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A focus on educational choice has social justice consequences - an empirical study informed by Sen's capability approach

Randi Boelskifte Skovhus

This article demonstrates that in Denmark there is considerable focus on educational and career choices during the last year of lower-secondary school, and investigates the possibility of using Amartya Sen's capability approach as a lens to analyse this focus. It is argued that attention to the processes occurring before choices are made is of central importance, as these help to give students a genuine opportunity to choose from a broader range of options. This consideration is important from a social-justice perspective even if students end up choosing what they would have chosen without broader knowledge and reflection.



Introduction

A focus on social justice has strong roots in the history of career guidance thanks to Parsons' *Choosing a Vocation* (Parsons, 1909). In the literature, there are varying views as to how career guidance promotes social justice, if at all. Scholars wonder whether the career guidance field has drifted away from its roots in social justice, focusing instead on interventions primarily aimed at the individual without adequately considering contextual and environmental conditions (Arthur, Collins, McMahon & Marshall, 2009: 22). They also speculate as to whether career education practices 'rarely aim at enhancing equality of opportunity, of lessening social inequity or enhancing collective development actions' (Guichard, 2001: 166). Much of the literature on career development and social justice is primarily conceptual in nature and gives little attention to the challenges and successes

experienced by career guidance practitioners. We need to focus on social justice in relation to, rather than detached from, practice (Arthur, Collins, Marshall & McMahon, 2013: 137; Irving, 2015), and to give due attention to what is actually to be done in practice (Hooley, 2015: 13), based on empirical observations (Berthet, 2010: 85).

One of the roles of youth guidance centres in Denmark involves supporting students in lower-secondary education (Danish grades 7 – 9/10, ages 14-16/17) in choosing upper-secondary education programmes. In the evaluations, surveys, research reports and articles produced on these youth guidance centres there is no focus on researching social justice issues (Skovhus & Thomsen, 2015). This article explores how career guidance unfolds in two Danish lower-secondary schools and how the students perceive the guidance activities which are offered to them. The empirical examples are discussed using Amartya Sen's capability approach as an analytic lens.

Initially the capability approach was not intended to be a theory about social justice. Sen's starting point was to find other ways to evaluate well-being, poverty and living standards than using an income approach or a utility approach. Sen argues that we should focus instead on what people are actually able to be and do, on the freedom they have to choose and live a kind of life they have reason to value. This is what Sen calls 'capabilities', a concept that will be explained in more detail later on in this article. Even though the basis of the theory was not social justice, it has become important in research and discussions of justice in relation to career guidance and education, see for example (Berthet, 2010; Bonal and Tarabini, 2016;

Galliott and Graham, 2014; Lanzi, 2004; Robertson, 2015; Saito, 2003; Sen, 2009; Unterhalter, Ladwig & Jeffrey, 2014; Unterhalter, Vaughan & Walker, 2007).

In the article, I argue that when considering career guidance in relation to social justice and capabilities, it is important to adopt a perspective which covers more than choices of education alone.

Methodology

The empirical studies which are the basis for this article formed part of my PhD research into career education and guidance in lower-secondary education in Denmark. In Denmark, compulsory education begins in pre-school grade (age 6) and ends after ninth grade (age 16). Tenth grade is optional. Students then choose between vocational and upper-secondary education. Guidance practitioners employed by youth guidance centres provide guidance in relation to this transition.

The empirical study was conducted in two ninth-grade classes for a total of 46 days spread over the whole school year. The classes were in two different schools connected to two different youth guidance centres. 47 students, two career guidance practitioners and six teachers were included in the research.

The methods used were interviews with students and career guidance practitioners as well as participant observation of guidance activities, lessons and students' breaks.

In this article I present one case about a student called Carl (not his real name) to demonstrate the focus on choice which pervades the empirical findings.

Sen, on whose theory this article is based, stresses the importance of operationalising the capability approach in a practical sense to assess justice (Berthet, Dechézelles, Gouin and Simon, 2009: 3), but without dictating which method should be used to conduct the work (Berthet et al., 2009: 20). The methods described above were chosen to gain insight into how career guidance in Danish schools unfolds, into how it makes sense for the persons involved, and into their subjective reasons for action.

Before I present the key findings, it is important to provide a brief account of the central aspects of Sen's capability approach.

The capability approach and social justice

Amartya Sen is a Nobel prize-winning Indian economist and philosopher who has worked in the United Kingdom and the United States for many years. In 1979 Sen presented a theory called the capability approach (Sen, 1979). He points out that most theories about social justice argue for the equality of something, but that this 'something' can vary. Traditionally, in relation to equality, there is a focus on utilities (concentrating on individual happiness or pleasure), or income, wealth or resources, which Sen calls 'goods' (Sen, 1992). Sen's starting point for the capability approach is that the critical question is not whether we need equality. The really critical question is 'equality of what?' (Sen, 1979, 2009: 293). Sen points out that the answer to this question is capability, where capability is 'a person's *actual* ability to do the different things that she values doing' (Sen, 2009: 253). The focus is on human lives and not just the goods they possess or have access to. Sen highlights that by changing the focus from the means of living to the actual opportunities people have, the capability approach represents a fairly radical change in the evaluative work on justice (Sen, 2009: 253).

Freedom is closely connected to human capabilities. In the capability approach, there is not just a focus on what people succeed in doing. There is also a focus on the freedom people actually have to choose between different kinds of lives (Sen, 2009: 18). Freedom to choose contributes to our well-being, but Sen points out that the importance of freedom goes beyond well-being. Freedom has an intrinsic value since 'being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life' (Sen, 2009: 18). Freedom is valuable because more freedom gives a person more opportunity to pursue his or her objectives. Another central aspect concerns the process of choice, e.g. that 'we are not being forced into some state because of constraints imposed by others' (Sen, 2009: 228).

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If we understand freedom in a narrow sense, it is sufficient to be concerned with what a person ends up with. But if we join Sen in regarding the existence of options and freedom to choose as important, we also need to focus on the process and the way a person reaches a choice (Sen, 2009: 230).

It is important to mention that Sen does not represent the understanding that people's choices are detached. He points out that rather than choosing in a free and detached manner, people are profoundly influenced by their environment. In addition, what people value is influenced by their surroundings (Robeyns, 2005: 102; Unterhalter et al., 2007: 5). Among other things, that is why it becomes interesting to focus on career guidance as one aspect of the students' surroundings, as well as discussing the role of career guidance in a social justice perspective.

The capability approach is relevant for example for poverty analysis in developing countries (Robeyns, 2005: 101; Sen, 1987: 109), but the theory is not restricted to the analysis of poverty and deprivation. It can also serve as a framework for project evaluations or the measurement of inequality in affluent communities (Robeyns, 2005: 101).

Before I move on, it seems fair to mention that Sen's theory has been criticised in various ways. Wells (n.d.) has listed most of these critiques. In this context only some of the main ones are mentioned. Some, for instance, have argued the theory does not sufficiently explicate what is meant by and what constitutes a capability (Williams, 1987); others have claimed that it is necessary to discuss and make a list concerning which capabilities are important or trivial (Nussbaum, 2003), or that the capability approach in general is under-theorised. Additionally there has been critique of the lack of focus on the 'power relations that cause and reproduce underdevelopment through national and political institutions' (Navarro, 2000: 661). It has also been pointed out that there is a tendency for the capability approach to focus on individuals at the expense of structures that inhibit personal flourishing (Bonal & Tarabini, 2016). It is important to notice the structural conditions existing in school and career guidance. Graham and Harwood warn against using the capability approach naively, because it can raise the temptation 'to focus simply on building the

individual capacity of students without recognising what structural and political barriers impede their participation' (Graham & Harwood, 2011: 137).

These critiques of the capability approach seem to be well founded. Even so, I found the theory useful when carrying out a qualitative analysis of selected empirical data from my PhD research on youth career guidance, largely because it provides perspectives on the focus on choice, which is conspicuous in the data material. The focus on choice is not new. In 2004 the OECD found that career services 'too often fail to develop people's career management skills, but focus upon immediate decisions' (OECD, 2004: 3). The analysis of my empirical findings outlined below shows that this may still be the case with youth career guidance and associated activities.

Focusing on choice

In Denmark, education is free. This includes not only compulsory education, but also upper-secondary education, vocational education and higher education. Every Dane over the age of 18 is entitled to a study allowance for his or her further education – regardless of income. In theory, this means that young people can choose which educational programme they like, as long as they are assessed as being ready for it and as long as they meet the requirements of a certain level of marks if admission is restricted or regulated.

In lower-secondary school there are various mandatory career guidance activities, such as 'bridge-building activities' in which the students visit educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2014), and some optional activities, such as short internships.

Now I will introduce a student named Carl from one of the classes involved in my research. At the age of 12 Carl decided that he would like to become a mechanic. For a couple of years he worked after school in a garage. In the eighth grade he went on a bridge-building visit to the mechanical engineering vocational school. He enjoyed this visit and afterwards said he was sure he wanted to be a mechanic. In his tenth-grade class, the plan is that all the students should visit various vocational programmes. Carl is not interested in these visits. His mother calls the school and tells

them that Carl will do an internship in a garage while the other students visit the various vocational programmes. Carl tells me he cannot see the point in visiting the other programmes because ‘they’re not for me, because I know I’m not going to be any of those things.’

The issues that arise in this case relate not to Carl alone, but to many of the students involved. Most of the students primarily value the career guidance activities in relation to whether the activity, in their opinion, is directly relevant for them in making a choice of educational programme. The students who were not yet clear about what to choose after lower-secondary school considered it very valuable for them to visit educational institutions in the range of educational pathways they were considering. But if the students had already chosen which vocational or upper-secondary educational programme they wished to attend after lower-secondary school, they rarely thought it was relevant or meaningful to participate in career guidance activities such as visiting an educational institution. This perspective is connected to self-understanding, which is an issue which I discuss in my PhD dissertation (Skovhus, n.d.). Using the capability approach, this focus on the end process of choice can be related to what Sen calls ‘functionings’. As Robeyns (2011) notes, ‘functionings are ‘beings and doings’, that is, various states of human beings and activities that a person can undertake [...] Capabilities are a person’s real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings. Thus, while travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. The distinction between functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible, in other words, between achievements, on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable opportunities from which one can choose, on the other’.

The analysis shows that the focus on choice is connected, among other things, to the practice of the career guidance practitioner and teacher involved. When they introduce a guidance activity to the students, such as a visit to an educational institution, they mainly justify why the students should participate by saying that the students need to join so they can find out whether they would like to choose this specific educational programme after lower-secondary

school. Many of these career guidance activities are isolated activities for which the students are not prepared, and no follow-up initiatives are implemented either.

Preparation and follow-up could help the students to consider more carefully what they might learn from the activity in a career learning perspective, even if they are initially certain that the activity in question (for example a specific programme of education which they are going to visit) is not relevant for them. The adoption of a wider perspective might broaden the student’s perspective and help them to think more deeply about and understand the educational and vocational system, how things work and the kind of social system of which they are part. This might in turn help them to make good choices in a longer perspective as well – alone and together. I will relate aspects like these (the potential for career learning in an activity, reflection, broader perspectives, and the support that can be provided for deeper consideration of the alternatives) to capabilities.

Capability and a broader perspective than choice

It is not surprising that in the last year of compulsory school young people and their guidance practitioners focus on which education pathway to choose. The case of Carl shows that some students have actually already made their choice of education long before grade nine.

The capability approach is centred on freedom and opportunity. As noted above, Sen points out that being able to reason and to have the freedom to choose between different things that you value doing is central. There is a focus on people’s actual opportunities to choose to live different lives, not exclusively on the end-process of a choice. In other words, the focus is placed not only on which course of education a young person ends up choosing, starting and finally completing. The process before the choice is central. With this in mind, and based on Sen, I argue that it is not sufficient to focus on choices of educational programmes by young people. It is also vital to support capabilities – which in this context means opening options, supporting reflection, and giving students a

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genuine opportunity to make other choices. In other words, it is important to support the students to find out which programmes of education they can actually choose, to support them in reflecting on what they value and considering their actual options – not only to help them make the right choice, but also to contribute to social justice (with justice being understood by Sen as the freedom to choose between various ways to live, including education and vocation). This is a crucial aspect even if it turns out that young people make the same choices they would have made in the first place without any broader knowledge about (or experience of) education programmes and vocations.

It is important to remember that the choice of upper-secondary education programmes is only the first of myriads of career-related choices the person must take throughout life. In lower-secondary education, it is important to build a base that can be developed continuously. The young person will need this base when he or she chooses what to do after vocational or upper-secondary education – and again and again throughout life. As mentioned above, the empirical findings give reason to believe that students' opportunities for building capabilities are reduced when they (or the professionals who work with them) focus overwhelmingly on choice.

Discussion and conclusion

The capability approach offers an analytical toolbox (Berthet et al., 2009: 2), selected parts of which have been used in this article. The approach draws our attention to additional ways of understanding social justice – alternative paths instead of climbing the social ladder, for instance (Hansen, 2015).

The empirical data shows that a narrow focus on choice as young people in the last year of lower-secondary school choose between subsequent educational programmes can adversely affect their motivation to participate and engage in career-choice activities – activities which could contribute to capability development. Based on the capability approach, it is argued that it is important from a social-justice perspective to give young people real options to make different choices, for instance by providing

them with knowledge of a broad range of educational opportunities and the chance to experience and reflect on them. This is the case even if students end up choosing what they would have chosen without broader knowledge and reflection.

In continuation of the analysis above, some questions can be raised about the capability approach. Questions such as how much capability (for instance connected to knowledge of and reflection on various educational options) is required before we can regard a choice as being genuinely free. And whether it is possible for the range of capabilities of a young person to be so broad that it becomes too difficult to make a choice and turns out to be a problem for him or her. Despite questions like these, I wish to stress that the capability approach contributes relevant perspectives when we want to understand career guidance practice in a social justice perspective.

Sultana points out that it is important not to overestimate the role career guidance can play. But it is also reasonable to argue that career guidance can make a positive difference in the lives of citizens, possibly contributing to equalising life-chances rather than just reproducing social class destinies (Sultana, 2014: 317). Based on Sen's framework, it seems fair to argue that career guidance has the potential in theory to contribute to social justice and increased capability, but that the analysis of career guidance activities in lower-secondary school reveals that whether and how career guidance actually succeeds in contributing is a matter for empirical examination.



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