

Development and Capabilities: An Educational Approach

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DOI: [10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.013](https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.013)

| Received: 05.08.2019 | Accepted: 24.08.2019 | Published: 30.08.2019

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Abstract

Review Article

The theory of *capability approach* formulated by the Indian economist Amartya Sen offers interesting insights into the concept of development, also understood in an educational sense. In particular, this theory helps to reflect on who is the subject of development, which Sen defines as 'person', and what is 'development', which Sen connects to the idea of freedom. This short essay intends to focus on this idea of person and the idea of development related to it, underlining the differences that these concepts present with respect to the pedagogical tradition of Western culture, no longer valid in the complex contemporary democratic societies.

Keywords: Development, capability, functioning, education, free person.

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INTRODUCTION

Can a concept of development taken from the economy be used to "reason" about pedagogy? The juxtaposition of the terms development and capabilities, in fact, immediately refers to the economic theory of Amartya Sen, which has echoed a lot in the last thirty years in all sectors of the social sciences as well as the humanities.

Well, the answer is affirmative if we consider that this theory originates from the deep analysis of multiple realities of life and from the observation of how, in any society, the level of well-being can be measured only by evaluating the subjective approach to existence, the actual quality of life of each citizen. And the *capability approach* is a theory that looks at the subjects, at their stories rather than the large numbers relating to incomes, quantifications and distributions of goods and services.

Like any educational theory, in other words, the capability approach has at heart an idea of the person and this uses as a regulatory criterion for evaluation and design of development. This brief essay intends to focus, through the delineation of the nodal points around which Sen's articulated thought on capabilities is shaped and defined, this idea of person and the idea of development related to it.

The latter, if adopted in pedagogical theory, involves a radical change of perspective with respect to the traditional way of understanding education in our

Western culture and with respect to the way of dealing with the educational problems that the contemporary age presents.

What idea of development

Beyond the different meanings that the notion of development can assume in scientific or ordinary language, it presents peculiar and constant traits that can be traced in all the definitions that are assigned to it from various perspectives.

A first feature can be identified in the idea of change: development, whether it refers to nature, whether it refers to society or the individual, always indicates a change in the situation.

A second trait is traceable in the fact that, although the conclusion of any development process appears as otherness, as a marked differentiation with respect to the original element, it is possible to detect a certain identity of form that connects the starting point with the point of arrival. So that a development process is always relative to a subject, it concerns that precise subject.

Finally, a third trait is placed on the evaluative level: what we call development is a transition from an initial state to a final state that involves a certain improvement or enhancement of the quality of the development subject. In positively evaluating, therefore, the results of a successful transformation, we define this transformation as "development".

It is precisely in his commitment as an “evaluator” of human development, as delegated by the United Nations to draft the *Human Development Reports*, that Sen has asked himself queries, questioning those consolidated criteria of judgment in this regard. When we talk about human development, it would seem to have been asked Sen, who is the subject of development? It is the person within his own context of belonging, with respect to which the improvement of a quality level of living conditions should be observed, or else it is that element ‘external’ or ‘abstract’ with respect to the forms of human existence, which in generic terms do we call economics: per capita income, resources, industrialization, technological progress? Is there not the risk, by following this second criterion, to emphasize the “means” to the detriment of the “ends” of human development? Is there a way to distinguish ends and means and not fall into error?

Sen identifies this way in focusing attention on the quality of life of individual persons, considering it a priority with respect to the attention given to the particular criterion of social justice adopted in a given society, to make evaluations.

And this is because, if the objective of social justice is to contrast as much as possible the inequality between citizens, Sen recognizes that human beings are extremely heterogeneous between them and equality between men is rather an ideal rather than a reality. It is a fact that “human beings have physical” as well as psychological characteristics, “very different in terms of age, sex, disability or illness, and these differences also diversify their needs”, says Sen on several occasions [1].

Above all, if people were actually identical, equality in one aspect of life (e.g. in opportunities or income) would correspond to other types of equality in other aspects (e.g. in ability to fulfill oneself). In real life, on the other hand, equality in one sector tends to coexist with inequalities in other sectors: it is not uncommon to see how, on equal incomes, some people are unable to achieve what they consider important, depending on whether they are healthy or ill, young or old, men or women, just to give some examples.

And yet, since equality is a principle of social justice, it happens that all the most important ethical theories about social arrangements are effectively based on the equality “of something”, in reference to some dimension of human life. The proof is the fact that even theories traditionally considered as “anti-egalitarian”, like the liberal ones, propose the pursuit of egalitarianism from a particular perspective: think of the theories of Nozick, Rawls, Dworkin, as well as those of utilitarianism. While referring to different criteria, these authors all share the goal of equality, at least in some aspects of human life [2].

While not denying the importance of all these factors, or the criterion of equality as an indicator of social justice, Sen notes, however, that development cannot be identified with them. It is evident that the income levels of the population are important, because each level coincides with a certain possibility of purchasing goods and services and enjoying the corresponding standard of living, however, given the inequality between men that affects their lives, such income levels do not provide the same effects on everyone.

What can the income in the face of heavily conditioning elements such as illiteracy or the lack of civil and political liberties or, again, the reduced life expectancies that substantially limit the possibility of action of people and do not allow them to “function” in a properly human way? Precisely because the subject of development is the human being, that is to say the person able to consider her/himself an end in itself and not a means to the ends of others, able therefore to choose the type of life that wants to live and define for her/himself the way which “function” (that is, the direction in which to direct one's human potential), a serious evaluation of development cannot ignore two fundamental indicators. The first is the amount of possibilities for alternative lifestyles (*functionings*) that people in a given society actually have; the second is the freedom of choice between these possibilities (*capabilities*) that those people actually enjoy.

It is precisely this freedom of choice that provides the measure of human development: it is not an abstract freedom, ascribable to the classic categories of ‘freedom-from’ or ‘freedom-of’ of which philosophical discourses are rich, but of a freedom concrete, practical, to be understood as a possibility of action that a person can put in place (even if he/she then decides not to do it), having a certain quantity – a certain basket – of goods. If this quantity of goods offers the person at least a couple of alternatives on how to use them, on how to make them “function”, then, to a certain extent that person is free.

And the criterion for evaluating this freedom is the *capability*: capacity or, better, capacity for action. To use Sen's words: “The *capability* of a person is nothing but the set of alternative combinations of *functionings* that he/she is able to perform. It is therefore a sort of freedom: the substantial freedom to realize more alternative combinations of functionings (or, said in a less formal way, to implement more alternative lifestyles). A wealthy person who fasts, for example, can also function, in terms of nutrition, in the same way as a poor man who is forced to go hungry, but the first has a ‘set of capabilities’ different from that of the second (the one can decide to eat well and feed properly, the other cannot)[3].”

There is a whole range of freedoms that increases people's capacity for action and therefore must be considered essential for genuine development: escaping the most acute deprivation (death from hunger, avoidable diseases, etc.), knowing how to read, write, count, be able to enjoy civil and political rights, social opportunities and social protection networks (school, public health, income support policies for the poor and those temporarily expelled from the production process, etc.). In other words, everything that allows people to choose a life to which, with good reason, they give value.

Ultimately, if the functioning can be defined as the choice of final realization that the subject accomplishes, the capability represents the possibility of this choice, containing in it the set of possible functionings in a given area. Sen explains: "It is indeed possible to represent the functionings in such a way that they reflect the alternatives available and therefore the choices enjoyed. For example, 'fasting' as a functioning is not simply equivalent to starve; it is the same as 'choosing to starve' even if there are other options. [...] Similarly, choosing a lifestyle is not exactly equivalent to having that lifestyle regardless of how it arose, and individual well-being varies, in fact, according to how that lifestyle ended up with emerge": if due to a choice or necessity imposed by the real conditions of life [4].

The person's full range of capabilities constitutes his or her substantial freedom, as an effective power of action. In this order of ideas, human development is configured as a gradual development of capabilities and the exercise of functionings, so that the purpose of a good governance is to facilitate the formation of good capabilities, to remove possible impediments to their exercise and, finally, to provide the means for their use.

Capabilities and pedagogical tradition

In what terms can Sen's theory be used on a pedagogical level? Its strength lies, first of all, in the idea of the subject of development: the human person as a single subject, not definable from an *essentialist* perspective, which conditions its development from the beginning, but free to choose, if placed in the right conditions, among the existences that best allow it to define itself. It is an idea that we can also share from the pedagogical point of view: the term 'person', that today connotes all educational discourses, has in fact lost its original essentialist dimension to assume the meaning of 'subject of dignity', which is expressed – and it must be facilitated to express itself – in all its uniqueness.

Secondly, the strength of Sen's theory also lies in the idea of development that it conveys: a gradual extension of the areas of freedom of the person, which is concretely expressed in the acquisition of capabilities. If applied to education, this idea invites us to consider

that, if we want to form free subjects, citizens capable of critical thinking, to make life projects, to review them, to make moral and political choices – as befits the inhabitants of a democratic society – then we should aim at an education aimed at the acquisition of capabilities rather than the acquisition of functionings.

Certainly, in the western pedagogical tradition, an education by capacity is not a novelty: Plato and Aristotle spoke of it in terms of 'virtue'; Tommaso d'Aquino and Comenio referred to it through 'natural inclinations'; Pestalozzi's educational theory resorted to the term 'faculty', while Herbart used the formula 'internal dispositions' or 'interests'. In all these cases, however, the meaning of capacity has coincided with that of functioning, since it has always been used to indicate a potential that, through education, reaches its actualization, that is, it reaches the end already contained in power, according to an idea of education/development as the realization of a substantial ideal of a person already defined.

And even when the notion of capacity has not enclosed this meaning of Aristotelian entelechy, as in Wolfgang Brezinka, according to whom capacity is "the quality, acquired through individual effort, evaluated positively by society and relatively long-lasting, of a person capable of fully meeting certain needs"[5], education inevitably translates into conformation to the dominant cultural models. For the German educator, in fact, capacities are not qualities that human beings possess by nature, but are instead required by society and must, therefore, be imposed by education.

It is easy to see how, both in the case of an education intended as a *realization*, and in the case of an education understood as *conformation*, the meaning of capacity turns out to be functional to an anthropological ideal previously defined: either by nature or by culture. It is the expression, in other words, of a pre-determined human functioning that leaves no room for the subject's choices or preferences, for his originality.

Education as a development of freedom

The capability approach model suggests a clear distance from these inevitably authoritarian visions of education, to favour an idea of education meant as the gradual development of freedom. In this perspective, the capacities (or capabilities), far from representing defined behavioural habits that, on the whole, are the expression of a unity of the person, responding to a precise anthropological ideal, are closer to what John Dewey called 'the native tendencies', 'the germs', the 'innate heritage' on which the work of education must be grafted as an original and creative development, capable of ensuring the non-homologation, the 'difference', the 'new'[6].

The capability approach does not exclude that the 'innate heritage' of human beings finds its development in precise functionings: quite the contrary. It recognizes, however, that for each 'seed' of this heritage it is possible to develop a variety of functionings and, nevertheless, that the direction of this development (which and how many functionings) depends on the environmental circumstances, material conditions, cultural customs, and regulatory impositions within which the individual finds himself to live.

And precisely because they are dependent on such variables, the functionings available to the subject cannot, as a whole, give an account of a properly human functioning. Rather, the individual can develop his innate heritage according to a plurality of functionings from which he can choose to live the life that he wants to live. And it is this possibility of choice that constitutes his capability.

By adopting this systemic meaning of capability – since it entails the simultaneous presence of at least three conditions: being in possession of a functioning; having at least one alternative to that functioning; being able to choose – one cannot fail to take into account, however, the educational steps that cultivating a capability so meant requires. Being in possession of the possibility and competence to choose between two or more functionings – what constitutes the acquisition of a capability – requires, on the part of the educational action, at least the imposition of certain functionings. In this respect, Martha Nussbaum's contributions to the capability approach are extremely useful [7].

The scholar argues, with Sen, that the main task of each government is effectively to ensure the development of the capabilities of individuals, and not to impose the acquisition of certain functionings. At the same time, however, she stresses the need for priority to be given to certain functionings as a prerequisite for capability building.

This is a fundamental clarification since, moving from the political level to the educational level, we know that the 'laws of development' that come to us from psychological research require the acquisition of certain basic skills in order to acquire higher-level skills: in other words, they require that certain functionings be taught with a view to an education of capabilities.

If, in fact, we aspire to train adults who have all the capabilities deemed necessary for a dignified life, it will often be necessary to require certain types of functioning in children. In the sense that it is often necessary to take care of and exercise a certain functioning in the age of development in order to produce a mature adult capability. It is therefore

legitimate, just to give an example, to impose primary and secondary education on all.

Nussbaum's particular attention to the acquisition of functionings as a prerequisite for the exercise of capabilities denotes the awareness, deeply rooted in reality, that many capabilities can develop in the individual only from a certain moment of his maturation, i.e. not before he has reached certain 'basic' knowledge and skills.

In this way, the American scholar highlights the fundamental role that educational responsibility plays in guaranteeing the possibility of exercising certain capabilities. Responsibility that takes shape and takes on prominence both when it is recognized that only the acquisition of certain functions makes it possible to develop a certain range of capabilities, and when it is realized that it is necessary to reach precise levels of development before becoming able to choose between a range of functionings.

However, one might ask why should public education not be limited, as it has always happened, to focusing on education, leaving the capabilities of individuals to mature on their own, once compulsory education has been completed, and why should it be aimed instead at the ultimate goal of capability building?

The answer can be found in the observation that 'knowing how to choose', which could be defined as the 'functioning of the choice', is not, in reality, one of the objectives of education. Traditionally understood education does not guarantee the autonomy of the student and, consequently, does not guarantee the autonomy of future citizens. Regardless of the functionings that an individual may or may not decide to pursue, the basic value to be defended is the fact that life options, even that of renouncing a set of capabilities, are justified only if they are autonomous. Autonomy, in other words, is the ultimate goal of the capability approach, even if it foresees that wrong choices can be made or a whole series of capacities can be given up to submit to a hierarchically ordered life.

Well, this renunciation is acceptable precisely because it takes place in a context that guarantees choice. This is enough to establish those educational priorities that cannot yet be crushed by the power of tradition: to guarantee a series of capabilities and guarantee the subject's ability to choose.

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For his part, Rawls describes equality as a basket of primary goods that all individuals should have at their disposal. Dworkin, on the other hand, argues in favour of equal resources, while the utilitarians are in favour of equal consideration of the preferences or benefits of all individuals.

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