

Balancing Education's Purpose: Advocating the Capabilities Approach Amidst Neoliberal Challenges

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Abstract: This essay explores the evolving purpose of education through the lens of the Capabilities Approach (CA) and critiques of Neoliberalism. The CA, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum, emphasizes fostering individual well-being, social justice, and personal dignity through education. In contrast, Neoliberalism frames education primarily as an economic investment, prioritizing efficiency and market-driven outcomes. The essay critiques Neoliberalism's commodification of education and its neglect of broader humanistic and social goals. It advocates for integrating CA as the central educational aim, proposing policies that balance economic adaptability with the holistic development of individuals. Drawing on personal experiences in English education, the essay demonstrates the application of CA principles to enhance personal growth and global participation. It concludes that adopting CA in education ensures equitable and inclusive practices that prioritize human dignity and societal well-being.

Keywords: Capabilities Approach (CA); Neoliberalism in Education; Human Development and Educational Justice.

1. Introduction

Modern educational thought has grappled with the central question of the ultimate purpose of education, generating diverse perspectives that reflect broader social, economic and cultural values. The consideration of educational goals is not merely academic, but profoundly influences policy decisions and classroom practices around the world. In this essay, I will explore the Capabilities Approach (CA), developed by Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum, which emphasizes enhancing individual well-being by offering educational opportunities and fostering capabilities derived from education.

Section 1 introduces the CA's core concepts, focusing on the development of central human capabilities to foster inclusive development and social justice over mere economic efficiency. Section 2 critiques Neoliberalism Theory, emphasizing its focus on market-driven choices and skill development at the cost of educational equity and broader values. Section 3 advocates for the CA as the primary educational aim, proposing a balanced approach that integrates economic adaptability with social equity and individual autonomy. This revision aims for an educational model prioritizing continuous learning, personal development, and social equity, challenging the commodification of education. Section 4 will discuss my understanding and application of CA theory based on my own experience.

2. The theory of Capabilities Approach

2.1. Core Concepts of the Capabilities Approach

It was initially conceptualized by Amartya Sen in the late 1970s and further developed by Martha C. Nussbaum, the CA redefines well-being and societal progress beyond traditional metrics found in welfare economics and political philosophy. At its core, the approach evaluates "what individuals can do" and "what they can become," focusing on capabilities and freedoms, thus prioritizing opportunities for individuals to realize their life values and goals [1, 2].

In the domain of education, the CA is particularly transformative. It emphasizes the development of central human capabilities such as life, health, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, and social affiliation [2]. These capabilities reflect the fundamental requirements for individual autonomy, freedom, and dignity, delineating educational objectives aimed at fostering individual well-being. The reach of the CA extends to discussions of justice and distributive justice, advocating that societal fairness depends on ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to achieve these central human capabilities. This perspective aligns with the broader concerns of development economics regarding policy design to improve the quality of life, especially among the most vulnerable populations [1]. By focusing on what individuals are actually able to do and become, the CA introduces a fundamental shift in assessing equality and fairness from a mere economic to a deeply humanistic perspective. Building on this foundation of justice, the CA also brings a nuanced view on individualism and pluralism. While it advocates individualism by respecting individual differences and the freedom of choice, the CA acknowledges that individual development and well-being are inherently linked to others and the community, thereby supporting a Pluralistic view of society. This view posits that society should embrace diversity, including different values, lifestyles, and goals, advocating that everyone should have the opportunity through education and other societal mechanisms to become the person they choose, thereby achieving personal and societal flourishing [2]. This synthesis demonstrates how the capabilities approach bridges personal freedoms with social responsibilities, promoting both individual capabilities and communal well-being.

2.2. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to Education

Before delving into Nussbaum's CA in education, it is important to acknowledge the significance of this perspective. Nussbaum's framework prioritizes enriching human capabilities and fostering personal growth, emphasizing the intrinsic value of education. By integrating Nussbaum's CA,

we shift the focus towards how education can fundamentally support personal dignity and societal contribution, framing education as a transformative force for individual and collective well-being. Nussbaum introduces the CA with the concept of human dignity and a life worthy of this dignity, which is endowed with authentic human functioning [3]. She argues for capabilities as a broad goal that can be further articulated by society, and stresses the transformative potential of education to enable students to think critically, act morally, and interact empathetically. This highlights the role of education as an agent of personal and social change [4].

Nussbaum's CA highlights the importance of education in promoting autonomy, encouraging students to become independent thinkers and active participants in their learning. The approach advocates for education to go beyond academic success and encompass emotional, physical, and social development, with the aim of preparing well-rounded individuals for complex societal roles [2]. Supporting contemporary educational innovations, Robert (2024) discusses AI's role in creating personalized learning paths that align with individual needs, reinforcing the CA's emphasis on active participation and personal growth [5]. This approach challenges traditional educational paradigms by promoting comprehensive personal development that equips students not just with knowledge, but with the skills needed for meaningful engagement in life. Nussbaum (2011, p.39) notes "equalizing access to primary education for all when we are not yet in a position to give everyone access to secondary education" [2]. She advocates for equal educational opportunities as a cornerstone of social justice, arguing that socioeconomic, material, or cultural barriers should not limit access to education. Furthermore, Nussbaum's philosophy outlines ten core competencies essential for educational goals, ranging from life and health to control over the environment [3]. These competencies aim to evaluate education's role in fostering a fair society where individuals can lead purposeful lives.

3. The Neoliberalism Theory and Practice

3.1. Neoliberalism: An Educational Perspective on Market Freedom and Individual Choice

Originating in the mid-20th century, neoliberal theory advocates for market freedom and minimal government intervention, emphasizing the importance of individual autonomy. In the context of education, a defining feature of neoliberalism is its treatment of education as an economic investment. According to Hastings (2019), under neoliberalism, the value of education is primarily viewed through the lens of economic return [6]. If it can generate profitable returns for students who invest in their human capital or for service providers who commodify knowledge and learning, it is considered worthwhile.

Hayek (1944) criticizes central planning economies for their inefficiency and infringement on individual freedoms, advocating for the effectiveness of market mechanisms in the allocation of resources and services, including education [7]. He argues that individuals should have the autonomy to choose their educational paths, rather than being subjected to standardized government-provided education.

Building on Hayek's advocacy for market-driven approaches, Friedman (1955) proposed an education voucher system to increase competition among schools by providing

vouchers for private tuition [8]. He believed this system would elevate educational quality by fostering choice and competition, effectively catering to the diverse needs of students and parents. According to Friedman, such market mechanisms would not only improve education quality but also spur innovation and efficiency across the educational spectrum.

3.2. Challenges in the Implementation of Neoliberal Education

Neoliberalism theory promotes enhancing educational efficiency and quality through market mechanisms and individual choice. However, its practical application faces significant challenges. In the domain of skill development and economic adaptability, although neoliberal educational theory underscores the role of education in fostering skills required for the knowledge economy and generating a workforce ready for economic shifts, it tends to focus narrowly on technical skills. This focus often sidelines broader capabilities like critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional intelligence. Sennett (2008) observes that policy inclinations towards standardized testing and rote memorization neglect the nurturing of comprehensive skills, rendering the workforce ill-equipped for the complexities of modern workplaces[9]. Additionally, Giroux (2005) critiques this approach as diminishing education to a mere instrument for economic productivity, thereby neglecting its broader implications for individual and societal growth [10]. Leathwood and Read (2013) extend the discussion by examining the impact of neoliberal policies on academic performativity [11]. They align with Buchanan and Tullock's (1962) view that competitive mechanisms can address inefficiencies in government- provided educational services [12]. However, they caution that while competition may drive innovation, it also places significant pressure on educational institutions to meet market-driven performance metrics rather than focusing on genuine educational outcomes. This critique highlights a potential drawback of neoliberal education policies—though they aim to improve efficiency and innovation, they may also compel institutions to prioritize market values over educational integrity and quality.

Within the neoliberal framework, education is perceived as an investment, framing students and families as potential "consumers". This perspective, although potentially encouraging individuals to enhance their skills, simultaneously leads to the commodification of education. Apple (2004) criticizes this instrumental view of education, highlighting its disregard for the comprehensive role of education in fostering civic consciousness and social cohesion [13].

One of the most significant critiques of neoliberal educational practices revolves around the issues of equity and access. Despite claims of promoting meritocracy, neoliberal policies often aggravate existing socio-economic disparities. Apple's (2006) research into the fairness and opportunity imbalances under neoliberal education reveals the adverse effects of marketization and standardization on education, and how they intensify social and economic inequalities [14]. It shows that neoliberal educational policies result in unequal resource distribution, exacerbating the gap between social classes and limiting underprivileged groups' access to quality education. Furthermore, Anyon (2005) argues that neoliberal reforms deepen social segregation within education, benefiting the wealthy while widening the achievement gap

in disadvantaged communities [15].

In summary, despite neoliberal educational theory proposing market-driven solutions to enhance efficiency and choice, its implementation faces significant challenges. The issues of narrow skill development focus, education commodification, and worsening inequalities highlight the complexity and limitations of neoliberal approaches in achieving the diverse objectives of education.

4. Beyond Neoliberalism: Advocating the Capabilities Approach as the Central Educational Aim

This section explores the relationship between the CA and neoliberalism theory. It examines how the integration of neoliberal principles can modify the CA, particularly in terms of aligning education with economic adaptability. Despite this integration, the educational aim of CA remain as the aim of education to promote personal dignity, social justice, and overall human development.

4.1. Expanded Capabilities Approach: Neoliberal Perspectives and Revisions

4.1.1. Balance between Education and Economic Adaptability

Nussbaum's (2011) CA theory values education's role in developing individuals' comprehensive abilities, including critical thinking and social-emotional intelligence [2]. The theory holds that education's core goal is to promote overall individual development, rather than solely meeting the immediate needs of the market. In contrast, neoliberal theory prioritizes the direct impact of market demand on educational content and methods. For instance, Sennett (2008) highlights the importance of education adapting flexibly to economic changes and prioritizing the development of technical skills to tackle the challenges of the knowledge economy [9]. This perspective underscores the crucial role of education in economic growth and recommends enhancing economic competitiveness by improving the workforce's skills. The design of educational policies needs to strike a balance between promoting the all-round development of individuals and meeting market demand. The CA could be enhanced by ensuring that, besides developing broad personal skills, the education system is responsive to market trends and adjusts teaching strategies to align with future job market demands. Additionally, we can learn from the neoliberal emphasis on lifelong learning and personal career development [10,13]. This revision emphasizes the importance of a flexible and diverse education system that supports individuals' continuous growth and adaptability throughout their careers.

The balance between individual development and socioeconomic needs is achieved by viewing education as a bridge. Education policies should not only focus on cultivating technical skills required by the market to adapt to market development, but also pay attention to developing individuals' critical thinking, creativity and social participation abilities. To achieve this, critical revisions can be made in the following aspects.

The first point is the establishment of a multidimensional skills framework. The education system needs to develop a framework that encompasses technical and vocational skills, as well as critical thinking, innovation, and socio-emotional skills. This framework should transcend traditional subject boundaries and encourage interdisciplinary learning and

practice to cultivate students' adaptability and innovative abilities. Gardner (2006) proposed the theory of multiple intelligences, emphasizing the diversity of individual intelligences. He advocated that education should cultivate logic, mathematics, language, space, music, body movements, interpersonal relationships, and self-understanding[16]. So I think this approach can provide a more comprehensive perspective on talent development in education. Educational policies should aim to support the development of multiple intelligences and encourage schools to provide diverse learning paths and curriculum designs that promote students' ability development in various fields.

The second point is to focus on an ecosystem perspective. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory emphasizes that individual development occurs within nested environmental systems [17]. These systems include microsystems, mesosystems, peripheral systems, and macrosystems. The theory provides a framework for education policy, requiring policymakers to take into account the interplay of education, family, community, and broader socioeconomic factors when designing education policy. This promotes a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, ensuring that all students have access to high-quality educational opportunities.

The third point emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and personal development. Jarvis (2007) explored the dynamic process of individual learning in a knowledge society and how to promote the overall development of individuals through lifelong education [18]. This perspective requires educational policies to support the framework of lifelong learning and encourage individuals to continuously learn new skills and knowledge. Education policies should promote flexible learning models and pathways, including online learning, adult education, and vocational training, to meet the learning needs of people of different ages and backgrounds.

This section examines the balance between education and economic adaptability, highlighting the importance of education not only adapting to market needs and developing technical skills but also promoting the overall development of individuals. These ideas provide a framework for designing inclusive and equitable education policies that guarantee all students have access to high-quality educational opportunities.

4.1.2. Commercialization of Education and Social Equity

Neoliberalism views education as a service that can be traded in the market, with market competition stimulating efficiency, and innovation, and providing more educational choices. This can improve the quality of education [8]. This statement is in line with the educational equity advocated in the CA, which aims to provide every individual with equal opportunities to realize their potential. Neoliberalism emphasizes the role of market mechanisms in improving the efficiency and quality of educational services, while the CA reminds us of the intrinsic value of education and the importance of individual autonomy. The conversation between these two theories highlights a complex issue: how to enhance the marketization and efficiency of educational services while safeguarding the equity and inclusivity of education.

By incorporating a neoliberal perspective, along with Friedman's (1955) suggestion of an education voucher system and Hayek's (1994) emphasis on market freedom, it is believed that market mechanisms can efficiently allocate educational resources and enhance the quality of education

and students. This ultimately leads to greater satisfaction. The CA can be used to explore how market mechanisms and competition can promote the optimal allocation of educational resources while pursuing individual development capabilities, and consider the efficiency and fairness of educational resource allocation. In this theoretical background, we must discuss the role that policymakers play. From a comprehensive perspective, educational policy design must balance improving efficiency and promoting competition with maintaining educational fairness and individual autonomy. Education is not only a market service but also a crucial means of promoting individuals' all-round development and achieving social justice. Therefore, policymakers must focus not only on popularizing and making education accessible but also consider the incentive role of market mechanisms and the social responsibility of providing equal educational opportunities for all individuals, especially marginalized groups, by effectively utilizing educational resources. To achieve this goal, education policy can explore innovative paths.

It is recommended to introduce private investment in the education field through the Public-Private Partnership model. This will increase the diversity and accessibility of educational resources by allowing competition between schools and providing more school choices. This, in turn, can promote the improvement of education quality. To ensure the quality of education and protect educational equity and accessibility, this diverse education financing mechanism requires strict supervision and quality control mechanisms to prevent erosion by the profit drive in the marketization process [19].

Secondly, market mechanisms should be used to promote innovation in educational services and provide personalized and customized education paths. This promotes competition and diversity in the education market, providing students with a wider range of educational choices. This approach allows students to choose the educational path that best suits them based on their abilities and interests, meeting the needs and potential of different students. The customized educational path is designed with respect for individual differences and concern for each student's comprehensive development [20].

To address potential socioeconomic disparities that may be exacerbated by neoliberal education policies, it is necessary to strengthen social security and support systems. Rawls (1971) proposed providing more educational support and resources, such as scholarships, educational subsidies, and tutoring services, for low-income and disadvantaged groups to eliminate the restrictions on educational opportunities caused by economic barriers. These policies aim to ensure that all people, regardless of their economic or social background, have equal access to high-quality education, promoting a more equitable and inclusive society [21].

By implementing these revision suggestions, an education system can balance efficiency and equity, promoting the all-round development of individuals while valuing educational equity. This comprehensive strategy supports the harmonious development of individual autonomy and overall societal well-being.

4.2. A Critical Analysis of Neoliberalism through the Lens of the Capabilities Approach

Nussbaum (2011, p.18) emphasizes the pluralistic value of education and individual dignity [2]. She argues that the

qualitative differences in the quality of individual life cannot be ignored, which is often overlooked in neoliberal theory that prioritizes market efficiency and individual economic freedom [9]. The CA proposes a broader educational perspective that prioritizes the development of abilities that promote individual dignity and realize personal value, rather than solely focusing on enhancing economic productivity. According to this view, the primary goal of education should be to prepare individuals to become capable members of society, rather than simply meeting the immediate demands of the market.

Additionally, CA emphasizes fairness and social justice. The CA emphasizes the importance of respecting each person as an end in themselves. Basic justice and decency in education should revolve around the question of what each person can do and become [2]. In contrast, neoliberalism focuses mainly on increasing economic growth and enhancing individual consumption power, often ignoring the role of education in promoting the development of individual capabilities and social justice. The CA argues that economic growth alone does not necessarily lead to improvements in health and education [2]. The CA emphasizes the need for education to provide equal opportunities for all individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, to develop their capabilities.

Additionally, it acknowledges the limitations of both social structures and individual choices. Although neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of market freedom and individual choice, Nussbaum (2011, p.26) and Giroux (2005) have criticized this theory for ignoring the restrictions of social structures on individual choice, particularly in relation to marginalized groups [2,10]. This oversight can lead to inequalities that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and undermine the very autonomy that market mechanisms are intended to promote. Nussbaum (2011, p.35) believes that everyone should receive equal respect and attention, offers a more equitable alternative [2]. Therefore, the CA advocates for an education model that prioritizes social equity and individual autonomy. This ensures that educational resources are distributed fairly, allowing all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to realize their full potential. Finally, this essay discusses the role of market mechanisms and the purpose of education. Friedman (1955) and Hayek (1944) suggest that market mechanisms can improve educational efficiency, the CA may place too much emphasis on economic efficiency and overlook the intrinsic value of education [7,8].

By contrasting the viewpoints of neoliberalism and the CA, it becomes clear that the CA provides a more extensive educational philosophy. It not only focuses on economic efficiency and market adaptability, but also pays more attention to the overall development of individuals, social equity and the intrinsic value of education. Therefore, according to the criticism of neoliberalism from the CA, the purpose of education should be to promote the development of individual abilities and achieve social justice, rather than solely satisfying market needs. To further investigate the implementation of CA in education practice, the next section reflects the CA in my English education experience.

5. Application and Reflection of the Capabilities Approach in English Education

When I worked as an English Teaching Assistant in a Chinese educational institution, I discovered that the teaching of English in China places too much emphasis on utilitarian goals. It mainly focuses on exam-oriented education and uses English tests such as College English Band 4/6, IELTS and TOEFL to evaluate students' English proficiency. Schools and parents often view test scores as the primary measure of a student's success in learning English. The second type is career-oriented learning, which focuses on providing students with practical English skills, such as business English, tourism English, etc. These courses focus mainly on oral communication and vocabulary learning in professional fields. Although this approach meets the immediate market demand for English skills, it ignores the broader importance of learning English for overall personal development.

This trend prompted me to reflect deeply on the current purpose of education. During my tenure, I noticed that students were very proficient in English grammar and vocabulary, but had great difficulty in spontaneous conversation, critical thinking and expressing their opinions in English. This shows that there is a big gap in English language teaching between the content skills that teachers teach and the skills that students need.

Inspired by the CA, I have introduced new teaching methods into my teaching practice. I organize a monthly seminar to enable students to participate in discussions on various global issues. I take into account the different interests of the students and encourage them to engage in personalized learning. For example, students interested in literature are guided to explore British classics and modern works, while students interested in science and technology take part in discussions about scientific and technological innovation in English-speaking countries. This approach helps students combine personal interests with language learning, cultivating deeper motivation and a more meaningful educational experience. At the same time, students share their own cultural perspectives to enhance their understanding of other cultures and improve their communication skills. Regular feedback sessions are held on this basis and each week students reflect on their learning progress, challenges and future goals. This approach encourages them to become independent learners and to continually assess their development in the context of wider life skills.

Based on these insights, I advocate for an English education paradigm that goes beyond utilitarian goals. The focus should be on developing students' comprehensive skills and humanistic values, preparing them for global participation and personal growth. The CA emphasizes enhancing individual well-being by offering educational opportunities and fostering capabilities derived from education. That's why I think the goal of CA should be the aim of education.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, the CA was explored as a transformative framework for redefining the aims of education, moving beyond the narrow confines of neoliberal educational theory. While acknowledging the CA's focus on enhancing individual capabilities and fostering inclusive development and social

justice, I have also considered the critiques and challenges of implementing a purely market-driven education system as posited by neoliberalism. This essay has highlighted the commitment of the CA to promoting individual well-being by providing opportunities for education and the cultivation of diverse capabilities that come through education. These foundational principles not only challenge but also extend beyond the limitations of neoliberal educational models, advocating for a holistic vision where education is not solely about economic adaptability but encompasses a broader spectrum of human development and dignity. It is argued that the CA should be embraced as the central aim of educational policy and practice. This approach prioritizes individual well-being, social justice, and the intrinsic worth of education. It ensures that education serves as a pivotal means for individuals to realize their life values and goals, offering a robust alternative to the inefficiencies and inequities inherent in market-driven education systems. In conclusion, integrating the aims of the CA, which are to enhance individual well-being, provide educational opportunities, and foster the development of a wide range of capabilities, into our educational policies and practices presents a comprehensive and equitable vision for the future of education.

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