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How can the capability approach contribute to understanding provision for people with learning difficulties?

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Abstract

The capability approach suggests that well-being is fundamentally about the freedom that people have to be and do the things they have reason to value. This paper asks *what freedom those adults who experience difficulties in learning have to be and do the things they have reason to value?* It draws upon our recently completed literature review on theories of learning for adults with difficulties in learning (Dee, Devecchi and Florian, 2006) where the concepts of 'being' and 'doing' were integrated with a new elaboration of 'having'. These three concepts are conceived as an integrated set of purposes for learning and it is argued that educational provision should be person-centred taking into consideration all three purposes. In this paper we show how a notion of having can result from an understanding of well-being that is not just about what people are and what they want to be able to do. It is also about the intrinsic and extrinsic resources that are available to them to be and become.

This paper takes up Sen's insight that though individuals may differ in what well-being means to them, it is not *how* they differ (their functionings) that matters so much but the difference between *their capability to choose and achieve* different functionings (outcomes) that explains inequality. In this paper we consider the usefulness of focusing on *the freedom people have to be and do the things they have reason to value* in terms of our conceptualisation of being having and doing as foundational to provision that is more equitable than that which is currently available for adults with learning difficulties.

How can the capability approach contribute to understanding provision for people with learning difficulties?

Introduction

Amartya Sen's capability approach has been summarised as a framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements that focuses on "what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities" (Robeyns, 2003, p.5). As the things people are able to do and to be, capabilities allow people to function, or (using the terms of the capability approach), capabilities allow people to achieve valuable functionings - to live lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1987). Dreze and Sen (2002) have discussed education as an enabling factor of great value to the freedom people have live lives they have reason to value. They see education as having intrinsic value, in and of itself, for what learning can offer individual fulfilment, and they see education having extrinsic value in the instrumental roles that formal education plays in the larger social context, for example, reducing child labour, enhancing democracy, and so on. The capability approach has had a wide appeal across a range of disciplines and has been developed in a number of different directions (Robeyns, op.cit.). Like many others, we are interested in exploring whether and how the approach can help to develop more theoretically robust, equitable, and humane educational policy and practice. This paper considers how the capability approach can contribute to thinking about provision for adults with learning difficulties.

To date, the education of adults with difficulties in learning has been informed by a series of discourses about disability, difference and social inclusion that determine and support different views of what constitutes well-being and quality of life. In our recent review of post-compulsory educational provision for adults with learning difficulties (Dee, Devecchi and Florian, 2006), we found that both normalising and emancipatory discourses co-exist. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on human difference and how best to respond to those differences. On the other, there is an emphasis on human similarities and how best to ensure equality of opportunity in social life. In both cases, the learner is positioned on a theoretical continuum from passive recipient of services based on ideas of normalisation (making available the patterns and conditions of everyday life) to active agent of transformation influenced by human rights and person-centred arguments (emancipation).

Moreover, both discourses are also situated in a wider educational context that operates within largely utilitarian forms of provision (e.g. colleges). As utilitarian forms of provision depend on a conceptualization of the greatest good for the greatest number (often constructed as norms), educational provision for those who are located outside of established norms is often underpinned by a labelling process that sees ability as fixed

(Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre, 2004). In the case of people with learning difficulties, this discourse is connected to a medicalised notion of learning difficulty that views learning as limited by an individual's deficit and/or stage of cognitive development. This, in turn, frames what people with learning difficulties can and should learn starting from assumptions of what they cannot do. As a result both the intrinsic and extrinsic resources available to them to live the lives they have reason to value are constrained by the idea that they lack the capacity to act properly and consequently to learn satisfactorily.

In our recent review of the literature on theories of learning and adults with learning difficulties, we examined the interrelationship between purposes of learning, teaching strategies and learning outcomes, and how these in turn are influenced by views and beliefs about disabled people and their place in society (Dee, Devecchi and Florian, op.cit.). We found that an interconnected and sometimes conflicting set of ideas, informed by different discourses about disability, difference and social inclusion were reflected in the literature and influenced policy decisions about provision, curriculum and pedagogy. In an attempt to present a holistic and comprehensive view of the disabled learner as a person, or social being, we proposed a conceptualisation of lifelong learning for adults with learning difficulties around three main purposes of education: 'being', 'having' and 'doing' (as shown in figure 1 and discussed below). Our hope was that this more holistic conceptualisation of the purposes of education for adults with learning difficulties would lead to a re-evaluation of provision based on:

1. ways of thinking and acting which are respectful of people with learning difficulties as persons[1];

2. the recognition that a person, irrespective of his or her abilities or disabilities, has the right, and the capacity to contribute to society and to the community he or she lives in;

3. that in turn both society and the community have the duty to contribute to the well-being of the person; and

4. education is conceived as an opportunity to learn those things necessary to fulfil the person's conception of well-being.

In this paper, we extend our articulation of 'being', 'having', and 'doing' by summarising key findings from our review and considering whether a new understanding of well-being based on Amartya Sen's capability approach might usefully clarify and strengthen our argument for a more holistic and multi-faceted view of people with learning difficulties. We are aware that one of the main challenges of applying the capability approach to education resides, as Robeyns (2005) and Unterhalter (2003) claim, in the fact that the

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[1] We are guided by Issacs (1996) conceptualisation of people with learning difficulties as social beings: persons first. We take his point that this 'raises the question of what kinds of relationships between persons are conducive to enhancing, or limiting, the good life as experienced at both the individual and collective level' (Isaacs, 1996, p. 27).

connection between the two is still under theorised. While we do not attempt such theorisation of the capability approach more broadly, we do draw on Sen's views on education to make some points about how it can have a positive impact on the well-being of people with learning difficulties. Moreover, we claim that this can only be possible if adults with learning difficulties are positioned at the heart of the decisions about the educational provision they are offered. In other words, we use the capability approach to theorise 'person-centred approaches' to planning provision for people with learning difficulties and as a guidance for practitioners engaged in person-centred planning processes.

Theories of learning and adults with learning difficulties.

Generally, there is limited understanding of how learning theories have contributed to the development of provision for learners with learning difficulties in post school education or employment training. For this reason, the Learning and Skills Research Centre commissioned us to undertake a literature review in order to:

- identify the principal theoretical perspectives which indicate or reflect effective teaching or training approaches for learners with learning difficulties
- provide a theoretical framework for evaluating current provision and informing the development of future provision for learners with learning difficulties

The starting point for our review was the landmark report, *Inclusive Learning* (FEFC, 1996). Known as the Tomlinson report, this report argued that unless we understand how students learn we cannot begin to make the right provision for them. Theories of learning are ideas about *how* people learn and they underpin teaching strategies and approaches. Forms of provision are about *what* and *where* such learning occurs. In our review, we proposed the principal theoretical perspectives that underpin effective teaching strategies and approaches for learners with difficulties in learning are behaviourism, cognitivism/ constructivism and socio-cultural models. These families of ideas are not mutually exclusive and have, over the years, influenced and been influenced by each other's insights into how people in general learn best. In addition, emerging views of adult learning suggest that it might be different from that of children because of the experiences, self direction, motivations and social roles that adults bring with them to the process of learning (Merriam, 2004).

The development of knowledge about adult learning has generally not been applied to adults with learning difficulties despite a rhetoric of adult status that argues that the purposes of further and adult education for people with learning difficulties should be to support them in developing autonomy, having worthwhile paid employment and valued activities, family roles and social participation (FEFC, 1996). A series of studies produced by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) based at the OECD (CERI, 1986) and others (Riddell, Baron and Wilson, 2001), consistently find that people with learning difficulties and disabilities are often not accorded adult status but seen instead as perpetual children, creating a major barrier to the development of forms of provision based on principles of adult education, particularly the notion that lifelong

learning is self-directed. Hence, some forms of provision tend to emphasize preparation for adult life rather than participation in it. In other words they do more to contain than empower. Thus, despite the rhetoric of adulthood, adults with disabilities, by virtue of their status in society as perpetual children do not have the same opportunities as others in the society to live, as Sen would say, 'lives they have reason to value'.

Our argument is that assumptions about the role and status of adults with learning difficulties have influenced perceptions of a person's intrinsic resources (how people's capabilities are expanded), and extrinsic resources (in this case forms of provision and the kinds of educational opportunities that are available throughout the lifespan). Because we are concerned with adults with learning difficulties, questions of provision are located within wider debates about the economic and social purposes of lifelong learning. Provision for adults with learning difficulties is contextualised within the changes that have occurred in the field of post-compulsory education in general. At one level the notion of lifelong learning has become intertwined with the need to have a trained and responsive workforce able to cope with the continuous change that the technological society demands. But lifelong learning also has the potential to be both socially and personally transformative. Sfard (1998) and more recently James and Brown (2005) contend that the debate can be encapsulated in the two basic metaphors of learning as *acquisition* and *participation*. Both Edwards (2005) and McGuiness (2005) however warn against taking these metaphors too literally. Edwards argues that 'deep' learning i.e. learning characterised by understanding, relies on learners' active participation in order to acquire new concepts and ideas while McGuiness suggests that these two kinds of learning, knowing that (acquisition) and knowing how (participation), tend to co-exist and ' at the most expert levels of human performance thinking *is* doing'. (2005:33).

In sum, our review found that decisions about how to teach and what approaches to adopt are influenced by views and beliefs about the learners themselves. Decisions about how best to teach adults with learning difficulties are likely to be influenced by attitudes and beliefs about the nature of their disability, their status as adults and their place in society. In addition, there is a growing acceptance in the literature on learning that the effectiveness of particular teaching methods depends on their underlying purposes in terms of learning outcomes. Thus, in order to meet our project objective to provide a theoretical framework for evaluating current provision and informing the development of future provision for learners with learning difficulties, we integrated the purposes of learning with a consideration of what it means to take a person-centred approach to provision. Our analysis led us to a conceptualisation of these purposes as those associated with three interrelated concepts: 'being', 'having' and 'doing'

<p style="text-align:center">Insert figure 1 about here</p>

Being, Having and Doing

Questions about provision for those with learning difficulties have largely been ignored in the wider debate about the purposes of lifelong learning. Riddell, Baron and Wilson (2001) concluded that most provision for adults with learning difficulties remains focused

on independent living and social skills, reflecting the traditional principles that lie behind normalisation and an 'ordinary life'. On the other hand, O'Brien, O'Brien and Jacob (1998) have shown how the *idea* of 'ordinary living' can be matched with a transformative and empowering discourse centred on the notions of self-determination, economic independence and human rights/equal opportunities with the aim of changing social attitudes and simultaneously enhancing people's self image and competencies. This blending of ideas has given rise to the 'Quality of Life' movement that has moved from a normative set of criteria against which the quality of the lives of people with learning difficulties can be measured to a recognition of both the relative and subjective nature of what constitutes 'the good life' for individuals. Thus in formulating the framework for our review we considered how the process of learning is contextualised within the overall purpose of supporting learners to acquire a good quality of life. This is a complex notion which informs the relationship between purposes, i.e. education as contributing to 'the good life, theories of learning and the implications for teaching.

In our model the purpose of being (or learning to *be* and learning to *live together*) relates to both the individual characteristics required of a learner, but also to the social and spiritual dimensions of learning and living (UNESCO, 1996*)*. In terms of learning, people are required to have knowledge of themselves, and to be self-motivated, self- regulated, self-confident, able to set targets and solve problems. The social and spiritual aspect of being, on the other hand, relates to the fact that a person needs to be accepted as part of, and participate in, the wider community through which a sense of ourselves and our own identity is developed. In terms of learning, this means that the person needs to develop communication and interpersonal skills as well as a sense of their own purpose and fundamental beliefs (Merriam, op.cit.). However, it also stresses the fact that learning happens within a community and that teaching should therefore foster the notion of learning as both an individual and a collective or group process, so that the learning of the whole is greater than and different from the sum of the individual parts.

The need to have skills for being brings us to the purpose of having (learning to *know*). Once again, the learner is viewed both as an individual but also as a member of a community. Thus what skills, knowledge and understanding a learner requires are both dependent on the development of his or her wishes and desires, and on what society requires of its members. Having is not detached from being, but intimately related to it. In this respect having denotes a more objective perspective on learning since it is possible to assess the degree to which learners acquire particular knowledge, skills and understanding. In terms of learning, having deals with both knowing how and ultimately knowing why. However, it also includes more fundamental purposes like having equal rights. Thus education is not just a matter of gaining a qualification or acquiring knowledge about rights (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer and Eddy, 2005), but also and most importantly, it is about being able to use such knowledge to ensure their place as citizens. Teaching therefore can be viewed as instruction and developing understanding, but also as creating opportunities to improve people's quality of life.

If being emphasises the emotional and psychological aspects of learning and having focuses on knowledge, doing (learning to *do*) as a purpose is about learning to participate,

but also being enabled to participate. At the educational level it means having the opportunity to learn through being an active learner, that is by solving real life problems, by incorporating one's knowledge, by making sense of things with reference to one's own life. At another level, it points to the socio-cultural dimension of learning and the fact that the way in which we learn is mediated by the norms and rules of the different communities in which people live and work which in turn contributes to our sense of ourselves: who we are and who we might become. However, the central purpose of doing is that of fostering the form of knowledge that is required to look outward and to engage with the world (Edwards, op.cit.). Doing therefore refers to what people with difficulties in learning can do but they are also enabled to do. It deals with creating the educational opportunities for active learning but also for learning and practising self-advocacy and self-determination as building blocks for personal and social empowerment. In the final analysis, while being is about individuals expressing one's wishes and desires, doing is about pursuing them.

Capability approach and provision for adults with learning difficulties

So far, a number of important issues about the educational provision for people with learning difficulties have been raised. In particular we have highlighted how contrasting discourses about disability, social inclusion, rights and equal opportunities are enmeshed with more utilitarian discourses about the roles and purposes of lifelong learning. Moreover, it has been argued that the two apparently contrasting perspectives of normalisation and social empowerment when combined with the instrumental purposes of education create a series of dilemmas about provision for this group of people. However, the findings from our review on theories of learning showed that thinking in such dichotomous terms is unhelpful and limiting. Rather, our conceptualisation of learning as determined by the fulfilment of the three integrated purposes of 'being', 'having' and 'doing' offers a more holistic and complete view of the person not just as passive recipient of learning, but also as active in determining his or her views about well-being and quality of life.

However, as Issacs (op.cit.) points out, educationalists would do well to consider more deeply how accounts of persons as social beings might better inform our understanding of provision, and, we would add, the development of future provision. While Robeyns (op.cit.) and Unterhalter (op.cit.) rightly caution that the capability approach has been under theorised with regard to education, we would argue that available theories of well-being and quality of life leave unchallenged the issue of what freedom disabled people have to be and do the things they have reason to value. We suggest that the capability approach, which suggests that well-being is fundamentally about *the freedom that people have to be and do the things they have reason to value*, offers a potential way forward. In an initial consideration about what the approach might contribute to debates about inclusion, Florian (2005) suggested changes in thinking and practice need to be underpinned by asking the question:

What freedom do disabled people have to be and do the things they have reason to value?

In so asking, it is argued that people with learning difficulties must be accorded the same capability to function that is acknowledged as essential for all people to pursue life they have reason to value. For as Sen has argued:

> it is the **capability to function,** that is, the opportunity to live the life one has reason to value that is key to the capability approach. [A] functioning is an achievement (of what I have reason to be and doing the things I have reason to value,) whereas a capability is an ability to achieve (freedom). 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 (1987, p. 36 emphasis original).

This takes up our second principle that should inform provision - the recognition that a person, irrespective of his or her abilities or disabilities, has the right, and the capacity to contribute to society and to the community in which he or she lives.

The process by which, through the provision of education, we enable and acknowledge such right is therefore an essential.   If, as Isaacs suggests,

> ...we adopt a fuller account of persons which recognizes the distinctiveness of each individual person, which values his/her unique aspirations towards self-realization and which acknowledges the power of the social to create conditions which either enhance or constrain individual flourishing, then we need to reconstruct a new practice of special education, a new way of seeing and of acting, which places the person at the center and adopts an ethical framework, rather than a medical one...(p. 42)

then the conditions of learning and the process of learning can become the means through which people with learning difficulties themselves challenge the negative and stereotyped views that are held by many in society about who they are and who they can become. To enable this, however, requires that those who provide are guided by questions of the freedoms that people with learning difficulties have to be and do the things they have reason to value. As guidance for practice, such questions open up new possibilities for the nature of what is taught, for example, learning about rights and developing leadership and communication skills;   the methods and materials that are used and the underlying assumptions of staff about who their learners are. In this scenario, practitioners may have to surrender some of their power and control as they work together with learners towards common goals where all are experts.

In this context, learning itself becomes a matter of quality of life that emphasises respect for the real lives, experiences and aspirations of people with learning difficulties combined with the notion of community participation and empowerment. It is because of what we learn, but more importantly how we learn that the capability to choose becomes central in a discussion of building provision for people with learning difficulties. This means that the quality of the provision in itself can contribute to challenging the

assumptions and misconceptions about disabilities and learning difficulties. Challenging the quality of the educational/learning provision becomes, therefore, a starting point for a redefinition of well-being and quality of life.

The capability approach offers a conceptual lens through which we can start to conceive provision from a different perspective. For instance Watts and Ridley (in press) use the capability approach to evaluate a music project for people with learning difficulties and found it helpful in evaluating the value of musicianship ('being' and 'doing') to the well-being ('having') of the participants. By using the capability approach as a frame, Watts and Ridley began the evaluation by first determining what 'beings and doing' (functionings) the participants had reason to value and what substantive freedom they had to achieve them (in this case, access to adaptive technologies). The capability approach permitted them to focus on the value of musicianship to the well-being of the musicians, rather than on the ability of the musicians to play instruments, with or without accommodations. To us, what is important about the capability approach, as Watts and Ridley demonstrate, is the emphasis on the *capability to function*.

Retuning to the four principles outlined above, the capability approach permits an exploration of the connection between learning as the fulfilment of the three purpose of 'being', 'having' and 'doing' and Sen's distinction between capability and functionings. Sen's argument that it is the respective roles of capabilities and functionings that must be considered in any assessment of well-being enables us to examine in practice the relative contribution and influences that discourses about disability, difference and social inclusion have on the resources that are available to enable people with learning difficulties.

If, as Sen argues, it is the capability to choose between various options that gives meaning to well-being rather than the achievement of any particular standard of living then although individuals may differ in what well-being means to them, it is not *how* they differ (their functionings) that matters so much but the difference between *their capability to choose and achieve* different functionings (outcomes) that perpetuates inequality. Views of adults with learning difficulties as perpetual children, lacking in ability, limits not only their capability to choose, but how we perceive intrinsic resources, in this case, the expansion of their capabilities (Robeyns, 2007). It also places limits on the extrinsic resources, the forms of provision that are available to them to be and become.

As we have argued, for adults with learning difficulties, concepts such as normalisation stress forms of functioning that focus on how people with learning difficulties can, and should, be like others. Although this view has been challenged by emancipatory approaches which see people with learning difficulties in more self-determined and person-centred ways, the opportunity for people with learning difficulties to live lives they have reason to value are severely compromised without a concomitant focus on the freedom they have to choose lives they have reason to value. The capability approach offers a wide and flexible approach to well-being that offers new ways to evaluate, and hopefully, improve provision for people with learning difficulties.

Conclusion

In attempting to break from the constraints of current discourse we sought a conceptualisation of the purposes of learning ('being', 'having' and 'doing') that would apply to all people. In our review of learning theories and adults with learning difficulties, we argued that this can be achieved through working together towards a common goal where the participants are recognised as the experts and re-empowered to live the life they have reason to value. Such an approach challenges existing ideas about the nature of the knowledge that is to be acquired, the methods and materials that are used and the role of the learners in the teaching and learning process. Claiming the *freedom to **be** and **do** the things people **have** reason to value* as an outcome of education, as the capability approach suggests, permits a new evaluation of provision in terms of the resources and supports that are available to people with learning difficulties.

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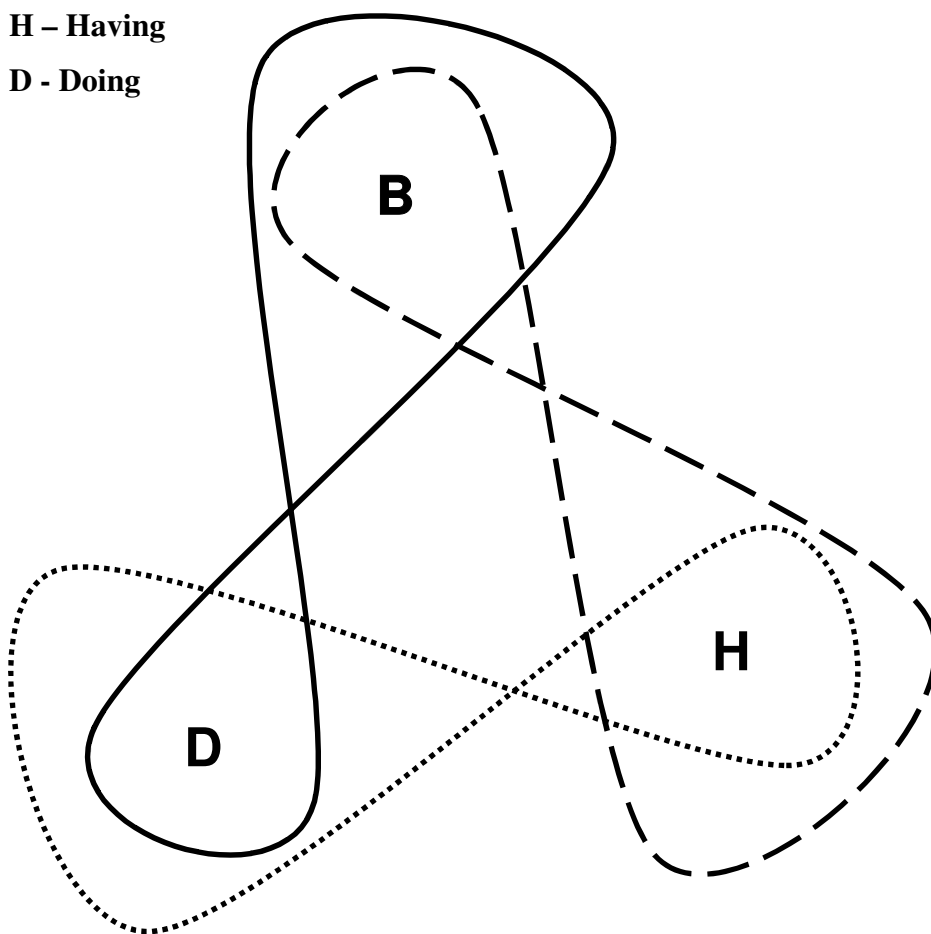
Figure 1

A Model of learning

Key

B – Being

H – Having

D - Doing

Source: Dee, L. Devecchi, C. & Florian, L. (2006) *Being Having and Doing: Theories of Learning and Adults with Learning Difficulties.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.