1992, 1999, 2009) and Nussbaum's capability approach (ref). The paper draws from recent developments in the field of capabilities and specifically children's capabilities to argue that a focus on "A-capabilities" (capabilities as abilities) the complex of innate talents and of acquired competencies (skills); "O-capabilities" (capabilities as opportunities) the set of actual, accessible or available chances for improving well-being; "P-capabilities" (capabilities as potentialities) the set of the imagined, prospects or conceivable chances of improving well-being or alternatives which can be considered admissible' (Biggeri and Santi, 2012) could and should be used in the process of assessment, identification and support so as to promote both learning and opportunities to learn.

It is suggested that the comparison between a staged 'capacity to learn' approach which focuses on the acquisition of A-capabilities, and an inclusive approach focusing on O-capabilities will result in the development of a combined framework based on the 'capability to learn' entitlement fostering the promotion of P-capabilities. The paper argues that relying on one single way to understand and measure children developmental capacity to learn is not only short sighted, but counterproductive since it can narrow the opportunities for learning and flourishing. A notion of development which is too structured and focused on cognitive outcomes only delimits, and consequently, limits the opportunities and potential for learning of any child, but particularly children with learning difficulties.

This paper aims to raise awareness about a new and promising way of conceiving children's development for learning and one that can have both theoretical and practical applications for teaching children with SEN. Such a development is needed in the present circumstances in which traditional models of disability as within the child limitations are now re-surfacing.

## **Stages of development: boxing children in, casting them out**

Hannah is a 13 years old attending Year 9 in an English secondary school. She has been stated since primary school having been identified through a barrage of tests as having severe learning difficulties. Amongst the many labels, which construe her identity as a student and a young girl, she has dyslexia, dyspraxia, and finds all subjects, including PE, very challenging. In the three core subjects of English, Maths and Science she is assisted by a number of learning support assistants (LSAs), whose knowledge of the subjects they work with is variable but whose intentions to foster Hannah's independence beyond any doubts. In Maths, for example, Hannah is still adding and subtracting to 100, can do only basic multiplications, but has not yet mastered divisions, let alone any of the more complex mathematical skills required by the National Curriculum. She has spent her entire school life in the bottom set, being looked after, supported, and given 'TLC', tender loving care, as an LSA once said. Hannah is included in the social life of the school, but excluded from its academic purpose. Considered 'vulnerable', she is protected from the harshness of academic competition by giving her tasks that she can achieve so as to meet her potential, but never stretched to go beyond it.

Now there is another Hannah. When at home Hannah looks after the family since her mother is unwell and most of the times unable to do any work, or take care of the house and the two children when her father is out for work. Hannah does the shopping, cooks, and keeps an eye on the money. But Hannah can barely add or subtract or multiple, and cannot divide. Hannah's development is, so her statement says, that of an 8 year old. Teachers, teaching assistants, educational psychologists and others monitor her daily, monthly and yearly development only to conclude that Hannah is lovely, and willing, and hard working, but she is still behind. The logic of exam testing and various forms of continuous psychological assessment ensures that there is an alignment between her needs, her abilities, and the education she receives. The logic of meeting her needs ensures that through LSA support, annual reviews, and individual educational plans (IEPs), Hannah's needs are met as a consequence. The system works. Or does it?

Hannah is not necessarily an isolated case although unique in many ways. It is not even that the adults who worked for her are ineffective, or careless, or wilfully excluding her from the opportunity to learn. It is that who Hannah is, and what she can do, is pre-determined already. Her development, or lack of, has been determined by others, in a scientific and, most probably, supportive manner. Rims of papers fill up her file; there is evidence to back decisions up. But how she develops and what she should and would develop into is not hers to choose.

In the last one hundred years, a common shared understanding of how children learn has been accepted as valid, and reliable. The force of its 'scientific' logic not only determines what children learn and how they are taught, but also defines, limits and delimits who the children are, and what their expectations and aspirations lead them to become. Almost without criticism, this system has been applied to the structure of the content of the curriculum and of the final exams by fitting children's learning capacity into a hierarchical set of stages in which children master more and more complex learning skills until they achieve the formal operational stage in adulthood. There is no escape. The force of its logic is pervasive and persuasive: some children can, while others cannot. Some children develop, while others would struggle to succeed in a narrow notion of performance, which favour cognition over other ways of knowing, doing and being.

This paper contends that while the previous system of inclusion and support was not necessarily perfect, the *Children and Families Bill* (HMG, 2013) does not provide assurance that things will get better. The situation in England has been at a crossroad since the drafting of the document 'Reform of provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs' (DfE, 2012b), aiming at addressing the 'weaknesses' of the now past education system in relation to children with statements or special educational needs (SEN). In the foreword to the draft legislation, Sarah Theater, the now ousted Minister of State for Children and Families, writes,

'Children and young people who have a special educational need or disability deserve the same life chances as every other child. But, too often, the systems that should support them and their families fail them, putting bureaucratic barriers in their way and failing to address their true needs' (DfE, 2012: 5).

While a strong consensus can be reached that all children deserve the best life chances, 'bureaucratic barriers' are not the main or only issue. The barriers that 'fail to address their [the children's] true needs' are not just bureaucratic, but 'ideological', to use Gove's own words in relation to the teaching and academic profession. This paper argues that it is the very system onto which education is based, its ideological make up, that is the invisible barrier because that very system is the one that defines, creates and addresses the children's '**true** needs' (emphasis added).

Thus, this paper argues that the way the staged approach to learning has been applied to construct a notion of the capable and the desirable learner might be necessary as an initial means to identify problems and suggest solutions so as to determine action, but that such system is neither sufficient, nor ethically and pragmatically sound in the long term. It is argued that an uncritical and mechanistic application of behavioural and cognitive psychological theories, onto which the logic of this system is based, has been determined more by the need to normalise and control than to nurture and educate. Deeply cast in the notion that children with disabilities and SEN are outside 'the norm', this approach to learning has shaped not only teaching practice, but also the mind, fears and expectations of many teachers, parents, children and policy makers. The notion of a staged development has created a series of adaptive preferences (Watts, 2009) which in determining what is to be expected, reproduces a myopic notion of children's development.

Conversely, this paper argues that meeting children's needs requires to, as Bernstein (ref) to bridge the gap between commonsense knowledge and disciplines and professional based knowledge so as to be able to 'think the impossible'. In doing so, there is a need to 're-imagine' (Florian, 2007) special education, find alternative solutions and go beyond what is deemed possible, usual, tested, and easy to assess and evaluate. This paper proposes to broaden our understanding of development through the application of the human development paradigm. The human development paradigm refers to an approach that has developed from, and together with, the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2010). According to the human development paradigm, human beings are the end of development (UNDP, 1990) and thus, as Sen (1999) states, development is about broadening the capabilities, that is the *real* freedoms, people have to do and be what they have reason to value. The capability approach stresses the importance of achieving valuable and valued functionings, on the one hand, and promoting environments which broaden the choices of which capabilities to foster. Along these lines, development is the result of a dynamic interplay between the learner, the educator, and other environmental factors in which learning is not detached and devoid of the learner's capacities for development and entitlement to learning. Rather learning is viewed as both a functioning and a capability with

both intrinsic and instrumental value (Robeyns, 2006). From a capability perspective human development is not determined by capping one's cognitive abilities, but by acknowledging human diversity and using it as driving factors in planning achievement and outcomes which are valuable to the person.

This paper starts with an examination of current views of development based on cognitive theories in order to set the context for a more critical appraisal of the use of a human development and capability approach based view of development.

### **Cognitive development and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities: the solution or the problem**

It is specifically to the assessment of the needs of the children that knowledge of cognitive development has had a determinant role for the life of millions of children with or without SEN. With regard to teaching children with special needs, the role of psychology, more in general, has been, until recently, that of providing appropriate testing to determine the level of cognitive abilities of the child. This in turn has been matched to the most appropriate teaching strategies whose objective has been that of creating a match between the learning ability and the learning objective to be achieved. While this approach has some merits in as much as it can be a useful heuristic tool, its over-reliance can concur in giving a sense of certainty and false security. More to the point, it can shift the responsibility of assessing and identifying learning progress from the teacher to the expert, that is, the psychologist in this case. As Burden (1974: 16) commented:

'For far too long we have attempted to disguise our state of ignorance behind such respectable smoke screens as psychometric tests. This is not to say that such tests are without their uses, but to inflate them to a level of importance that they do not deserve'.

From such a criticism came the realization that educational psychology should shift its focus from the identification of the problem to the suggestion of possible solutions. Positive psychology, applied psychology and other emerging theories of wellbeing can be future contenders as new positive approaches.

While undoubtedly educational psychology has changed and is changing, the fact remains that the interrelated needs of knowing the children's needs and ensuring the right provision of resources to meet them is still one of its central features. Thus, although the process of assessment is far from being the objective and scientific process that is made to be, it has enabled many students to receive the resources necessary to be educated, first of all, and educated in mainstream school. It is, however, of some concern the present call for testing and assessing children at an early stage in their life and development (DfE, 2012b; HMG, 2013). While this can be useful, it can also label children and, paradoxically, limit their development and future educational opportunities and outcomes. As Devecchi, Murray and Trory argue (2013),

..., there are potential problems with some aspects of the proposed legislation that may detract from an inclusive approach for young children with SEN and disabilities. The Children and Families Bill is proposing to offer the EHC plans exclusively to those with diagnosed SEN ... (Special Needs Jungle, 2013). ... Furthermore, the Children and Families Bill draws on extant definitions of SEN and disability which have been identified as lacking rigour and clarity (Ellis, Tod and Graham Matheson, 2008; 2011). Equally those definitions and interpretations may not account for the

broader additional needs of many children that might inhibit their access to education and care (NASUWT, 2013).

There are four major ways in which the working relationship between psychology and education has been fatal to teaching and learning. They are:

- the assessment of children with SEN's learning needs
- the notion that children's development takes place in age compartmentalised stages
- the use of hierarchies of knowledge
- the use of behaviourist approaches to teaching and learning

Underlying all of the above are the two interrelated principles of standardization and normalization. Both are based on the idea in which both the outcome (the standard to achieve) and the process (the way to achieve it) can be set against a perfect norm. Such processes are, according to Thomas (2007), based on a specific epistemology which has historically drawn from social Darwinism, psychometrics and scientism. The former reifies a discourse of competition and survival of the fittest as natural biological and social processes. The latter, according to Thomas's Foucauldian analysis, has had a great impact on the success of the system of discursive regularities, which have defined what counts as knowledge, and what knowledge count. Psychometrics and other deterministic approaches to cognitive capacities have been the most visible ways to support marginalisation and exclusion. With regard to the impact of scientism on special education, Thomas argues that

'The model (scientific experimental) is deeply flawed for education generally ... and in special education it has had particularly unfortunate effects. ... The result has been, in the field of special education, an epistemic jumble, an agglomeration of bits and pieces from many and varied theoretical provenances, often contradictory in their tenets and widely different in their recommendations' (2007: 251).

Both standardisation and normalization, thus, work on the premise that intelligence can be known and measured. As a finite resource we are born with (the nature argument), intelligence, once known, can be used to categorise children and select a pedagogical approach with regard to both what is to be taught (the curriculum), how (the teaching strategies) and how to assess that learning has taken place (the grading system).

Thus, the premise that there is a norm of distribution of intelligence creates an unquestionable and natural distinction between those who fit the standards and those who do not fit the norm and who 'logically' deviate from it. Unfortunately, there are at least two major faults in the self-confirmatory logic of standards and normalization. The first is that standards are far from being objective. Rather, as is the case of the GCSE latest results, they are the results of statistical 'adjustments' (The Guardian, 2013). The second is that this view of how intelligence is 'distributed' has undergone a form of linguistic cosmetics changes, but its substantive message remains unchanged in, for example, how children are set and consequently the curricular content they receive. It is not uncommon to find teachers and academics, even in the field of special needs and inclusion, who when pressed would resort to 'normal distribution' as a scientific reason for why some children are to receive a better education in a special school where 'specialist' teachers can meet their needs.

But the notion of the norm goes deeper than this. It also creates standards of living, and thus it determines a raft of skills which are necessary to live a 'normal' life. The atypical children, thus, need to be normalized in more way than one. They need to be treated, helped, trained, cared for, looked after by experts. Despite much development towards inclusion children with

special needs are, and remain, the 'others' who do not fit, and who, in the case of children with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, receive our moral condemnation.

### **A pragmatic approach: beyond practitioners' action and towards practitioners' moral thinking**

The history of special education is marred with ill decisions and paved with good intentions. This is to say that there are many who argue that good and effective teaching is good teaching for all children (Florian and Rouse, 2001; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011), and others who argue that while there are pedagogies which work with all children, some children might still require specific differentiation (Lewis and Norwich, 2001; 2005) within a consideration of universal similarities amongst all children. Those who side with the view that all children can learn are teachers who believe in 'learning without limits' (Hart, Drummond and McIntyre, 2004) and specifically beyond the limits of narrowly defined academic abilities, intelligence, and predefined notions of what is normal and acceptable as standard.

This is not to say that we should be blind to the fact that human beings are diverse. Neither should we be unresponsive to the fact that not all children can accomplish everything at the same predetermined stage in their learning career. The argument put forward is rather that we cannot refuse to acknowledge the value and importance of a variety of ways to assess learning, as the acquisition and application of knowledge, and its use to provide for children's wellbeing and development.

In this light, I would like to propose an alternative framework, which is based on an understanding that teaching is a process by which professionally informed decision-making is reactive, proactive and overall responsive to the learner's interest, and potential to learn. Within this framework, it is not learning that takes centre stage, but rather the assessment starts not from what children cannot do, as it is the case for psychology-based testing, but on what children can already do. Pedagogically, the aim of developing such a kind of teaching is that in which teachers keep the three basic purposes of *being*, *having* and *doing* (Dee, Devicchi and Florian, 2006) in mind. They define the three purposes as:

- ***being*** (developing a sense of and belief in one's own identity and who we want to become)
- ***having*** (acquiring new skills, knowledge and understanding, and accessing new opportunities)
- ***doing*** (becoming empowered to participate, and being enabled to participate).

In their recommendations, they suggest that 'decisions about teaching approaches are most effective when based on an informed eclecticism that draws on a range of theories of learning rather than an adherence to a single theoretical model' (2006:2), or psychological fashion. Such a statement agrees with James's argument that knowing psychology is not a *sine qua non* of being a good teacher. He says,

'To know psychology, therefore, is absolutely no guarantee that we shall be good teachers. To advance to that result, we must have an additional endowment all together, a happy tact and ingenuity to tell us what definite things to say and do when the pupil is before us. That ingenuity in meeting and pursuing the pupil, that tact for the concrete situation, though they are the alpha and omega of the teacher's art, are things to which psychology cannot help us in the least' (1958: 24).



Dee et al (2006) also support James's idea about the importance of the 'concrete situation' when they say that 'the context influences not only what is learned but how it is learned through the social interactions that occur, the networks that are created and the means that are available within particular environments. The context can transform how learners see themselves, and how they are seen by others' (3).

In a following publication (Florian, Dee and Devecchi, 2008) they developed their findings by locating their work within the application of a Human Development paradigm and the capability approach. Both stress development and wellbeing as the expansion of capabilities and define capabilities as 'the freedom a person has to achieve what he or she has reason to value (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2009). Central to the capability approach is the idea that social arrangements conducive to individual wellbeing, of which learning arrangements are an important aspect of the life of students and their supervisor, should be evaluated in terms of how effective they are in expanding functioning and, above all, individual capabilities. Sen defines the two core notions as such:

"A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they *are* different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead" (Sen 1987: 36).

The combination of the three purposes and the notion of capabilities allow for an alternative understanding of the process of teaching, its aim and practice. Rather than the linear process of knowledge transmission, or the functionalist one predicated on the acquisition of skills, a capability informed conception of teaching and learning focuses on the expanded notion of personal wellbeing. It stresses the obligation of the social institution, and the inter-personal obligations of the teacher and student in building a learning experience that enables the achievement of knowledge, skills and understanding which are means to the accomplishment of broader *learning outcomes* (James, 2005). The teacher/student relationship is thus contextualised within a specific institutional community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), but also in a private dimension related to the goals and expectations of both parties in the learning experience.

In this light, teaching all children is the informed combination between a person-centred approach to learning and institutional and disciplinary expectations. However, the informed teacher is not the technician who knows how to mix and match various theories, as Thomas (2007) suggested having being the demise of special education. The informed teacher is driven by both pragmatic goals of ensuring what works, and the need to question the means and ends of his or her practice by confronting 'our moral relations' (James, 1958: 19) to the children and society.

Such an approach draws from both psychology and philosophy. With regard to the former, it centres on the notion that all children, irrespective of their learning ability, come with valuable knowledge, skills and understanding, which need to be acknowledged and used as a starting point for the development of innovative and original thinking and practice. Simultaneously, the child is posited as a novice and it is the teacher's role to introduce the child to a new and challenging learning experience. This process of scaffolding and bringing the child to his or her zone of proximal development is a socially constructed process of learning (see Daniels, 1986 for an introduction into Vygotsky's theory of development) in which the production of knowledge is the result of complex and at times challenging balances of power as professional and socially determined discursive practices (Foucault, 1980, 1991), but also of

identity development and construction of the self as a member of a professional and learning culture. In essence, the teaching process is more than the technical application and achievement of what Habermas (1971) defined as technical knowledge. Rather, the teaching process is effective when besides technical knowledge, teachers and children afford each other the opportunity to acquire and develop also practical and emancipatory knowledge required to promote social interaction in order to achieve a consensual agreement.

### **Towards an enabling provision: education as broadening capabilities**

One of the major tenets of the capability approach is that equality does not depend on income, the fulfilment of subjective preferences, or, in the case under review here, the amount of resources held by each individual. Rather, it stresses the importance of broadening the information basis so as to determine how and whether the resources individual have or can dispose of are used to 'lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have' (Sen, 1997 cited in Biggeri and Santi, 2012, p. 374). It follows that equality is not about ensuring that all have the 'same' resources to start with, or that they achieve the 'same' goals. Rather, it means that the resources are distributed in such a manner that equalises the individual opportunities to freedom, here understood as the freedom to broaden one's capabilities so as to achieve those functionings, or achieved beings and doings' that are instrumental to individual development and flourishing (Robeyns, 2005).

The capability approach, and the related Human Development paradigm, is, as Nussbaum (2011, p. 18) explains, 'an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment', which, as she continues, 'takes *each person as an end*, asking not just about the total average well-being but about the opportunities available to each person' (emphasis in original). Education is considered a fundamental capability by Sen (1999, 2009), Nussbaum (2011) and Robeyns (2006) because it is instrumental to the development of future capabilities since 'it expands the possibilities for what people value and for various pathways they might take' (Wood and Deprez, 2012, p. 471).

The capability approach is a relatively new approach to the evaluation of social arrangements. In brief its main tenets are:

- Equality and justice should be considered at the level of capabilities
- A capability is 'what people are effectively able to do and to be'
- It focuses on the freedom people have to choose opportunities (capabilities) and functionings (realised opportunities) that they have reason to value
- It rejects an evaluation of wellbeing based on purely subjective accounts of happiness (such as utilities), or income or consumption
- It broadens the informational basis necessary to make judgments on equality and justice
- It posits questions about justice as 'realization-focused comparisons'
- It locates positive freedoms at the centre of the evaluative process
- It takes into consideration freedom as both an end of and a means to development as both the *opportunity and process aspects of freedom*

Central to the approach is the notion of human development, which posits the person as the end of development rather than simply a means to economic growth. In this sense, the capability approach challenges the resurgence of a human capital approach to education which views individuals as means, stresses performance, and posits success not as individual achievement, but as the gain of competitive gain in a free market. While not rejecting the instrumental value of education in relation to gaining future personal advantage,

the capability approach also takes into account both the intrinsic value the extrinsic values of education in relation to realising the person as a future citizen.

If, as Sen (2009, p. 227) suggests, 'in assessing our lives, we have reasons to be interested not only in the kind of lives we manage to lead, but also in the freedom that we actually have to choose between different styles and ways of living', then not only education, but above all the quality of education children can access to and participation in through the provision made available matter as well. In this sense, the CA stresses the importance of defining, broadening and refining the informational bases required to make decisions on the nature of the social arrangements needed. This last point has implications for the process of the identification and assessment of what the individual children might need, want and required.

### **The realisation of a person's capabilities: implication for developing the capabilities of children and young people with disabilities and SEN**

This paper has so far argued that provision for children with disabilities and SEN should be evaluated with regard as to whether educational provision, including the assessment and identification of their learning difficulties, serves to broaden the children's capabilities, thus enhancing the opportunities they are afforded through education to choose specific pathways. This section will provide an overview of recent developments both in the field of capability and disability and children's capabilities and examine how they can be applied to devising provision, which would fulfil both support and aspirations.

Far from being just a technical exercise, as Lamb (2012, p. 204) states, the system of resource allocation is "political" at its core'. It is so in at least two major respects: first because it is dependent on changes in policies and the ideology onto which such policies are based. Second, because it requires the political activism as responsible and responsive citizenship of all interested parties, including the children themselves.

While in theory, the SEN Code of Practice (DFES, 2001) stresses this second political dimension, in practice at present, and more so in the future, the setting up of provision would be determined through the identification of a series of purported unique and different 'needs' of the child, viewed as additional and different from those of other children and which, therefore, define the nature of the provision as different from what is 'otherwise' already available to other children (Florian, 2007). What follows is a tense battle between two contrasting approaches to disability and SEN, which, ultimately, do not necessarily work in the best interest of the child, his or her family, and the school. This is because on the one hand, the approach to identification and intervention has remained, and will become more so, fully within a medicalised model of disability in as much as it starts by identifying what is different, and therefore outside the norm, which requires specialised intervention for its remediation. Simultaneously, the within-the-child model identifies the child as in need of care and therefore creates an essential position of vulnerability, neediness, and dependence.

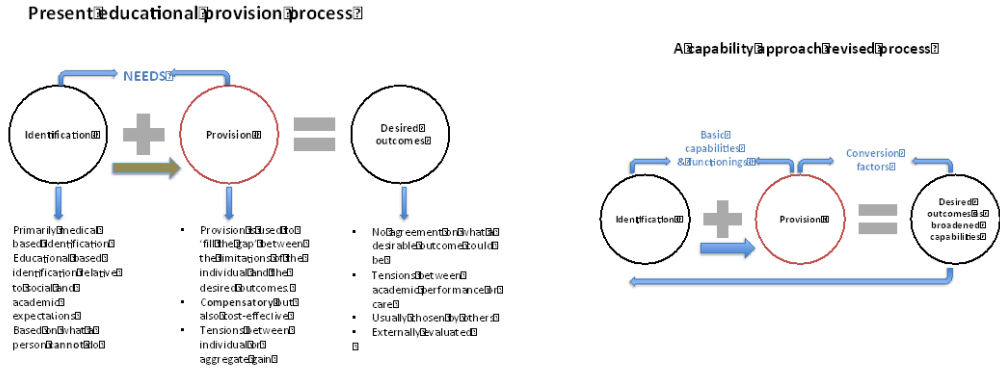
Conversely, a social model of disability stresses the role the school and society play in creating barriers to participation and wellbeing. While not without its critics (Shakespeare and Ward, 2002; Terzi, 2008) this model has informed research in school improvement, multi-agency working, and socio-cultural based pedagogy (Kershner, 2007). The tension between these two models give rise 'the seemingly unavoidable choice between, on the one hand, identifying children's differences in order to provide for them differentially, with the risk of labelling and dividing, and, on the other hand, accentuating 'sameness' and offering common provision, with the risk of not making available what is relevant to, and needed by, individual children' (Terzi, 2005, p. 444).

As Sen (2009) argues, in matters related to justice it is more productive to focus on 'real' injustices rather than develop theories of perfect institutional justice although Nussbaum (2011; 2009; 2006) pursues a more institutional approach. In the case of children with disabilities and SEN, injustices specific to education have traditionally been evaluated in relation to marginalisation, that is deprivation in terms of fair access and participation in education. However, the capability approach would add to these a further situation of disadvantage, namely the deprivation of capabilities. The distinction is subtle, but significant.

Present procedures for the allocation of resources focus on the notion of need defined as the shortfall between what the child is expected to achieve – or have achieved- in relation to pre-determined indicators including stages of cognitive, emotional, language and social development; functional skills, or, most likely, school attainment targets. The system of identification is such for which it continuously reifies itself in as much as such indicators are the only ones deemed sufficient and necessary for the allocation, type and evaluation of the quality of the resources which make up the provision. A different approach, employed mainly with young people and adults, and one more akin to what the capability approach suggests is person-centred planning (see Florian, Dee and Devecchi, 2008 for an examination of both, but also O'Brien et al., 1997; Robertson et al., 2007). A further development of the person-centred planning approach is the 'mosaic strategy' developed by Biggeri, Bellanca, Tanzj and Bonfanti (2010) and Biggeri et al (2011). The 'mosaic strategy' is based on the notion of disability (Bellanca, Biggeri and Marchetti, 2011) which emphasises the agency aspect of the person with disabilities in deciding a life project, and the responsibility of others in ensuring its realisation.

Thus, an ineffective provision would be one which disadvantaged the child with respect not just to gaining access to resources, but, more fundamental, to the conversion of such resources into valuable beings and doings. Viewed in this light, disability and SEN can be seen as being deprivations in relation to functionings, what children can actually be and do; opportunities, what they can be and become; and the fulfilment of their individual potential, be it cognitive and academic, social, emotional and as future active citizens. Neither the present process of identification and the process of determining provision and the distribution of resources address the issue of how to ensure that all children are equal in relation to their future capabilities.

A capability approach based form of identification would start by defining desirable outcomes by positing the individual and/or significant others at the centre of the assessment (Fig 1).



In determining which outcomes are valuable and to be pursued, a synergetic approach combining appropriate medical assessment where this is deemed useful and necessary; externally determined learning outcomes as measurable attainment, but also outcomes of learning as broader reflection of the complexity of learning (Dee, Devecchi and Florian, 2006), together with individual values and aspirations. Namely, the process of identification should take into account and aspire to develop through focused provision three sets of specific and interrelated outcomes as capabilities. They are:

- *Combined capabilities* – the totality of capabilities, as Nussbaum (2011) a person can effectively choose from;
- *Internal capabilities* – the characteristics of a person, or child which are ‘developed in most cases in interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environment’ (Nussbaum, 2011: 21); and,
- *External capabilities* – those capabilities which permit to achieve additional functionings through the interaction with others (Foster and Hardy, 2008 cited in Biggeri and Santi, 2012), be teachers, professionals, family or peers.

However, the above are referred to in the capability approach literature in relation to adults. Ballet et al (2011) and Biggeri and Santi (2012) have developed a set of specific capabilities which are more pertinent to children. Taking into consideration that children in general, and children with disabilities and SEN, are simultaneously knowledgeable agents and yet not fully functioning adults, Ballet et al (2011) put forward the notion of ‘evolving capabilities’, namely the process by which through acquired functionings children can develop further functionings but also develop ideas about different and valuable types of lives they want to lead and aspire to. ‘Evolving capabilities’ comprise three sets of capabilities, namely,

‘A-capabilities’ (capabilities as abilities), the complexity of innate talents and of acquired competencies (skills); ‘O-capabilities’ (capabilities as opportunities), the set of actual, accessible or available chances for improving well-being; and ‘P-capabilities’ (capabilities as potentialities), the set of imagined prospects or conceivable chances for improving well-being or alternatives that can be considered admissible’ (Biggeri and Santi, 2012, p. 387).

The list of possible outcomes as capabilities is open, as Sen would suggest, because it will be determined by consideration about the specificity of the situation and of the individual. However, Biggeri et al (2011) offer a list of generic valuable outcomes, not dissimilar in principles from the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda (DCFS, 2004) and considerably close to Nussbaum’s (2010) list of ten central capabilities. They are:

- life and physical health;
- emotions;
- love and care;
- social relations and participation;
- control over one’s environment: agency, autonomy and respect, shelter and environment;
- education and knowledge;
- practical reasons 1: paid work and other projects;
- practical reasons 2: mobility;
- personal expression and recreational activities: “sense, imagination and thought”, spiritual/religion, sport and recreational activities.

The allocation of resources, encompassing the amount and characteristics of the resources needed, will be variable and changing over time as individuals achieve goals and functioning and develop further views about their progression toward their beings and doings. This

implies a personalised approach to resource allocation. The personalisation should also take into account the environmental affordability, or the way in which the resources allocated to the individual can be converted by the individual and by the system in which the resources are to be used. Conversion factors are pivotal in determining the success of the provision and, sadly, an aspect, which is many times over-shadowed by other means of accountability such as measurement of attainment and performance. Conversion factors can vary and are context dependent. They range from the knowledge, competence and expertise of the professionals which make up the team; the school organisation and management; the community in which the child lives; the family and significant others. Ideally, the same process of identification and assessment of capabilities should be carried out for those who are to ensure the success of the provision.

In evaluation the provision, the, dynamic and developing process should consistently afford the child a space for choice and control, in relation to his or her abilities and development. This means that one of the purposes of education would be also to develop and support self-determination. However, while the development of the internal capability for choice and reasoning is important, likewise is the development and support of choice and locus of control for the adults without whom the provision would cease to be effective (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010).

### **Final reflections**

The idea of applying the capability approach to the process of identification and assessment in order to set and monitor provision might be perceived by some as either far-fetched or not fundamentally new. Yet, it strikes a chord with Norwich's (2009, p. 211) call for a 'plural values framework' which 'will assume common or shared general requirements or needs for all children and young people', but which 'will also imply different requirements or needs relevant to the individuality of all children and young people, respecting each person's unique history and their balance of dispositions'. By taking into account combined, internal and external capabilities, within the dynamic framework of evolving capabilities the process of assessment and identification would not only address children's needs, but establish firmer grounds for the assessment of valuable outcomes as well. In so doing it will provide a way forward to Lamb's (2009) call for a focus on outcomes.

Furthermore, the capability approach offers a language for the evaluation of provision in the space of the substantive freedoms and opportunities children with disabilities have to choose amongst different and valuable pathways. In doing so, a capability approach focus would take into account not only the amount of resources allocated, but, most importantly, how children are allowed and enabled to convert the resources in functionings and capabilities.

Yet, there are still many limitations. First of all, the capability approach has not been systematically applied to education and specifically to the education of children with disabilities and SEN. Conceptually and operationally, only recently more attempts have been made to combine the capability approach with theories of learning such as ecological models, and socio-cultural theory. Walker (2008, p. 154), for example, argues that a welcome development would be the application of 'theorisations of power and participation in educational settings' by combining, for example, emancipatory perspective such as disabilities studies, feminism or critical pedagogy (Wood and Deprez, 2012). More collaboration between different theoretical avenues is welcomed and will no doubt follow as there is a need to ground the theory to empirical evidence.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the capability approach has the potential to expand the informational basis for the evaluation of provision since present 'narrow objectives ... are easy to measure [but] can crowd out broader objectives which are more complex' (Simon and Ward, 2010, p. 32) but which deserve to be fulfilled. Because of its commitment to realisation-focused comparisons, to diversity and education, the capability approach can be a source of empowerment not only for children, but also for the professionals around them. Given the present government bias against inclusion, the capability approach can ultimately pursue those inclusive principles, which serve as safeguards on behalf of children with disabilities, their families and professionals without being partisan in this respect. The model of provision outlined in this paper goes some way to address Nussbaum's (2011, p. 150) assertion that,

'the task of fully including people with disabilities and supporting their human capabilities requires a new account of social cooperation and the human motives for it'.

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