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Is there a Role for Educators in Developing Well-being Amongst Young People?

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Background

For over ten years the Westminster government has pursued a policy agenda to widen participation in higher education by 'raising aspirations'. In this paper the discourse around 'raising aspirations' is problematized and it is argued that the framework of Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach offers significant potential for the evaluation and development of widening participation policies and practices. The complex and dynamic nature of aspirations is re-examined in this study in relation to Amartya Sen's concepts of 'well-being freedom' and 'well-being achievement'. Reflecting on the empirical findings, this paper examines the moral dilemma facing educational practitioners in terms of balancing demands to meet government widening participation targets with the role of developing the well-being of young people in their care. A moral argument is developed calling for a focus on capability as well as aspiration. It is further argued that this more holistic focus will enable young people to explore a range of valued futures including but not limited to higher education. The research comes at a significant time, nationally in relation to plans to extend the compulsory participation age and internationally in a global political climate that supports expansion in higher education.

Research Questions

The research was guided by these research questions:

- What is the nature of young people's aspirations?
- What factors affect young people's abilities to realise their aspirations?
- How can we understand the relationship between young people's aspirations and their well-being?
- What are the implications for educational policy and practice?

Methods

i) *Problem Formulation* - This study was driven by the desire to develop a more holistic understanding of aspirations which may contribute to future human development and social justice. The research aimed to test the merits and limitations of the capability approach in an educational context through applying the approach in a rigorous empirical study.

ii) *Method* - A mixed-methods case study was undertaken involving a large-scale quantitative survey, group and individual interviews. In designing the case study the four design tests put forward by Yin were applied relating to construct validity, internal, external validity and reliability (Yin, 2003).

iii) *Selection of Cases* - The city where the study took place was chosen due to its contrasting areas of high and low participation in higher education. Year 13 students from two institutions from a ward with high HE participation rates and two institutions from a ward with low HE participation rates took part in the study. Participants included 580 young people aged 17-19 years old. The institutions can be said to be representative of the ward but not of the city as a whole or beyond. However, theoretical generalisations can be made.

iv) *Data Collection* - High reliability was achieved by designing a questionnaire survey which was administered in controlled conditions to generate independent responses from individual participants. A survey response rate of over 90% of Year 13 was achieved in each institution. 24 self-selected

young people participated in individual interviews and 85 young people participated in group interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

v) *Data Analysis* - The qualitative data were analysed using the framework of Hernadi's Hermeneutic Triad and facilitated by using Nvivo software. Univariate, Bivariate and multivariate analyses were undertaken on the quantitative survey data facilitated by SPSS software.

Frame

Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was used as the primary lens for this research. Although relatively new in the field of education, the capability approach has been widely recognised as a new framework for thought and a space for evaluation of advantage and human development. The merits and limitations of the capability approach were considered in relation to a range of other approaches. The capability space highlights the problematic nature of resource-based, utilitarian and achievement-oriented metrics for comparison. Sen argues, 'The capability approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve valuable functionings as a part of living.' (Sen in Nussbaum & Sen, 2001:30). It is argued that the capability approach can usefully be supplemented in an English educational context with the key concepts of habitus, capital and field developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

Research findings

Key Findings Include:

- 1. *New Typology of Aspirations*: The study found that the aspirations young people openly express are not necessarily their own aspirations and may not reflect their 'true' aspirations. A new typology of revealed, concealed, adapted and apparent aspirations emerged from the study findings.
- 2. *Fear of Sharing Aspirations*: 1 in 4 young people in the survey sample (N=580) reported having aspirations they had never shared and more than 4 out of 10 young people surveyed had at times been afraid of sharing their aspirations with others (45%, N=580). Females were statistically significantly more likely to be afraid to share their aspirations.
- 3. *Barriers to Aspirations*: A range of home and school-related barriers were identified which impeded young people in the realisation of their aspirations. This often led to the adaptation of aspirations. Overall more than 40% of the survey sample (N=580) said they had changed their aspirations during the last year.
- 4. *Help with Aspirations*: A third of survey participants indicated they thought there should be more help at school/college about options other than university (N=580). Less than half the sample felt they had enough time to talk to Connexions Advisors about their aspirations. It was found that whilst some students benefited from school and college practices to widening participation in higher education other young people felt excluded and marginalised.
- *Aspirations and Well-Being*: The findings showed evidence that the implementation of widening participation policy has at times led to the privileging and promotion of certain kinds of aspirations and the marginalisation of students who do not fit the criteria of having higher education potential. The capability approach offered new insights into understanding the role educators may play in both developing young people's aspirations and enhancing their well-being.