

Editorial

Human Capabilities in this Post-Neoliberal Period: A Summative Editorial

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As Professor Wang Chen noted in the introduction, this Special Issue was conceptualized after conversations concerning the prospect of an international center focused on “education development and social justice.” Our first book provided comparative cases of using action research to promote social justice within nations through education reforms. The chapters provided examples from Brazil, England, China, and the US [1]. As international exchange became more strained during the COVID crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian War, it was apparent that the concept of “social justice” was controversial, given the growing US–China conflict. In the webinars leading to this volume, we realized that focusing on “human capabilities development” provided a workable approach to promoting educational opportunity in support of economic development and social wellbeing within nations that are democratic and authoritarian. Subsequently, this summative editorial compares contexts for human capabilities development, examines findings of policy developments and outcomes across contexts, and proposes university practices and partnerships for promoting capabilities development through policy and practice.

For more than a century, human capital theory has provided governments with frameworks for expanding educational opportunities to promote economic development. By the 1960s, nations measured the returns from public investment in education by gains in education attainment and economic growth. The US and Western European nations used student grants as strategic investments to reduce inequality in college access as they moved toward mass access to higher education during the Cold War. After the Cold War, the “Washington Consensus” promoted student loans to expand access in developing countries. A capabilities approach digs deeper, engaging universities, schools, and governments in partnerships that build the knowledge and skills of students in low-income families in rural communities and urban neighborhoods with few examples of college success. Even after decades of privatization, it is evident that public investment in education is necessary for nations to improve college attainment rates and promote social wellbeing, evidenced by student loan crises in several developed nations.

Extending educational opportunities to marginalized populations with a limited family history of college success has become an increasingly important policy issue in developing economies. The human-capabilities framework started in Ireland with the successful Trinity Access Program (TAP) in Dublin, where Trinity College Dublin built university partnerships with low-income-serving high schools in the city. Over a decade, the partnership model extended across the nation, and Ireland rose among European Union nations in the college enrollment rate. Cambridge and Oxford recently adapted the TAP process in England. In a larger country with a more complex education system and greater population diversity, there is reason to question whether taking a successful practice from a small island to its larger neighbor will have similar success nationally in England. Nevertheless, this cross-nation movement of innovation informed our dialogue regarding international collaboration on research promoting equity. Cliona Hannon led the efforts to develop TAP, piloted the method in England, and formulated the human-capabilities framework used in this volume.



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The theory of human capabilities emerged in studies of developing nations as an alternative to using human capital theory as a basis for public decisions regarding education investment. Our Chinese colleagues reexamined the origins of human capital and used it to examine the history and future of China's investment in education. As a still developing nation with one of the world's largest economies, China is now moving to universal K-12 education and continuing the development of the mass higher education system. Adding human capabilities into the planning models used in China can reduce inequalities as the nation moves forward. These papers illustrate the potential of human capabilities as a framework for improving educational opportunities and an alternative basis for the exchange of research. Not necessarily a substitute for thinking about education as a public investment in education, the human-capabilities approach provides a framework that can inform policy and practice, promoting the educational opportunities supporting the public good and community wellbeing and expanding the aims for public investment from the narrower notion of economic gains.

The authors also explore the prospects of building and using databases to inform better policy development in promoting human capabilities. Developing high-quality databases for analyses informing policy relating to capabilities remains challenging globally in both developed and less-developed nations. Collecting information that includes the data elements and covers the population needed to consider inequalities at the level of capabilities is no easy task. Liu, Gao, and Chen illustrate that regional data collected in Beijing province have utility for informing policymakers and educators about student outcomes. Yang and St. John use international data to compare developed and less-developed nations' investment in postsecondary vocational education, a policy issue that links to creating and maintaining a working middle class in both countries. Another lesson from this analysis reminds readers that even developed nations are always dependable in providing data for comparative studies of capabilities development within nations and across regional economic networks, like the European and South Asian nations.

The final set of papers returns to the core issue of the practice of promoting human-capabilities development. An engaged scholar over decades, Nate Daun-Barnett uses local databases to examine the impact of university-based outreach programs in Buffalo, New York. In a city ravaged by American rust belt and the export of industry, inner-city Buffalo schools continue to serve students who are among the state's least-advantaged populations. Much like Trinity University's TAP, Nate documents the impact of these bold, local partnerships, further illustrating the potential of international exchange. In contrast, Xu Li and Yaun Li review an initiative in a provincial Chinese university to enhance world-class STEM education, emphasizing liberal arts education. Their essay gets close to the core issues by focusing on capabilities in science education rather than overly narrow economic and managerial conceptions of the value of science education. Finally, Zach Taylor and colleagues return to the question of equitable data collection and database development. Data and data analysis are not the only issues facing educational researchers and policymakers, as data analysis is only as useful as the equity and quality of the data. Nor is data analysis the most important element of educational research. Without concerted efforts to improve databases through equitable data collection in nations and regions, it will be much more difficult to address the human and environmental issues challenging our collective global and local communities.

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