

Teachers' professional capabilities and the pursuit of quality in Sub-Saharan African education systems: demonstrating and debating a method of capability selection and analysis

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Biography:

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Word count: 6849

Word count (including reference list): 8091

Abstract:

This paper reports on the methodological approach of a study that examined an important dimension of the global challenge to better understand the 'quality' element of Education for All: the professional lives of women teachers in rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Teachers from five countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sudan) provided a focus for exploring the relationship between official representations of teachers' work and the professional lives teachers create and experience. Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach was used as a framework for understanding this relationship and to produce two conceptualizations of professional capabilities for teachers generated by the official and teacher perspectives respectively. These capabilities are organised around the pursuit of quality in teachers' work. The paper explains how these two conceptualizations were determined, justifies four key aspects of the method used and highlights key insights into the teachers' professional lives enabled by this approach.

Introduction

At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, the international community pledged to develop systems of educational governance that were more participatory and more responsive to local needs and interests (UNESCO, 2000). Yet studies of teachers across the world, but particularly in low income countries (LICs), consistently show that they rarely feel actively involved in policy changes, nor do they feel a sense of ownership of them (Barrett, 2005; Harley et al, 2000; UNESCO, 2014). Teacher policies reportedly continue to be designed by elites in urban, centralized contexts, draw predominantly on statistical analyses and often have little resonance with what is going on in classrooms (Bonnet and Pontefract, 2008; Buckler, 2011; Lewin, 2002).

This paper reports on a study of women teachers in rural schools in five Sub-Saharan African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sudan) in which the capability approach was used to develop a more inclusive understanding of what is valued in education – an understanding that incorporates both official and teacher perspectives. In particular this paper shows how a methodology of capability selection and achievement was developed to provide a lens through which to reconceptualize teacher quality. An exploratory definition of teacher quality is suggested: the successful pursuit of valued professional capabilities.

The methodology was developed to present two ‘organisational picture[s]’ (Sen, 2009:18) of teacher quality. The official perspective was drawn from national documents around teachers and education and from interviews with education officials from the five countries. The second organisational picture was constructed from the perspectives of women teachers working in rural contexts in these countries.

The methodological and analytical approach is rooted in the call for more democratic participation in the development of education policy presented in the social justice literature, and for educational governance which ‘recognises and reflects the identities and needs of different groups’ (Barrett and Tikly, 2010:10), and the paper argues the case for the role and potential of the capability approach in this respect. However, it also empirically and theoretically challenges predominant applications of the capability approach which tend to evaluate the capabilities of the beneficiaries of public services rather than the capabilities of the providers of these services, evaluate a person’s capabilities across their whole spectrum of well-being, and conclude with a single list of capabilities drawn from a range of empirical and academic sources. This study explored alternative ways of applying the approach to the issue of teacher quality in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While the capability approach is increasingly used to frame issues of welfare, development and education, few authors describe or justify their method of capability selection and analysis (Alkire, 2007). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not to present the findings of the study (these are presented elsewhere, see Buckler (2012; 2013; forthcoming)) rather to demonstrate and debate this method. In the sections that follow I briefly describe the purpose of the study, outline the process of data collection and analysis and present four novel elements of the methodological approach. These elements are: i) the separation out of professional capabilities from other capabilities; ii) a focus on agency rather than well-being; iii) a focus on agency freedom *and* agency achievement and; iv) keeping lists of capabilities separate. The concluding sections explore the added richness these elements bring to the findings, as well as the questions they raise.

Thematic and theoretical context

This research grew out of a small-scale ethnographic study called Teachers' Lives, carried out by the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) programme (Buckler, 2009a; Buckler, 2011). TESSA is an international consortium researching and developing Open Educational Resources (OERs) for teacher education across the Sub-Saharan African region. Teachers' Lives was carried out to reach a better understanding of the professional worlds of teachers who would be accessing the OERs – particularly teachers working in rural areas where access to computers and the internet (where most OERs are hosted) is limited. The study focused on women teachers who reportedly experience additional challenges and reduced agency in rural schools (UNESCO, 2007; UNESCO, 2014)

Teachers' Lives offered many insights into the professional and personal worlds of women teachers, and confirmed findings in both policy and academic literature regarding wide variations in motivation, effectiveness and quality. However, it also suggested that issues around teachers' work are more nuanced than is often portrayed in this literature (Buckler, 2011; Moon and Buckler, 2007). The data implied that teachers have clear objectives in their work that draw on a range of influences: their own schooling, their experiences as parents, pre-conceived understandings of teaching and learning, their knowledge of the community and their religious beliefs. These objectives only sometimes resonated with those written in their job description and the international agendas to which their countries subscribed. The teachers were motivated, but their motivation was not always directed towards the pursuit of objectives expected by their employers. The teachers were qualified, but often appeared not to utilize the range of pedagogical approaches they had been taught. In short, for all of the attention focused on quality in education, Teachers' Lives suggested that there are differences between how teachers' work is interpreted by teachers and policy makers and differences between what is valued and what is considered to be good quality teaching from these two perspectives (Buckler, 2012).

An overarching research question was determined to expand on the findings of Teachers' Lives: to what extent are women teachers in rural schools able to pursue and achieve valued aspects of teaching? The capability approach (Sen, 1999) was identified as a way of framing this question. The capability approach is fundamentally interested in the freedom people have to live the type of life they wish through the freedom to pursue the things (the beings and doings that Sen calls functionings) that they have reason to value. The approach provides a distinction between two sets of assessment criteria; the contrast between agency and well-being and the contrast between freedom and achievement. A person's capability can be evaluated in four distinctive 'concepts of advantage': i) well-being freedom (the opportunity to achieve well-being); ii) well-being achievement (the realization of well-being); iii) agency freedom (the opportunity to pursue the goals one values) and; iv) agency achievement (the realization of these goals). Different evaluations require a focus on different concepts of advantage (Sen, 2009:287) and, correspondingly, different methodological approaches.

While capability perspectives are increasingly used in education studies (see for example Cameron, 2012; Manion and Menashy, 2013; Rubagiza et al, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Walker, 2006; Unterhalter, 2003), these studies have primarily evaluated the extent to which education expands or restricts the capabilities of students to enhance their well-being or agency.¹ This reflects a trend in the use of

¹ Tikly and Barrett (2011:9), for example, state that for quality education to exist the capabilities of 'learners, parents, communities and governments' must be considered. The

the approach across a range of disciplines to focus on the beneficiaries of public services, rather than the providers (see also Frediani, et al, 2014; Hu and Mendoza, 2013 for examples from international development and public health respectively), although Walker et al (2009) argued that universities need to develop the capabilities and functionings of students in professional education so that they are able to – in turn - ‘expand the capabilities of the people the poor and disadvantaged’ (p.565). In education studies, where the focus has been on the teacher, the point of evaluation has tended to be within the well-being concept of advantage: Tao (2009; 2012) has demonstrated how impoverished environments of schools undermine teachers’ well-being and Cin and Walker (2013) explore Turkish teachers’ capabilities to determine their quality of life.

By contrast the study reported in this paper used the approach as a framework for understanding the agency freedom and agency achievement of teachers; the main conduit of the public service of education. It is generally understood that good quality education can enhance pupils’ capabilities for agency and well-being (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011), but also that these capabilities can be constrained by conditions in schools (Unterhalter, 2013). In terms of what they choose to pursue and achieve, teachers – particularly in rural areas – are in an interesting position as they navigate official and local expectations of their role, and different approaches to understanding education quality. On one hand they work within a human capital paradigm driven by the pursuit of high grades for pupils in national examinations. On the other hand they work within human development and social justice conceptualisations of education as being responsive to local needs and desires (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; UNESCO, 2005). In order to provide a quality education, teachers must achieve valued goals in their work, but their own values, as well as those of their employers are central to their individual capability set (Peppin-Vaughan and Walker, 2012). To better understand the role of teachers in education quality, therefore, it is important that these values and teachers’ pursuit of them are investigated.

This study explored what is valued in teachers’ work from these two perspectives, and this paper suggests a way of evaluating teachers’ agency freedom to pursue and achieve the things that are valued. By focusing on values, agency *and* achievement the study determined, but also went beyond the ‘organisational pictures’ (Sen, 2009:18) of teachers’ work to include ‘the life that [they] manage – or do not manage – to live’.²

The contested nature of capability selection has been acknowledged by Sen (2009) and this study added weight to his suggestion that conflicts may arise between individually and collectively identified functionings and capabilities and those defined by different scales and levels of abstraction (Sen, 1998 in Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Few empirical studies, however, acknowledge or deal with this conflict. Indeed, few outline how these functionings and capabilities are identified. Alkire (2008) suggests that capabilities are often called into question not for what they are, but for how they are determined: ‘without knowing the basis for their choice, the reader is unable to probe the chosen dimensions and either trust or question them’ (p.1).

Partly, this omission from the capabilities literature is due to the openness and flexibility of the approach – particularly from Sen’s perspective (2009). The ‘intentional breadth’ (Alkire, 2005:118) means that the approach can be relevant in a

Research School for Education and Capabilities (2011) (in Germany) lists 73 possible research topics for doctoral theses. Only one focuses on the capabilities of teachers.

² The definition of agency used in this study is ‘the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value’ (Sen, 1999:19).

wide range of circumstances and evaluations, with capability lists constructed according to the specific needs and desires of those at the centre of the evaluation and depending on the 'level of analysis, the information available and the kind of decision involved' (Alkire, 2008:2). Claassen (2011), for example, distinguishes between a 'democratic position' in which capabilities are determined through empirical means by those at the centre, and a 'philosophical position' in which capabilities are selected through ideas and debates at a more theoretical level. More specifically, Alkire suggests five methods of selecting dimensions: i) drawing on existing data; ii) making assumptions, perhaps based on a theory; iii) drawing on an existing list that was generated by consensus and; iv) using an ongoing, deliberative participatory process and; v) drawing on empirical findings (2008).

In terms of descriptions of empirical applications, there are some useful guides: Anand et al (2009), in a quantitative analysis of quality of life among 1000 people in the UK extrapolated a list of questions and indicators from Nussbaum's list of human capabilities (2000) and developed a Likert scale for each question in order to quantitatively understand respondents' well-being. Coast et al (2006) used an inductive and retrospective approach by extrapolating the values of older people in the UK from in-depth interviews about their lives, and then classifying and grouping these values to develop an index of well-being. Walker (2006; 2007) examines a series of interviews with South African school girls and draws on this, and other, data to develop a list of capabilities that promote gender equity in South African schools. For all the richness these descriptions add to understandings of capabilities, it is less commonly practiced for authors deal with *why* these methodological approaches were adopted or debate their advantages and limitations.

This paper responds to the call for more detail around the methods of selecting and analysing capabilities but also for the justification of these methods and their 'grounds for being viewed as principled' (Anand et al, 2009: 131). Of course, such a call could be made of any approach to research, but is especially relevant when using capabilities, for which flexibility is one of its greatest appeals and therefore most daunting qualities, especially for researchers new to the approach. Robeyns (2005) suggests that 'a practice in which authors explicitly described how and why they chose dimensions of agency or well-being could itself be of tremendous value'. This paper is not intended as a 'how to' – the method was inspired by the studies outlined above to be a perceptive means of understanding the data and questions at hand – but an attempt to contribute to this limited literature.

Collecting data on valued functionings and capabilities

The methodological approach of this study intended to draw out the interplay between values in teachers' work from official perspectives, and the perspectives of the teachers' themselves, and to determine teachers' agency to pursue and achieve professional capabilities constructed from these values. The five focus countries – Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sudan - were chosen because they represented the breadth of the TESSA consortium geographically, culturally and linguistically.

The official context

The official context referred to in this study represented a decade of policy perspectives around teachers' work in the five focus countries. The study addressed a field of policy (Potter and Subrahmanian, 2007), rather than a specific policy in itself or the policies around teacher education in a specific country, to present a

regional view of what is valued in teachers work.³ In total, 94 documents (published since 2000) were retrieved from online repositories, Ministry of Education resource centres, university and teacher college libraries, school libraries and staff rooms and from the portfolios of the focus teachers. A quality and relevance appraisal reduced the number of documents to 52, which were analysed in depth (Blaxter et al 2006; May, 2001). Official perspectives were also drawn from semi-structured interviews with ten education officials across the five countries at different levels of policy formulation and enactment (from school supervisors to Ministers of Education).

The teacher context

TESSA contacts helped to select five primary schools against set criteria. Buckler (2012) discusses these criteria in depth, but, to summarize, it was requested that schools were rural, yet accessible and average with respect to catchment area and achievement. In each school a focus teacher was selected through consultation with the head teacher. Specifications for the focus teacher were not as detailed as the criteria for the school, although it was requested that they were female, represented the head teacher's idea of a 'normal teacher' and were proficient in English. In some of the schools it was possible to collect in-depth data from more teachers. The data from two of these teachers was analysed alongside the original five; their stories stood out as presenting notably different experiences of teaching and it was felt that their inclusion would add richness to the study.

The fieldwork took place between 2007 and 2011. At least two visits were made to each country and in total just over six months were spent in schools, with the teachers, collecting data. In the first visit three interviews were conducted with the focus teachers. They provided logically ordered transcripts (based around the teachers' history, present and anticipated future). This biographical structure (Acker, 1999) was designed to complement the shorter narratives recorded in every day conversation. In the second visit, interviews served both as a catch-up with events in the teachers' lives and to investigate ideas around values, agency and capabilities in more depth. These 'ethnographic interviews' were designed to reveal 'the cultural context of lives through an engaged exploration of the beliefs, values... and the structural forces underpinning socially patterned behaviour' (Forsey, 2008:59).

Interviews alone may have revealed what the teachers valued but shadowing offered additional insights into this, as well as into how the teachers were able to pursue valued goals. It offered 'privileged access' to how they actually behaved (Silverman, 2007:91). In order to match the teachers' rhetoric with the realities of their teaching – to understand how their values related to what they were actually able to pursue and achieve – as much time as was possible and appropriate was spent with each teacher inside and outside of the classroom.

Questionnaires were also distributed among staff in each school. In the first visit they gathered general information about experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession. In the second visit they focussed on teachers' perceptions of their roles at school, community and national levels. Questionnaire data was collated and analysed in the field and, with the focus teacher, key themes were selected to shape discussions in focus groups. The teacher data, therefore, consisted of in-depth notes, narratives and transcripts from seven focus teachers, and supplementary narratives from their colleagues drawn from the questionnaires, focus groups and field-notes.

³ See Buckler (2012) for a detailed justification of this decision.

Analysing the data: understanding teachers' professional capabilities

The first stage of analysis followed Chase's (2003), Robson's (2002) and Blaxter et al (2006) guidelines for thematically coding and categorising narrative data. These techniques were also used with the documents, field-notes, focus group transcripts and questionnaire responses – treating these as narratives too. Themes were determined that focused on values, agency, choices and achievements. These themes were expanded into extended pieces of writing about what the documents, the officials and the teachers valued in teachers' work.

In order to position the data within a capabilities framework, lists of functionings and capabilities were extrapolated from these thematic narratives. A valued aspect of teaching was counted as a functioning if at least one person identified it and if it was considered important by the majority (Walker, 2006). The official list of functionings was cross-checked back across the 52 documents and, where possible, with the education officials.⁴ For the teacher-generated list, the iterative process of multiple-visits and continued contact with the focus teachers meant that a more rigorous testing out ideas about values and debating emerging categories of capabilities was possible. A key exercise in the focus groups, for example, involved teachers discussing a series of preliminarily-determined functionings extrapolated from the questionnaire, interview and field-note data.

This analysis generated two conceptualisations of professional capability for teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa (see table 1). From the data, two lists of professional functionings were constructed and these were clustered into two lists of professional capabilities that represented substantive freedoms related to the work of teachers. Associated functionings were grouped into capabilities through a process of exhaustion and non-reduction until no functionings were left out (Robeyns, 2005). No ranking or weighting of capabilities was attempted (Walker, 2006).

In total, from the official perspective, fourteen capabilities made up of 84 functionings were determined, and from the teacher perspective, 58 functionings made up sixteen capabilities.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE: Lists of capabilities and functionings extrapolated from the data

A different type of analysis was necessary to determine the extent to which the teachers were able to pursue and achieve functionings within the two lists of capabilities. For each teacher, two scores of professional capability were determined which represented her freedom to pursue elements of quality teaching determined by the teachers, and by the official data.

The tendency for empirical applications of capabilities to focus on the achievement of functionings (or not) rather than the freedom to achieve them has been noted (Miquel and Lopez, 2011; Zimmerman, 2006). In this study, questions were developed that mapped on to the list of teacher functionings that made up each list of professional capabilities. Two sets of questions, extrapolated from the official and teacher-generated lists of capabilities, were then 'asked of' the qualitative data. The first set (QA) was designed to determine agency freedom (the ability to pursue each functioning) and the second set (QC) was designed to determine the achievement of these functionings. An example is presented in table 2.

⁴ This was only possible with three of the ten education officials.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE: Extract from the list of official capabilities

The total number of functionings for each capability (x) corresponds to x number of questions for agency and achievement.

$$\mathbf{Ca = Fx = QAx = QCx}$$

For example, three functionings (F3) make up the official capability of recognition (OC1):

- i. Achieve the minimum qualification for teaching
- ii. Register as a teacher
- iii. Maintain registered status

These three functionings correspond to three questions (QA3) asked of the data to determine teachers' agency freedom in respect of this capability:

- i. Can they achieve the minimum qualification for teaching?
- ii. Can they officially register as teachers?
- iii. Can they maintain their registered status?

The three functionings also correspond to three questions (QC3) asked of the data to determine teachers' agency achievement.

- i. Have they achieved the minimum qualification for teaching?
- ii. Have they officially registered as teachers?
- iii. Have they maintained their registered status?

Therefore:

$$\mathbf{OC1 = F3 = QA3 = QC3}$$

The questions relating to agency (QA) were deliberately phrased as 'can the teacher...?' to emphasize that the capability approach is interested in the freedom to achieve functionings, as well as in the achievement of functionings. Focussing solely on achieved functionings 'does not necessarily incorporate the freedom to decide which path to take or the freedom to bring about achievements one considers to be valuable' (Alkire, 2005:120). Considered in the answers to each question about agency was whether or not the teacher understands that this is a functioning that is expected of them. If, for example, they do not realize that they are supposed to be well-versed in the national constitution (a functioning within the official capability of loyalty) it is argued that they do not have the freedom to pursue it.

The study was interested in what teachers do, but also why they do what they do. The questions about achievement (QC), therefore, sought to determine whether or not the teachers choose to pursue and achieve the functionings. If a teacher *can* pursue a certain functioning but doesn't, the space between agency and achievement is where teachers' choices can be explored in an attempt to better understand education quality. Clearly if the answer to the agency question (QA) is 'no' then the teacher does not have the freedom to pursue that functioning and responsibility for the resultant limitation on their capability set lies outside their control; there is no point asking QC and the area for exploration is the space between the functioning and agency – i.e. what prohibits the pursuit of this functioning.

In the analysis, answers to the questions were deliberately limited to 'yes' or 'no'. For each 'yes' the teacher was allocated 1 point, for each 'no' the teacher was allocated 0 points. A 'grey area' column was included for when it was not possible to ascertain a definite answer, for example when there was insufficient data to answer the question or when it was too difficult to distinguish between freedom and choice and further checking with the teachers was not possible. The scores were expanded upon in detail drawing on evidence from the qualitative data, but were designed to serve as a preliminary way of making visible each teacher's overall professional capability.

Example analysis

To demonstrate how this approach worked in practice, this section provides a summary of a part of the analysis for one of the focus teachers. Ruth is in her early twenties and working in a village called Nkyen in Ghana's Central Region. She qualified with her teaching certificate and is studying for a Dip.Ed through distance mode at the University of Cape Coast. She finds village life challenging logistically (it has no running water and very little electricity), socially (the relationship between the school and the community is hostile), personally (her fiancé lives and works several hours away) and professionally (the village is remote and they receive visits from education officers once a year at best).

This example concerns the teacher-generated capability of 'support and encouragement' (TC10). Table 3 shows how this capability is made up of nine functionings (F9). Therefore, to establish Ruth's agency and achievement of this capability, the data was re-visited to find answers to the questions around agency and achievement of these functionings: e.g.

QA1: Can Ruth access professional support?

QC1: Does Ruth access professional support?

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE: Extract from the list of teacher-generated capabilities

There are several possible outcomes of the analysis which include:

1. Ruth scores nine points for the agency questions within this teacher-generated capability. This suggests that she has the freedom to pursue all of the functionings and is not restricted in terms of her professional support and encouragement (as interpreted by the teachers).
2. Ruth scores nine points for the achievement questions. This suggests that she is not only free to pursue these valued goals, but that she chooses to do so.
3. Ruth scores fewer than nine points for agency. This suggests that there are elements of this capability she is unable to pursue.
4. Ruth's achievement score is lower than her agency score. This suggests that while she is free to pursue the functionings she chooses not to.

Ruth scores just two points for both agency and achievement in this teacher-generated capability of support and encouragement – the lowest score of any of the teachers. These two points were associated with the functionings of professional support (through her Dip.Ed programme and through an informal peer network she had established with teachers from other schools) and for being able to access her salary on time (because she regularly travelled to the town to visit her family, she had access to the bank). Her data suggested several obstacles to the other seven

functionings. The head teacher was frequently absent and officials rarely visited the school which she found frustrating: 'without this contact you drift, you lose focus'. Even when they were present, Ruth had little confidence in either to be able to act on reported grievances:

'Well, we tell the head teacher and they send it out there. [What happens next?] No, after that nothing happens... after some time you give up and forget about the whole thing. You have other things to focus on'

Ruth's data also highlighted a lack of support from the community, which further restricted her agency and achievement of functionings within this capability.

'The parents don't come to the school, they don't care much for the progress of their children... in fact there is much animosity between the school and the community. They don't like you approaching them about their children... so we tend not to interfere with each others' affairs'

Even from this greatly abridged sample of data it is possible to see how physical, environmental and social factors limit Ruth's professional capability.

Justification of method

This method resulted in two scores of professional capability for each focus teacher. These scores represented i) their capability to pursue aspects of quality teaching as determined by their employers and; ii) their capability to pursue aspects of quality teaching determined personally and by their peers. Perhaps not surprisingly while the scores differed between the focus teachers, the *pattern* of the scores was the same for them all: the teachers scored higher in the teacher-generated than in the official list. The significance of the scores is discussed elsewhere (Buckler 2012; 2013). The rest of this paper highlights and justifies four key aspects of the methodology that constitute a novel contribution to the evaluation of professional capability and considers – with hindsight - the usefulness of these aspects in capability evaluations and the questions raised by these aspects.

1. The separation out of professional capabilities from other capabilities

This study explored the usefulness of separating out a specific subset of a person's valued goals and analysing these independently of other valued goals. Most empirical uses of the capability approach consider people's overall capabilities (that is, their sum total of valued objectives) – a practice promoted by Nussbaum's list of human capabilities (2000; 2003) and rooted in a more holistic belief in the responsibility of governments to ensure social justice for all citizens. This study, instead, drew on Sen's suppositions around how the approach might be applied in different contexts by focussing specifically on capabilities within the teachers' professional environment (Sen, 2004). Sen suggests, for example, that there is often good sense in 'narrowing the coverage of capabilities for a specific purpose' (p.74) and that, doing so, acknowledges the broad and flexible nature of the approach, with applications possible outside of the sphere of poverty and deprivation analysis (Robeyns, 2005). The 'intentional breadth' (Alkire, 2005:118) means that the approach can be relevant in a wide range of circumstances and evaluations, with capability lists constructed according to the specific needs and desires of those at the centre of the evaluation.

Narrowing the coverage of capabilities was consciously aligned with the purpose of this study which was to explore professional values in teachers' work and teachers'

pursuit of them. It was intended that this more focused approach would enable other aspects of the teachers' lives to be considered without diluting the key purpose of the evaluation. In fact, the data suggests that for the teachers, who lived and worked in small rural communities there was considerable overlap between their personal and professional lives and goals. Ruth's feelings of isolation meant that many of her personal goals were rooted in her desire to leave the village, and this was reflected in things she most valued in her work as a teacher. For example:

'These children need help getting out too... if you ask them what they want to be and one might say a taxi driver, one might say a teacher, but most of them say salt farmer – salt is all they see... I really try to talk about things in Accra, even just big statues and tower blocks and things to open their minds to see that there is life beyond this small place'

Separating out a specific sub-set of a person's goals, therefore, does not necessarily mean evaluating them in a space removed from context. A person's societal background is clearly relevant in terms of their values (Deneulin, 2011; Peppin-Vaughan and Walker, 2012) and their capability (Sen, 2009) even when these values and capabilities are considered around a focused section of the sum total.

2. Focussing on agency rather than well-being

The capability approach offers two sets of assessment criteria with which evaluations can be aligned; the contrast between agency and well-being and the distinction between freedom and achievement (Sen, 2009). This study deliberately concerned itself with teachers' agency rather than well-being.

While the pursuit of teacher well-being is important and it is reasonable to suggest (as Tao, 2012 does) that a teacher who is not able to achieve personal well-being is less likely to be interested in or able to pursue the well-being of her pupils, this research suggested that is not always the case. Focusing on the alternative 'concepts of advantage' of agency freedom and achievement, shifts the focus away from seeing teachers just as 'vehicle[s] of well-being' (Sen, 2009:289). Focusing on teachers' agency freedom made visible ways in which teachers use agency to improve the lives of others at the expense of their own well-being. Several of the teachers, for example, prioritized the educational and emotional needs of their families over their own professional development. Nearly all of the teachers spent their own money on resources for their teaching or on food or clothes for their pupils. One spent break and lunch times marking her pupils' books rather than socialising with the other teachers in the kitchen. Another went into school most Saturdays to catch up with administrative tasks.

A focus on agency rather than well-being, therefore, was more aligned with the goal of understanding teachers' work and demonstrated how the teachers used their agency freedom to 'uplift the lives of others' (Sen, 2009:289). Understanding the ways in which teachers' agency freedom is used presents a more holistic picture of what teachers value and choose to do and reveals 'layers of complexity' that may not be captured in other analyses (Robeyns, 2005:194). The official documents implied that governments are responsible for the well-being of teachers, where teachers' well-being is conceptualized within relatively narrow and known categories of remuneration, resources, housing and support. Tao's (2012) study of teacher well-being in Tanzania has usefully corroborated and expanded upon these aspects of desired well-being (by drawing on the teachers' perspectives), but the focus on agency helped to demonstrate that teachers' values are also located in the broader social environment in which they work. Their values respond to the specific needs of

these environments and are often focused beyond the limits of their personal well-being (Sen, 2009).

3. A focus on agency freedom **and** agency achievement

When using the capability approach to assess professional capabilities – where there is a contractual obligation to pursue certain functionings - it is important to determine agency freedom *and* agency achievement of valued functionings. A key finding of this research was identifying areas in which what teachers *can* do represents a different outcome to what they actually *choose* to do and, therefore, end up doing. If the capability approach is to be a useful way of thinking about professional work it is important to engage not only with the culmination outcomes, i.e. what is on the list, but the comprehensive outcome which considers people's eventual choices and the reasons that underlie these choices (Robeyns, 2005). In this study, it appeared to be important to understand teachers' professional capabilities through an exploration of what it termed 'the agency space' (freedom to pursue) and the 'achievement space' (realisation of) for each functioning: I argue that the methodological choice is not either/or: understanding the agency space *and* the achievement space is necessary to capture a fuller picture of people's professional capabilities.

Of the seven teachers, for example, it was Ruth's data that illustrated the widest gap between agency and achievement of official capabilities. This suggests that she chooses not to pursue functionings within these capabilities that she has the freedom to achieve. She agrees, for example, that she could participate more in extra-curricular activities – functionings within the official capability of relationships – but tends to prioritise her diploma:

'I have two things to do and you know that you should take extra classes or mentor a pupil, but for your diploma you have to study... you get divided attention'

'when only 5 or 6 pupils show up, sometimes I just set work for those pupils and get on with my study, otherwise I'll just have to repeat the lesson when the others come back'

This example also illustrates how when a choice is made to achieve one functioning, this choice may facilitate or limit an individual's values and agency and affect their choices in terms of other capabilities (Buckler, 2012): Ruth's commitment to pursuing professional development (a valued functioning in both the official and teacher-generated lists) influenced the decisions she made about pursuing other professional capabilities as well as her freedom to achieve these.

4. Keeping lists of capabilities separate

The final methodological decision of note in this study is perhaps the one that required, and inspires, the most thought. This study drew on Robeyns' procedural approach (2005) in which she suggests drawing capabilities from different areas and stakeholders. However, the key difference is that while Robeyns suggests collating the areas to create one definitive list of capabilities appropriate to the purpose of the investigation, this study kept the lists separate. The main purpose of this study was to use the capability approach to provide a framework for understanding different perspectives on what is valued in teachers' work and for understanding what teachers are able to do and choose to do in their work.

While, initially, a single 'ideal' list of professional capabilities for teachers was sought, attempts to combine mutually valued capabilities left out valued (and clearly valuable) functionings from both perspectives. The official list, for example, contained functionings around familiarity with education policies, subject-specialism and activities around keeping records of pupils' learning – these did not feature in the teacher-generated list. Similarly, the teacher-generated list contained functionings around sharing their own experiences of a rural childhood with their class, opening their minds to experiences outside the village and providing food and clothes to the poorest pupils.

Other empirical applications of the approach accept that the final list involves 'compromise' (Walker and McClean, 2013:26) and it was decided that (without extensive further empirical work) such a list would not be the end goal of this research. Keeping the lists separate is a lesser-used approach (Biggeri et al, 2006) but enabled different levels of analysis around what is valued and around what teachers are able to do: values and functionings could be considered in their own right, rather than subsumed into a neat but potentially neutral list of valued goals. In fact, the startling differences between the teachers' professional capability when measured against the official list compared to the teacher-generated list constituted a key finding of this research – the teachers feel they are providing a better quality education than those who employ them think they are. Keeping the lists separate illustrated this further consequence of educational governance being unresponsive to the needs, interests and pursued values of teachers.

Conclusion

The strengths of the capability approach lie in its flexibility and the freedom enabled to the researcher to adapt it for specific scenarios. This goes some way to accounting for its increasing popularity across a range of development disciplines. Yet the methodological choices made around empirical applications of the approach are a key indicator of the ideologies of the researcher and central to the outcome of the study. This paper argues, therefore, that it is not just helpful to understand these choices and their implications – as Anand et al (2009) and Robeyns (2005) suggest, but essential in order to make an informed judgement on rigour and wider-application of findings.

With that in mind, this paper has aimed to shed some light on one particular method, and on how and why these methodological decisions were determined. These decisions were rooted in the call for more democratic participation of teachers in the debate around the global, but also very local pursuit of education quality. A transparent exploration and explanation of the approach used, however, also enables the reader to make a judgement on the extent to which the functionings and capabilities are contextual rather than normative (McClean and Walker, 2013) and the impact of the white, British female researcher in mediating the teachers' participation in this debate.

To conclude I want to return to Claassen's (2011) distinction between philosophical and democratic approaches to selecting and justifying capabilities and consider how this relates to the quality teaching and quality education discourse. Claassen's definition of the philosophical position highlights the arrival at a list of capabilities through debates at a more abstract level to represent 'the most enlightened theories' (p.506). In this study of teachers' professional capabilities, the valued functionings extrapolated from the official data resonate (sometimes word-for-word) with the values embedded in the EFA agenda which are 'universally and internationally agreed upon' (UNESCO, 2007:2) and represent the most 'enlightened' – or at least

the most widely accepted – theories of good quality education currently available. In this sense, then, the official list of capabilities can be aligned with this philosophical position; similar criticisms are levelled at academics ‘in their proverbial ivory towers’ (Claassen, 2011:500) and education policy makers in their elite, urban environments (UNESCO, 2014). Claassen argues in favour of the legitimacy of philosophical position over the democratic position, providing the former does not completely bypass the latter and if those charged with developing the theories upon which capabilities will be based ‘regularly cross the boundaries to gather data in the real world’ (2011: 504).

Investigating and highlighting teachers’ pursuit of official professional capabilities intended to provide a glimpse into some of the ‘real worlds’ for which goals around quality teaching are written and in which they often fail to have an impact. Investigating and highlighting teachers’ pursuit of professional capabilities that they themselves have reason to value also provides a glimpse into the more nuanced alternative worlds that teachers imagine for their pupils. These alternative worlds are rarely recognised in the debate around education quality.

Academics writing about empirical applications of the capability approach are careful to note that resulting lists are ‘not the end point of discussion... but open to further development and participatory revision’ (McClellan and Walker, 2013:14). Sen too emphasises that a ‘fixed forever’ list limits the possibility of ‘progress in social understanding’ (Sen, 2004:80).

In development endeavours as expansive and as subtle as the pursuit of quality education, however, I argue that individual empirical applications of the capability approach that aim to better understand this endeavour make a distinctive contribution by not combining lists from different stakeholders. Letting the valued capabilities of groups stand for and by themselves enables a more robust public debate about them in their own right rather than within the boundaries defined by the coordinators and participants of individual projects. Making lists public in this earlier, un-compromised state may help the determination of philosophically justified capabilities for quality teaching at international and national policy levels to become a more democratically informed process.

* With thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who provided valuable feedback on the first draft of this paper.

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