

## **Educational Leadership and the Capabilities Approach: Evidence from Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

School leaders play a central role in affecting the educational development of the young people for whom they have responsibility. This is especially the case where school leaders are operating in challenging low-income environments. This paper argues that a focus on Sen's notions of individual agency and freedom are a necessary but not a sufficient factor in the conversion of capabilities into functionings for these school leaders. This is done through using the Capabilities Approach as a lens through which to carry out a retrospective analysis and evaluation of the activities of a group of primary school headteachers in Ghana involved in a UK Government-funded project focused on education quality. The paper argues that headteachers with the capability of initiating change in the education process in their schools are unlikely to act in this way unless they feel that they have permission to do so. It is also important that headteachers feel that they are working within a context and an environment where acting in ways which aim to improve pupil learning is seen as central to their role. This kind of supportive context for school leaders (and for other educational practitioners) cannot be divorced from a policy environment which sanctions such activities, and, hence, it is argued that such a context is crucial to policy developments which seek to establish and sustain the core capabilities which are at the heart of Nussbaum's (2011) essentialist approach. The paper also brings to the foreground the tensions that exist between the notion of individuals being free to make choices about what they have reason to value, on the one hand, and the implications that these choices have for the freedoms of other individuals with whom they are connected to make such choices. Finally, it is argued in the paper that the action research approach used in the Leadership & Management Project in Ghana, allied to a positive policy context, provides both the sensitivity to context and a practice-oriented focus which can enable school leaders to bring about the conversion of their individual capabilities into functionings.

## **Introduction**

School leaders working in challenging contexts in low-income countries face numerous struggles. They are often working in an environment which places great emphasis upon their accountability within a hierarchical chain of command and, although much play is made of policy imperatives which stress decentralisation (Kathyola, 2011), the day-to-day reality is often one in which they lack the agency to take decisions without getting approval. Issues about the uncertainty of their role abound, and focus on whether they should be regarded as civil servants charged with carrying out policy or instructional leaders with a concern for the educational development of their pupils (Oplatka, 2004). Additionally, they face personnel challenges in terms of inadequate teacher supply, especially in remote rural areas, poorly trained or untrained teaching staff, and persistent teacher absenteeism (Abadzi, 2007; Bourdon et al, 2007; Halsey Rogers & Vegas, 2009; Kamunde, 2010; Mulkeen, 2010).

The issues presented in this paper suggest that there is an alternative, more positive, approach that can be utilised when thinking about the role of school leaders in low-income countries and the impacts that they can have upon pupil learning within their schools. A focus upon the use of the Capabilities Approach as a lens through which to investigate school leader actions provides an opportunity to identify ways in which the employment of an action research approach towards school improvement can bring about the conversion of school leader 'capabilities' or potentialities into school leader functionings or actualities. Within the context of the pursuit of 'Education for All' and, more recently, of 'Learning for All' (International Bank for Reconstruction & Development,

2011), this has the potential to energise school leaders and to move the demands for educational improvement away from a concentration on an increased provision of resources towards a focus on the learning value derived from the use of these resources. In doing this, it provides opportunities to impact upon the capabilities of both school leaders and their pupils.

### **The Capability Approach**

The concern to understand human development within the context of the increased economic penetrations across national boundaries seen over recent decades has been greatly aided by the emergence of the concept of ‘capability’, developed by Amartya Sen in the late 1970s. This was developed as a way of looking beyond a narrowly utilitarian approach which had come to dominate economic and political thinking following the establishment of the Bretton Woods system in 1944. This system had placed an emphasis upon the supremacy of the dollar within the global economy and gave prominence to policies which centred upon economic growth as a talisman of effective government and as a marker for the quality of life for citizens. As a counter to this approach, Sen ‘insisted on the importance of *capabilities*, what people are actually able to do and to be’ (Nussbaum, 2003, p 33, original emphasis). This notion identifies the *potential* that individuals have to act in ways which are of value to them, and it has been further developed into what has been called the ‘capabilities approach’ (or CA), which has become a framework within which social, political and economic factors are analysed so as to investigate and analyse the nature of an individual’s well-being (Deneulin & McGregor, 2009). This is seen to go beyond a focus on utility and resources, and places emphasis upon the freedom and ability of individuals to make choices about their lives on the basis of what they value (Sen, 1979). Within an education context, this move from quantity and resources towards quality and impact mirrors the move from the enthusiastic support for Millennium Development Goals which manifested itself in the early 2000s, with an emphasis on increasing the numbers of children accessing primary education, towards a more sophisticated approach which has increasingly focused upon the nature and quality of the learning that takes place once the children are attending school (International Bank for Reconstruction & Development, 2011). This paper will argue that the centrality which Sen places upon the freedom of the individual to choose on the basis of what they have reason to value becomes problematic when applied to the situation facing young children and the adults, such as headteachers, with whom they have contact in the context of their schooling.

A focus which goes beyond giving centrality to economic activity, resources and human capital development is one that has many precedents before Sen’s critique of this utilitarian view point. Nussbaum (1992) points out that Marx, for example, writing in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, argued that ‘It will be seen how in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy comes the rich human being and rich human need. The rich human being is simultaneously the human being in need of totality of human life-activities—the man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as need’ (qtd Nussbaum, 1992, p 202). Nussbaum (2011) has also argued that Aristotle was the earliest Western proponent of the Capabilities Approach, when he put forward the view that ‘the flourishing human life’ (op cit, p 125) should be the basis on which political leaders decided on policy and social development. A clear statement of this focus can be seen in his comment that ‘it is evident that the best political order is that arrangement in accordance with which anyone whatsoever might do very well and live a flourishing life’ (*Politica*, 1324a23-25, qtd Nussbaum, 2007, p 5). In summary, Aristotle took the view that:

‘the pursuit of wealth is not an appropriate overall goal for a decent society. Wealth is but a means, and the human values that should guide political planning would be utterly debased and deformed were wealth to be understood as an end in itself’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p 126).

Sen has given a major focus to individual autonomy and the importance to extending the freedom and agency of individuals to make choices which move them away from ‘capability deprivation’. As such he can be seen to be located within the tradition of libertarianism, with its concern to hold personal liberty as the central organising principle of society. This concern for, and focus on, the individual, can also be linked to the notion of ‘postmodernism’ in which overarching ‘grand narratives’ which seek to explain and give meaning to all aspects of human existence have become devalued, with a concomitant turn towards identifying the freedoms and desires of individuals as the locus of concern within social organisation. In this area, North (2006) has cogently identified the tensions within which Sen operates:

‘The liberal notion of individual autonomy undoubtedly opens up the life chances available to individuals because they are no longer obligated to conform to social and legal norms based on caste and class differentiations. However, it also has the potential to obscure unequal power relations that result in the oppression and domination of individuals and groups and, thus, to undermine or thwart political endeavours aimed at advancing solidarity, the interests of oppressed groups, and the transformation of society’ (p 517).

The tensions alluded to by North (2006) indicate the difficulties which the notion of ‘individual autonomy’ faces at the interface between individuals and the social groups within which they exist, and the implications that these have for the emergence and implementation of social action at the group level and, also, of policy at the wider, community or national levels. In particular, they delineate the fault-line within the thinking of Sen and the increasing imperatives that he has faced in terms of exploring the relationships between the choices which individuals make and the impact of these choices upon others. The potentiality which capabilities embody for the individual would however, of itself, provide no more than a heuristic device for analysing the ways in which individuals *might* act in directions which they value. So, in this connection, Nussbaum has suggested that: ‘The capabilities would be pointless and idle if they were never used and people slept all through life’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p 25). Thus, the notion of ‘functionings’, defined as ‘the active realization of one or more capabilities...(and) are beings and doings that are the outgrowths or realizations of capabilities’ (op cit, p 25) has become a further central tenet of the Capabilities Approach. In this sense, the Capabilities Approach extends inevitably into the areas of social action, since the functionings of any individual will impinge on, and have implications for, other individuals within, and beyond, their social network. Sen’s work does, it is true, illustrate a keen awareness that an over-reliance upon individualism neglects the social dynamics of everyday life. Indeed, one of his earliest concerns (1979) was to pose the question of the purpose of the choices that individuals make, together with a sense that abstract individual freedom alone, based on those aspects of life which are seen to be valuable by individuals, is in itself insufficient. Indeed, in their study of development in India, Dréze & Sen (2002, p 6) have stressed that ‘the options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others, and on what the state and other institutions do’. The concepts of freedom and liberty are retained by identifying capabilities, rather than functionings, as appropriate goals for collective political action and policy which set the contexts in which individuals can make choices (Nussbaum, 2011), thus leaving space for individuals to exercise, or not to

exercise, those choices. The concern here is to provide individuals with a range of opportunities which will then enable them to exercise their freedom to make choices which enhance their potentiality and move them from capabilities to functionings.

Additionally, Nussbaum (1992) has gone beyond the presentation of capabilities and functionings as worthy ends in themselves and has argued for the importance of an 'essentialist' and normative view that 'human life has certain central defining features' (1992, p 205) which she has gone on to define in terms of capabilities and functionings (2011) which are seen to be of such overriding importance in human experience that lacking them, or choosing to act in ways which negates them, entails a loss of essential humanity (Nussbaum, 2011). Central to this view is an idea that 'is frankly universalist... That is, it asks us to focus on what is common to all, rather than on differences...and to see some capabilities and functions as more central, more at the core of human life, than others (Nussbaum, 1995, p 63).

### **The Capability Approach and Education**

Within the Capability Approach, the central importance of education has been clearly examined (Walker, 2005; Unterhalter, 2009). The seeds of this thinking go back even further, beyond the emergence of the Capabilities Approach in the late 1970s. It is noticeable, for example, that Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* published in 1776, argued that:

'A man, without the proper use of the intellectual faculties of a man is, if possible, more contemptible than even a coward, and seems to be mutilated and deformed in a still more essential part of the character of human nature' (2008 edition, p 436),

and this view, of the need to develop 'the intellectual faculties' of individuals through education, has been a thread running through much of the thinking about 'capabilities'.

Education has, thus, been seen as an enabling process, which provides human beings with the opportunities to have experiences which can help them develop functionings. As Sen (1999) has noted, education can have value in terms of providing individuals with developed capabilities which, in turn, allow them to exert greater freedom in terms of how they use these capabilities. Nussbaum (2011, p 33) has also argued strongly for including education as a central capability in its own right, and has talked of 'senses, imagination and thought...(being) cultivated by an adequate education' as being a core aspect of what is meant to be human. The end result of this, again according to Nussbaum (2007, p 15), would be the emergence of 'a nation of free choosers, so it matters greatly that they have had the opportunity to learn and develop in ways that open a meaningful world of choice for them'. As will be seen later in this paper, this aligns closely with ideas of social justice which permeated much of the educational improvement activity of the Ghanaian school leaders. The right to education, above and beyond access to schools, has been seen as having the potential to have far-reaching consequences for pupils in terms of offering opportunities to convert capabilities into functioning (Kalantry et al, 2010), and this is especially crucial in relation to the issues facing the education of disadvantaged groups in many low-income countries, where the impact of providing effective schooling for girls, for example, has been well documented (Tembon & Fort, 2008).

Such a view of education within the Capabilities Approach has clear implications for the way in which it is perceived and the ways in which the quality of education is judged to be effective. Running parallel to Sen's original approach in the late 1970s (eg Sen, 1979), which argued in favour of using

more than economic indices as a measure of development, education within the Capabilities Approach seeks to go beyond a focus on inputs and resources, and looks to concentrate on their impact in raising the 'capability bar' for individuals. As Tikly & Barrett (2011, p 7) have suggested: '... a key role for a good quality education becomes one of supporting the development of autonomy and the ability to make choices in later life...'

The issue faced by the EdQual Leadership & Management Project (see below) in the context of the Capabilities Approach, one that pervades much of the discussion related to the CA and education, focused upon the extent to which the improvement activities could be seen to have an impact upon the learning of the pupils themselves, as well as upon the adult school leaders who were operating in this area. The debate about young children and the Capabilities Approach is a lively one (Biggeri et al, 2010; Clark & Eisenhuth, 2010; Dejaeghere & Lee, 2011) but it is helpful in this context to take account of the concerns that writers such as Macleod (2010) have expressed. The argument here is that 'childhood is a special phase of life to which it is difficult to extend the agency assumption. Young children lack the moral powers constitutive of mature agency and cannot therefore assume responsibilities for the adoption and pursuit of their ends' (p 180). Further support for this view has been provided by Brighouse & Unterhalter (2010) in their recent discussion which seeks to tease out the arguments surrounding the relationship between education and the Capabilities Approach. In ways which align closely with the views of Nussbaum, they have argued that education should act as a means to enable young children to develop the qualities and attitudes which will allow them to use their increased intellectual freedom and agency to make judgements related to those things which they value. As such, they have argued that '...the educator, and even the policy maker, often does, indeed, know better than the child what is good for her, and even when she does not she bears the responsibility for making judgements about what path the child should take (Brighouse & Unterhalter, 2010, p 206). It was within that kind of context and framework that the headteachers within the Project were operating—they were acting in ways which they anticipated would bring about improvements in the learning potential of the pupils in their care, within a policy context that was influenced by the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals agendas.

### **The Capability Approach and the School**

Little work has been done on the specific relationship between schools as organisations whose core focus is the education of young people and, hence as argued above, the development of an educational environment in which capabilities can be converted into functionings, on the one hand, and the Capability Approach as a means of explaining the actions of individuals within that organisation. One of the most incisive studies has been undertaken by Tao (2009) in her investigation of the relationship between the Capabilities Approach and school improvement interventions in Tanzania. The starting point for this exploration was a concern to move beyond a focus upon the ways in which the Capability Approach could impact upon pupils and to look at the relationship between this Approach and the adult workers within the school, that is the teachers. Looking at this through the lens of 'equality' and 'capability deprivation', Tao argued: 'The parallel (is) that schools can be contexts for inequality—much like the poverty-stricken village—but instead the teachers and pupils are its deprived residents' (2009, p 5). This resonates particularly strongly with the approach undertaken within the Leadership & Management Project adumbrated below: while Tao (op cit, p 5) talks of the focus of the Capabilities Approach within the whole-school context being '...the improved well-being of the teachers and students (via the expansion of their valued

capabilities...’, a similar focus, but this time upon the school leaders, was at the heart of the Project. The strength of the CA as a lens through which to examine school improvement initiatives is that it places importance upon the personal and social context in which individuals operate and which have an impact upon their ability to convert capabilities into functionings. The central importance of environmental and contextual factors was delineated by Sen as early as 1999 in *Development as Freedom*, where it was argued that:

‘What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people’s freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities’ (p 5).

The centrality of the relationship between the individual and the social organisations of which they are members, highlighted here by Sen (and also by Robeyns, 2006), has also been examined by Tao (2009), in her study of schooling in Tanzania. Drawing upon Robeyns (2006) she presented a framework which involves three ‘conversion factors’ (page iii) which can impact upon an individual’s ability to convert capabilities into functionings that they have reason to value. These factors focus upon the ‘personal’, the ‘environmental’ and the ‘social’. The core issue here is, as Tao suggests:

‘The simple presence of an input will not guarantee its use. Thus, the conversion factors affecting it need to be arranged so that capabilities are expanded (p 8)’.

As will be seen in the examination of leadership activity within the case study school presented below, the input, in terms of workshop activity and the provision of school improvement tools, were not in themselves able to bring about any significant change in the conversion potential for the headteacher. The combination of and the balance between the ingredients in the school improvement mix proved crucial in the conversion of the capabilities of the school leader into functionings which could be of benefit to pupils at the school.

### **The EdQual Leadership & Management Project**

The author was a researcher in the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID)-funded EdQual Project, which was a Research Programme Consortium (RPC) on Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries (EdQual, 2009; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The EdQual Project focused improving the quality of school and classroom processes in low-income countries in Africa and, in particular, upon exploring ways in which the education process could have a positive impact upon the ability of young people to learn. The foci of the Project ranged from the use of ICT in classrooms in Rwanda through to issues related to the ‘language of instruction’ in Tanzania and the role of headteachers in Ghana. The Project involved cooperative working between two Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom (the University of Bristol and the University of Bath) and a group of universities located in Africa. A core concern within the Project was that leadership of individual themes was located within the African universities. The intention of the Project was to investigate classroom practice and learning activities which flowed from the Millennium Development Goal concerns related to education. These concerns had emphasised increasing overall access to primary education and, also, achieving gender parity at this stage of schooling. EdQual’s focus was to move beyond the concerns about getting children into school and to concentrate upon

teaching and learning processes which sought to enhance pupil learning. Given the nature of this agenda, a key imperative was to work with school colleagues and pupils who were facing significant forms of disadvantage, whether that was in terms of school infrastructure, the nature of school personnel and/or issues related to pupil attendance and motivation. Central to the thinking within the Project was a desire to examine these issues in the light of questions of social justice (Bosu et al, 2011; Fraser, 1995). This approach informed the direction of the activities carried out by Project partners between 2005 and 2010. As the Project progressed, it became increasingly clear within the thinking of Project team members that the Capability Approach provided a fruitful framework against which to examine and evaluate the range of activities carried out under the umbrella of the Project. As such, our retrospective thinking made clear that at the heart of the EdQual Project was a concern with the expansion and conversion of young peoples' capabilities (they have come to school) into functionings (eg they have improved in reading or maths).

Located within the overall EdQual Project, the Leadership & Management (L&M) Large-Scale Project sought to examine the capacity that school leaders have to bring about changes which are likely to improve educational quality in schools located in disadvantaged circumstances. The Leading & Management Project was located in two African countries, Ghana and Tanzania. This paper draws upon the experiences within the Project in Ghana.

The initial aim of the L&M Project was to see in what ways the headteachers could bring about realistic and manageable changes in their schools so as to improve the quality of pupil experience and pupil learning. Towards the final stages of the Project, it became clear that, through the use of a Capability Approach lens, this meant that the work of the L&M Project had been to ensure that the embedded 'capabilities' that these school leaders had to bring about educational change could be translated into 'functionings' through which they could act to encourage change within their institutions. As such, then, an analysis of the process of working with these primary school headteachers in ways which sought to surface their capabilities and convert them into functionings draws attention to an issue which lies at the core of the debates surrounding the implications for action and practice of the Capabilities Approach—how can the individual's desire for personal autonomy and space in which to make choices about things they have reason to value be related to a concern for the implications for others of the choices which that individual might make? This question is especially sharpened when the issues concern the relationship between the Capabilities Approach and young children (Biggeri et al, 2010). The central focus of the L&M Project was upon the development of school leaders so as to enable them to bring about changes in their schools which could improve the potential for learning of pupils. As such, the emphasis was upon the role of the adults within the school community and on the ways in which the actions of the headteachers could fashion and change school contexts so as to improve the learning opportunities for the young children for which they had responsibility. Thus, it can be seen that this approach took cognisance of the contextual realities of power, authority and disproportionate opportunities for personal autonomy between adults and children found within these primary schools in Ghana. The use of a Capabilities Approach lens through which to view the actions of these headteachers highlights the difficult questions which underpin the attempts to connect the Capability Approach with concrete activities which seek to narrow what Sen (1999) has called the 'capability space'. At one and the same time, this addresses the issue of the tensions between the freedoms of individual pupils to make choices about what they have reason to value, on the one side, and the desire to provide



environments, determined essentially by adults, in which those same young people have opportunities to develop what Nussbaum (2011, p 33) has called the central capability of:

‘senses, imagination, and thought [which emerges through] being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training’.

Thus, as will be seen through the example of School A (below), the interventionist approaches developed by the Project headteachers often involved what could be seen, in retrospect, as a violation of the individual freedoms of pupils to choose what they had reason to value. In the same light, though, these interventions did enable the headteachers to make choices about what they themselves had reason to value in terms of providing contexts in which the learning opportunities of their pupils could be improved. In this sense, the work within the Project can be seen to reflect the Sen’s view that ‘the way we try to address practical problems must reflect their underlying complexity rather than attempt to wish it away’ (Wells, 2011, p 7).

Central to the ethos of the EdQual Project was the use of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (James et al, 2007; Noffke & Somekh, 2009). Such an approach to development had been introduced in the 1970s and has since become a key tool in the area of community development. At its core, PAR ‘involves bringing people from various social and political contexts and backgrounds to identify, investigate and take appropriate action on conditions that affect them as community members’ (Duraiappah et al, 2005, p 16). PAR attempts to work against the traditional top-down approach to research by encouraging those experiencing a situation regarded as problematic to work on gathering data on the issue and analysing this data in ways which enable them to take action to manage or improve the situation that they face. The location of project leadership within in-country Universities symbolised this approach within the EdQual Project. Within the L&M Project, this involved a deliberate choice to focus on the role of headteachers and to develop their capacity to work, where appropriate, with parents, local chiefs and other members of their community to develop ways in which they could enhance the learning potential of pupils at their schools. Hence, the approach was one which worked on a twin track of developing headteachers and, through their interventions, their school pupils. The headteachers would be working on developing and implementing actions within their school settings which would enable pupils to move from ‘capability’ to ‘functioning’ in areas such as language ability and mathematics, an approach which aligns closely with Nussbaum’s view of a central capability of ‘senses, imagination, and thought...informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but not limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p 33). At the same time, the headteachers themselves would be developing their own sense of agency and converting their leadership capabilities into leadership functionings. The deliberate focus on an Action Research approach was driven, therefore, by a number of allied issues which coalesced around notions of school leader empowerment, capacity development and an allied focus on functionings. Farah & Jaworski (2006) have argued powerfully for the integration of an Action Research approach as a means of taking a systematic and evaluative stance towards the educational development process in order to bring about improved learning among pupils. This view has been echoed by Nkomo (2000), who fore-grounded the need for ‘the human sciences in a development context (to) be informed by a critical and analytical disposition’ (p 52). The need for critical analysis of practice was seen as the

basic groundwork upon which was to be built a desire to find ways of improving headteacher agency and practice and, hence, their functionings, by using 'the reflective process of inquiry and knowledge generation to generate new practices' (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p 18). This approach resonates well with the view of action research elaborated by Stenhouse (1978), who identified the importance of teachers developing research case studies of their own practice as a means of contributing towards the generation of educational policy. Such an approach can clearly be seen as being nested within the broader umbrella of 'school self-evaluation' (MacBeath, 1999) but seeks to extend this by providing clear building blocks which can spur on the emergence of the capacity of school leaders to develop a critically reflective stance towards school improvement through action.

Allied to this was a determined view to develop synergies of research collaboration between school practitioners and colleagues from Higher Education Institutions in Ghana and the United Kingdom so as to enable practitioners to redress what is often seen as an imbalance of power between institutions and practitioners from the North and the South. The attempt here was to work within Nussbaum's central capability of 'affiliation', and treating individual practitioners in Ghana, whether working within a University or a school context, as 'a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others' (Nussbaum, 2011, p 34). There was a clear overlap here with what Appadurai (2001) has called 'globalization from below', where 'new forms of dialogue' between school practitioners, academics and policy makers emerge from the reflection and actions taken at the school level. In many ways, the approach used within the Project bore similarities to the notions of 'remodelling' that Salleh (2006) talks of in his account of the action research process within a Singaporean context. He reflects upon the initial constraints encountered resulting, firstly, from a tradition of accepting top-down policies and directives, which can have a deleterious impact upon teachers' desire to develop professional agency and capability and, secondly, from a culture and accountability environment which deterred teachers from taking risks in their educational activities or even from acknowledging that positive lessons could be learnt from mistakes as well as from successes. The prevalent accountability atmosphere encountered within the project in Ghana bore witness to the strength and dominance of these ideas, and the negative impact upon capability development which they embodied.

The schools within the L&M Project were, with one exception (an all-through school for the deaf in Ghana), all primary schools. A clear focus of the work done within the area of school leadership was upon equity and social justice for pupils living within these disadvantaged settings (Fraser, 2008; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Central to this was a view of justice which:

'...requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2008, p 16).

Additionally, the precise spotlight was on the ways in which the actions of school leadership could operate and impact on pupil learning in these areas. There is much in this approach which resonates with the focus on 'managing and supporting the teaching and learning programme' (Day et al, 2007, p xii), seen as one of the central claims of effective school leadership.

Such a notion of equity embodies what Oxenham (2005, p 70) has called 'reasonableness and impartiality in providing the opportunity to learn' and, hence, clearly overlaps with the notion of being able to convert capabilities in the area of education into functionings. Such a view of equity is

very similar to that embodied, for example, in Article 25(1) of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana. Here it is recognised that government has a prime responsibility to ensure the equitable provision of education and, by implication, the opportunity to learn. Yet, inequities abound in educational systems especially in developing countries (Fairbain, 2009). The reason for this state of affairs may not necessarily be that the government is not interested in addressing problems of inequity, but probably because local initiatives are often not forthcoming to help the over-burdened governments to solve such problems. The work done within the project schools was an attempt to develop ways of working that will enable school leaders to have a higher degree of agency with regard to what they value so as to enable the energies they expend through their functionings to bring about change within their schools. The parallels with the context in which the Capabilities Approach emerged, identified earlier in this paper, are clear: the Education for All imperative of the Millennium Development Goals has emphasised a resource-driven approach which gives prominence to accessibility to schooling and enrolment rates (as in the Bretton Woods system), whilst the work with school leaders highlighted the need to examine the opportunities for learning given to pupils once they attended school (in other words, the conversion from potential to actual learning). The emphasis within the Project on making the most effective use of the resources which were available, rather than focusing upon pumping large amounts of new resource into the schools involved, reflected a desire to illuminate the ways in which school leaders could uncover, and then extend, agency in their everyday leadership activities and, by so doing, develop ways of effectively promoting pupil learning, a central aim of the overall EdQual Project.

The initial phase of the L&M Project encompassed a baseline survey of a sample of schools which focused on school leadership practices, together with a systematic literature review centred on effective educational leadership practice within an African context. At this stage of the Project, the overarching sampling approach was a mixture of stage sampling, which involved 'selecting the sample in stages, that is, taking samples from samples' (Cohen & Manion, 1998, p 88) and convenience sampling (ibid, p 88), where the initial group of baseline schools was chosen as a result of the convenience of contacts between the headteachers of the schools and the facilitators from the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. Following this phase a small group of headteachers was chosen to become involved in the project. The selection of this group was in the hands of the Ghanaian University faculty and reflected local networks that had been established over a number of years. In this sense, the project school leaders were not seen as a representative sample of primary headteachers within Ghana but were chosen to represent the large range of school leaders in Ghana operating in extremely challenging urban and rural contexts. This sampling process reflected the EdQual Project's commitment to the idea of local actors taking the lead in developing key aspects of the research process. The Project Team made use of local knowledge to identify schools and headteachers who were located within challenging environments but which, as far as was possible, were also found across the broad geographic expanse of Ghana. The notion of 'challenge' reflected contexts which ranged from schools where there was no electricity, sanitation or potable water through to those which suffered from extensive pupil and/or teacher absenteeism, and many which contained combinations of these features.

A group of twenty-one school leaders attended a workshop in February 2008 where they were introduced into the use of Participatory Action Research techniques by facilitators from the United Kingdom and from Ghana. They were then guided to identify problems that they would like to try and solve using these techniques, with support from facilitators drawn from staff of the Institute for

Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The aim of the workshops was to empower the head teachers to use these techniques so that their practice of leadership would enhance their capacity to improve pupil achievement, through the translation of their own embedded leadership capabilities into identifiable activities, which would provide the opportunities for pupil capabilities to be transformed into identifiable learning and functionings. The intention was to seek to identify good practices from the headteachers' Action Research interventions that could provide insights into leading and managing change to enrich educational quality within their schools. In this sense, the headteachers were encouraged to focus on issues or concerns that directly impacted upon the quality of pupil achievement within their schools. Given the nature of the headteacher contract of employment in Ghana where, as Essuman & Akyeampong (2011, p. 519) have noted, teachers and headteachers 'saw themselves primarily as "contracted" to teach through a posting system controlled and managed at the national level (i.e. the Ghana Education Service—GES)', they felt themselves to be in the position of civil servants carrying out Government policy. This, allied to a national policy context in Ghana which laid great stress upon the accountability of school leaders, meant that the immediate response of the vast majority of the headteacher group was one of scepticism. A key factor which encouraged a more positive view was the work done by IEPA facilitators with regional officials and national policy-makers in persuading these key stakeholders to allow this group of school leaders to work in ways which deviated from national prescriptions for headteacher activity and the strict guidelines of a voluminous Headteacher Manual. This was an important aspect in the process of moving from what Walker (2006, p 165) has called 'an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome'.

By the conclusion of the initial workshops in February 2008 all of the participating headteachers had embarked on the trajectory identified by Walker (2006), had focused on their specific issue of concern and had started to build up a picture of the approach which they intended to use. A key element was the direct and on-going support offered by facilitators and critical friends located in the Higher Education Institution in Ghana. The network of close relationships and social capital built up over many years was seen as a vital ingredient in both maintaining research momentum and in emphasising the South-South nature of the research collaboration. All the participating headteachers were asked to keep a log of their actions in relation to their chosen issue or concern and, also, to develop data gathering instruments that would provide them with evidence of any resultant changes in their own and their pupils' capabilities emerging from their actions. Contact was maintained between Project school leaders and their respective facilitators. Issues of distance, school location in difficult and demanding terrain and poor transport infrastructure meant that, while some face-to-face meetings did take place, there was also a high degree of contact through cellular phone.

The emphasis throughout both the initial Action Research workshops and follow-up contacts was on developing the headteachers' sense of agency linked to a belief that they could affect the quality of their pupils' education through their actions. The focus on issues related to 'social justice' and 'equity' was evident from the report from the sample case study which forms the basis of the next section of this paper. This specific case study was chosen on the basis of 'purposive sampling', a sample chosen on 'the basis of their (the researchers') judgement of their typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs' (Cohen & Manion, 1998, p 89). The example is 'typical' in the sense that it was identified by supporting facilitators as exemplifying the parameters, constraints and possibilities that face school leaders within a low-income country

context in their attempts to improve educational practice within their schools through a focus on social justice. The case study also provides concrete evidence of the ways in which a potential capacity to improve was transformed into direct actions (functionings) which impacted upon school processes and learning opportunities for pupils. The aim was to surface key issues related to the tensions and dynamics faced by school leaders working in low-income contexts who are seeking to be proactive in their attempts to develop their own and their pupils' capabilities and promote social justice and the learning of young people within their schools.

### School A

School A is the only public basic school in its area, and serves three communities. These communities have one other private primary school but it has classes only up to Basic Three, that is, the first three years of primary schooling. Pupils are then transferred to the public school to join Basic Four. This has led historically to an increase in enrolment in the upper primary classes in School A. The literacy rate of the communities is generally low and most of the people have low incomes.

A key issue of concern for the headteacher was the high incidence of teenage pregnancy that caused girls to drop-out of school before completing the cycle of schooling. This concern with pregnancy as a factor in female dropout from school was significant and can be seen as an example of what Ananga (2011, p 378) has called 'event dropout'. As girls are generally less likely to obtain a higher level of education due to social and cultural issues, a critical issue for the headteacher was that girls that are in school are encouraged and assisted to go as far as they can. Girls who are educated tend to marry later, raise fewer children who are healthier, and support education for their all of their children-all of which contribute to alleviating extreme poverty (Akyeampong, 2009; Annin, 2009; Chimombo, 2009; Tembon & Fort, 2008).

The headteacher of the school focused attention on the importance of sending the girl-child to school and was looking to address the problem of pregnancy that hindered girls' education, as more often than not they are unable to go back to school after childbirth. The headteacher was also concerned about the impact that this was having upon the reading skills of girls in the lower primary classes.

In the case of teenage pregnancy the headteacher's strategy was to use the cooperation of the parents and the community to address the problem. This strategy bore close alignment to notions of 'recognition' (Fraser, 1997; Fraser, 1995), and casts doubt on ideas of young children's personal autonomy and choice (Biggeri et al, 2010; Clark & Eisenhuth, 2010) and the success of the strategy of gaining community support contrasted with the lack of community consensus building found in the recent study of two rural schools in the Mfantseman Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana (Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). It is also clear here that the headteacher here was acting as a 'moral agent' in the sense indicated by Schrag (1979), in seeking to gather together significant information from key parties who were likely to be affected by decisions taken within the school. Thus, a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting was organised to discuss the problem and come up with possible solutions. At the meeting it was agreed that the parents should monitor their children closely. It was also agreed that the PTA would meet with the chief and elders of the community in order to develop a set of bye-laws which would serve as a deterrent. These focused on introducing stringent measures/punishments which would be given to men in the community who had had sexual relations with teenage girls which had resulted in pregnancy. In addition, male and

female teenagers were also banned from going to night clubs and drinking 'spots' within the community.

A second strategy within this concern about teenage pregnancy, which further enhanced the notion of 'recognition', was to invite counselors and women who could serve as role models periodically to the school to give talks to the pupils on issues such as the importance of education, the adverse effects of teenage pregnancies, and the specifics of sex education.

Gewirtz (1998), in her discussion of 'redistributional justice', highlighted a need to consider the distribution of resources across the community. In this spirit, and in relation to poor reading skills, the headteacher adopted a strategy of organizing in-service training for lower primary teachers and preparing teaching aids that could be used to improve the reading skills of the pupils. An hour a day (at the end of the week after classes) was used for the in-service training activities. The headteacher was the facilitator for the lower primary teachers. During the term the headteacher stepped up supervision to monitor the teachers use of skills learnt.

The counseling of pupils and the involvement of the parents and community appear to have improved the situation of teenage pregnancy. The headteacher reported that in the 2007/2008 academic year there were five cases of pregnancies in the Junior High School. However no pregnancy has been reported in 2008-2009. The headteacher attributed this to the stringent rules made by the chief and the continuous counseling that was carried on in the school.

The in-service training and increased frequency of supervision has had some impact on the academic performance of the pupils in lower primary. Overall, the boys performed better than the girls in reading and core subjects in all the three classes before the intervention with, for example, average scores for Reading Skills in Class 2 being 42% for boys and 40% for girls. After the intervention the girls generally performed slightly better than the boys, especially in the reading skills, with average scores in Class 3 being 71% for girls and 59% for boys.

The role of the headteacher in this series of episodes had changed significantly from that of a functionary performing the bureaucratic demands found in the Headteacher Manual to one where the 'capability' of acting as a broker across different community stakeholders had been converted into a 'functioning', which had displayed an 'understanding (of) the social embeddedness and contextualized nature of individual capabilities' (Tikly & Barrett, 2011, p 8) and the impact this can have upon this conversion process. Crucially, this conversion process had not involved any significant increase in tangible resource inputs but had developed through the headteacher's utilisation of the increased agency space opened up through the possibility of involvement in Action Research.

## **Conclusions**

School leaders play a crucial role in providing opportunities for the young people in their charge to develop and flourish. Working within an environment which encourages them to work towards 'social justice' goals which seek to improve the learning experiences of pupils is central to this purpose (Bates, 2006; Bogotch, 2002; Bosu et al, 2011; Brown, 2004; Riehl, 2000). Much of the research focus in this area has understandably been upon the pupils within classrooms. It has been argued in this paper that, as well as involving the transformation of pupil capabilities into functionings, the use of a Capabilities Approach framework as an evaluation template in the context

of school improvement can shed critical light upon the potential that school leaders have for shaping learning opportunities for pupils. Walker (2012) has argued persuasively that capabilities 'offers a resource to take into public arenas to make the argument for change and public action in education in the direction of societies which support and sustain human capabilities' (p 392). This paper has argued that, given such an approach and desire, difficult questions regarding the power relationships between adults and young people joined together within an educational endeavour cannot be ignored. It has been argued that the action research approach used within the Leadership & Management Project, allied to a permissive policy environment which enabled school leaders to operate 'outside the box', provided the impetus and motivation for such a debate and transformation to take place. School leaders involved in the Project were encouraged to examine the challenging context in which they were working and to seek to bring about improvement in areas which they chose, and which they had reason to value. This suggests that the use of the Capabilities Approach as a stimulus for educational policy and also for its potential to enable school leaders to operate in creative and resourceful ways within their school environments, offers a significant way forward when considering the role of school leaders in bringing about school improvement and the enhancement of the capabilities of the young people for whom they have responsibility. The significance of this approach is one that merits further research, especially in relation to school leaders working in challenging contexts in low-income countries who are seeking to improve the quality of education offered to the pupils in their charge.

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