



Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Educational Freedoms for Diverse Learners

Abstract

Traditional educational metrics often fail to capture the real freedoms and opportunities available to diverse learners, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. While access to schooling has expanded, substantial gaps persist in the quality and relevance of education, limiting individuals' ability to convert resources into valued achievements. This study aimed to critically explore how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reconstruct and expand the conceptualization of educational freedoms for a diverse learner population. The central problem addressed is the inadequacy of standardized, attainment-focused models in recognizing and nurturing the varied capabilities that different students have reason to value. Theoretically, the study is pitched in Sen's Capability Approach, which shifts the evaluative focus from mere resources (e.g., school facilities) or outcomes (e.g., test scores) to the substantive freedoms which are the capabilities that individuals have to lead the kinds of lives they value. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative systematic review, synthesizing existing literature to analyze how core concepts of functioning, capabilities, and conversion factors can be applied to inclusive educational practice. The analysis concluded that the Capability Approach provides a robust normative framework for evaluating educational equity, emphasizing the expansion of students' genuine opportunities rather than the standardization of their outputs. A major recommendation arising from this is that educational policy and assessment must become more participatory and pluralistic, actively designed to identify and support the diverse capability sets of all learners, thereby making freedom a central goal of education.

Keywords: Capability Approach, Educational Freedoms, Diverse Learners, Inclusive Education, Curriculum Design.

Introduction

Despite decades of educational reform and increased investment in schooling

infrastructure, vast numbers of learners particularly those from marginalized communities remain confined by

Richard Owusu

University of Africa, Zambia

Department of Education

Phone Number: +27 60 421 9776

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-8273-4954

(Corresponding Author)

Gabriel Amponsah

University of South Africa, South

Africa, Faculty of Law

Gabrielamponsah1986@gmail.com

Phone Number: +27 83 312 3012

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-7843-5037

Solomon Mintah Afari

Kwame Nkrumah University of

Science and Technology, Ghana

Faculty of Educational Studies

smafari@st.knust.edu.gh

Phone Number: +233 541 460 565

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-0405-655X

Corresponding Author's Email:

Kwamenoah521@gmail.com

Date Received: 20th April, 2026

Date Accepted: 30th April, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21138056>

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systems that measure success through narrow, standardized metrics rather than genuine opportunity. Educational equity remains a pressing concern in contemporary schooling, especially where traditional attainment-oriented models measure success primarily by metrics such as test scores and enrollment figures (Sen, 1992). Such models often overlook how learners' real freedoms and opportunities influence what they can actually achieve and value, leaving many from diverse and marginalized backgrounds underserved.

Recent scholarship has increasingly applied the Capability Approach to education, though in fragmented ways. Mackenzie (2022) reconceptualizes English as a linguistic capability, revealing how economically vulnerable students' academic participation is shaped by language-related freedoms; however, the analysis remains confined to higher education and language-specific capability development (p. 620). Singh and Suknunan (2023) demonstrate how Universal Design of Instruction enhances access for students with visual disabilities, but their focus on instructional accommodation does not fully engage with capability expansion as a normative educational goal (p. 6).

This study addresses that gap by critically examining how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reframe the conceptualization of educational freedoms for diverse learners. The study synthesizes existing scholarship to explore how capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors can inform inclusive educational practice. This

perspective is distinctive in shifting evaluation away from standardized attainment toward learners' genuine opportunities to thrive. The aim of this study is to critically examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can be used to reconceptualize and expand educational freedoms for diverse learners beyond attainment-focused and standardized models of educational evaluation.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives which are to:

- i. Conceptualize educational freedom using the core constructs of the Capability Approach, namely capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors.
- ii. Critically synthesize recent literature on inclusive education through a capability-oriented lens.
- iii. Identify limitations in prevailing educational practices and assessment frameworks that prioritize standardized outcomes over learners' substantive freedoms.
- iv. Propose a capability-informed framework for evaluating inclusive educational practice that is responsive to learner diversity.

Research Questions

To achieve the stated aim and objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. How does Amartya Sen's Capability Approach reframe the notion of educational freedom for diverse learners?

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- ii. In what ways do recent inclusive education studies engage with, or overlook, learners' capabilities and conversion factors?
- iii. How can educational practice and policy be evaluated through a capability-oriented lens to promote genuine educational inclusion?

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which offers a normative framework for evaluating well-being and social arrangements by focusing on individuals' substantive freedoms rather than on resources or achieved outcomes alone. Developed initially within welfare economics and social justice theory, the Capability Approach shifts attention from what people possess to what they are genuinely able to do and to be (Sen, 1999). In the context of education, this perspective provides a credible alternative to attainment-driven models that equate equity with access, inputs, or standardized performance.

Central to the Capability Approach is the distinction between functionings and capabilities. Functionings refer to the realized states and activities of individuals, such as being literate, participating in classroom discussions, or completing formal schooling. Capabilities, by contrast, represent the real opportunities or freedoms to achieve these functionings (Sen, 2009). In educational settings, this distinction is critical as two learners may display similar academic outcomes while possessing vastly different degrees of freedom, agency, and future

opportunity. Evaluating education through capabilities therefore enables a deeper analysis of whether schooling expands learners' meaningful choices rather than merely producing comparable outputs.

The framework further emphasizes the role of conversion factors which are personal, social, and environmental conditions that affect individuals' ability to convert resources into valued functionings. Personal factors may include disability, language proficiency, or prior educational experiences; social factors encompass institutional norms, pedagogical practices, and assessment regimes; environmental factors involve material conditions such as infrastructure or access to learning support. For diverse learners, these conversion factors often mediate the relationship between formal educational provision and actual learning opportunities. As such, the Capability Approach draws attention to structural and contextual inequalities that remain invisible in standardized metrics of achievement.

Applied to inclusive education, the Capability Approach reorganizes equity as the expansion of educational freedoms rather than the equalization of outcomes. It challenges deficit-oriented and one-size-fits-all models by recognizing learner diversity as a normative condition rather than an exception. From this perspective, inclusive education entails designing curricula, pedagogies, and assessment systems that are responsive to varied capability sets and that actively support learners' agency, participation, and well-being. This theoretical stance aligns

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with calls for pluralistic and participatory approaches to educational evaluation that value what learners themselves have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative systematic review design to examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach has been applied in recent scholarship to conceptualize and evaluate educational freedoms for diverse learners. A qualitative systematic review is appropriate where the purpose is not statistical aggregation, but the critical synthesis of theoretical perspectives, concepts, and patterns across studies (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). This approach allows for an in-depth engagement with normative frameworks and supports theory-driven analysis, which is central to capability-oriented research.

Review Design and Rationale

Unlike meta-analyses or purely aggregative reviews, qualitative systematic reviews enable the examination of meanings, assumptions, and conceptual uses across studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This design was therefore well suited to addressing the study's research questions, which focus on how educational freedoms are framed, operationalized, or constrained within inclusive education discourse.

Search Strategy

A structured literature search was conducted across established academic databases commonly used in education

and social science research, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Search terms were developed iteratively and included combinations of keywords such as Capability Approach, educational freedom, inclusive education, diverse learners, disability, linguistic capability, and educational equity. Boolean operators were used to refine results and ensure relevance.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Studies were included if they:

- Were peer-reviewed journal articles;
- Were published between 2022 and 2024;
- Engaged explicitly with the Capability Approach or its core constructs (capabilities, functionings, conversion factors);
- Addressed issues related to education, inclusion, diversity, disability, or linguistic justice.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Were purely empirical without theoretical engagement;
- Focused on development or well-being without an educational dimension;
- Were conference papers, editorials, or non-peer-reviewed sources.

These criteria ensured conceptual consistency while maintaining analytical depth.

Data Extraction and Analytical Procedure

Relevant studies were subjected to thematic synthesis, guided by the core constructs of the Capability Approach. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, data were coded inductively and deductively. Deductive coding was informed by predefined capability concepts such as educational freedom, agency, and conversion factors—while inductive coding allowed for the emergence of patterns not initially anticipated.

The analysis focused on:

- How educational success was conceptualized;
- Which learner capabilities were emphasized or neglected;
- How structural, pedagogical, and institutional factors shaped learners' opportunities.

This dual coding strategy enhanced analytical rigor and reduced the risk of theoretical imposition.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance credibility and transparency, the review process followed established guidelines for qualitative synthesis. Clear documentation of search strategies, selection criteria, and analytical decisions was maintained throughout. Reflexivity was applied by critically examining how the Capability Approach shaped interpretation, acknowledging its normative orientation while remaining attentive to alternative perspectives within the literature (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Findings

Consistent with the study's aim of examining how the Capability

Approach can reframe educational freedoms for diverse learners, the qualitative systematic review produced three interconnected analytical findings. These findings emerge from a thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature and are organized around the Capability Approach's central constructs of capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors, as outlined in the theoretical framework. Together, they reveal how educational freedom is conceptualized, constrained, and partially realized in recent scholarship.

Educational Freedom Is Predominantly Framed Through Narrow Capability Lenses

Across the reviewed studies, educational freedom is most often conceptualized through specific, bounded capabilities, rather than as a broad and plural set of opportunities. Mackenzie (2022) frames English proficiency as a linguistic capability that enables economically vulnerable students to participate meaningfully in university learning. Similarly, Murray (2024) emphasizes autonomy and reflective capability through student-led course design. While these contributions illustrate the usefulness of the Capability Approach, they tend to isolate particular capabilities rather than examining how multiple capabilities interact to shape learners' overall educational freedom. As a result, freedom is often implicitly equated with success in a specific domain, rather than with learners' wider capacity to pursue valued educational pathways.

Conversion Factors Are Acknowledged but Not Systematically Examined

A second finding relates to the treatment of conversion factors, which mediate the relationship between educational resources and learners' achieved functionings. Singh and Suknunan (2023) show that Universal Design of Instruction improves access for students with visual disabilities, indicating the importance of pedagogical and environmental factors in enabling participation. Bobongie-Harris *et al.* (2023) similarly captures the role of teachers' cultural capabilities in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse learners. However, in both cases, conversion factors are addressed implicitly and primarily at the level of practice. There is limited systematic analysis of how institutional norms, assessment practices, and policy structures constrain or enable learners' ability to convert educational provision into meaningful opportunities, thereby restricting the expansion of genuine educational freedoms.

A Persistent Gap Between Normative Theory and Educational Practice

The review further reveals a consistent disconnect between normative capability theory and its application in educational systems. Brando and Pons (2023) advance a rigorous theoretical account of linguistic justice grounded in the Capability Approach, but their analysis remains largely abstract, offering limited guidance for classroom practice or curriculum design. Bhogal-Nair (2024) similarly develops a capability-based understanding of disability and well-being, emphasizing

social conditions over individual deficits, yet does not explicitly engage with educational structures. This pattern suggests that while the Capability Approach is increasingly recognized as a valuable evaluative framework, it is seldom translated into concrete mechanisms for evaluating or designing inclusive educational practice.

The findings indicate that recent scholarly work acknowledges the importance of expanding educational freedoms but applies the Capability Approach in partial and uneven ways. Capabilities are frequently treated as outcomes or competencies rather than as evaluative spaces of freedom, while conversion factors are insufficiently examined at systemic levels. Consequently, educational inclusion is often pursued through access and accommodation rather than through the deliberate expansion of learners' substantive opportunities. These findings support the need for a more integrative capability-oriented framework that places freedom, agency, and diversity at the center of educational evaluation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that while recent scholarship increasingly invokes capability-based ideas, educational freedom is still conceptualized in limited and uneven ways. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research questions, explains why they matter, and clarifies the contribution of the present study.

Reframing Educational Freedom Through the Capability Approach

In response to the first research question, how the Capability Approach reframes educational freedom for diverse learners: the findings show that educational freedom is rarely treated as a broad evaluative space of genuine choice. Instead, studies tend to focus on discrete capabilities, such as linguistic proficiency (Mackenzie, 2022) or learner autonomy (Murray, 2024). While these contributions align with the Capability Approach in principle, they often stop short of examining how multiple capabilities interact to shape learners' overall educational trajectories. This matters because Sen's framework emphasizes freedom as plural and context-dependent, not reducible to success in a single domain. The present study reinforces the need to evaluate education in terms of learners' wider capability sets rather than isolated achievements.

Capabilities, Conversion Factors, and the Limits of Current Practice

Addressing the second research question, the findings indicate that existing inclusive education research engages with capabilities unevenly and often under-theorizes conversion factors. Singh and Suknunan (2023) demonstrate that inclusive instructional design improves access for students with visual disabilities, while Bobongie-Harris *et al.* (2023) emphasize the importance of teachers' cultural capabilities. However, both studies focus primarily on immediate pedagogical practices and do not systematically interrogate how institutional norms, assessment regimes,

and policy structures shape learners' opportunities. This suggests that educational resources alone are insufficient to expand freedom unless the social and institutional conditions that govern their use are also addressed. The present study extends this insight by foregrounding conversion factors as central to understanding why access does not always translate into meaningful educational opportunity.

Bridging Normative Theory and Educational Practice

The third research question concerned how educational practice and policy might be evaluated through a capability-oriented lens. The findings reveal a persistent gap between normative capability theory and its application in educational contexts. Brando and Pons (2023) offer a philosophically rigorous account of linguistic justice, and Bhogal-Nair (2024) advances a capability-based understanding of disability and well-being. However, both remain largely abstract, providing limited guidance for educational design, assessment, or evaluation. This study contributes by synthesizing these theoretical insights with applied educational research, demonstrating how the Capability Approach can serve not only as a moral framework but also as a practical evaluative tool for inclusive education.

What is new in this study is not the introduction of the Capability Approach to education, but its integrative and evaluative application across diverse strands of recent literature. Unlike prior studies that focus on specific learner groups, single

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capabilities, or isolated interventions, this study brings together linguistic, cultural, disability-related, and pedagogical perspectives to show how educational freedom is systematically constrained by fragmented approaches. Thus, it advances a more coherent understanding of inclusive education as the expansion of substantive freedoms rather than the accommodation of difference within existing structures. This contribution lies in reframing educational equity as a question of what learners are genuinely enabled to become and do, rather than what they are measured to achieve.

The discussion underscores that inclusive education cannot be fully realized without shifting evaluative priorities from standardized outcomes to capability expansion. The findings suggest that educational systems must move beyond access-oriented reforms toward participatory, flexible, and context-sensitive practices that recognize learner diversity as a normative condition. By positioning freedom as the central goal of education, this study provides a conceptual foundation for rethinking curriculum design, assessment practices, and policy frameworks in ways that are responsive to the lived realities of diverse learners.

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational policy and practice, particularly within contexts committed to inclusive education. First, the analysis suggests that policy frameworks should move beyond access-based indicators and standardized attainment measures toward capability-informed evaluation criteria. Policies that prioritize

enrolment, progression rates, or examination outcomes risk obscuring whether learners possess genuine opportunities to participate, exercise agency, and pursue educational pathways they value. A capability-oriented policy approach would require educational systems to explicitly consider how institutional arrangements, assessment practices, and curricular structures enable or constrain diverse learners' freedoms.

At the level of practice, the findings stress the need for intentional attention to conversion factors within schools and higher education institutions. While inclusive pedagogies and universal design principles, as discussed by Singh and Suknunan (2023), enhance accessibility, they must be embedded within broader institutional cultures that value learner diversity and participation. Similarly, professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening teachers' cultural capabilities (Bobongie-Harris et al., 2023) should be accompanied by systemic support that allows educators to exercise agency in adapting curricula and assessment practices.

More broadly, the Capability Approach provides a pathway through which inclusive education can be understood as a process of expanding learners' substantive freedoms rather than accommodating difference within fixed structures. Educational leaders and policymakers can draw on this framework to design learning environments that recognize multiple pathways to success and value learners' voices in defining what educational achievement means for them.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reorganize the conceptualization of educational freedoms for diverse learners. Through a qualitative systematic review of recent scholarship, the study demonstrated that while capability-oriented ideas are increasingly present in inclusive education research, they are often applied in fragmented and limited ways. Capabilities tend to be treated as discrete competencies or outcomes, and the role of conversion factors in shaping learners' opportunities remains insufficiently examined. By synthesizing insights across linguistic, cultural, disability, and pedagogical domains, this study contributes a more integrative understanding of educational freedom as the expansion of learners' genuine opportunities to learn, participate, and flourish.

Future research should build on this conceptual foundation through empirical investigations that examine how capability-informed approaches can be operationalized in schools and higher education institutions. Studies exploring learners' own perspectives on valued educational freedoms, as well as comparative analyses of assessment and curriculum reforms, would further strengthen the application of the Capability Approach in inclusive education. Such work would deepen understanding of how educational systems can move from measuring attainment to expanding freedom as a central goal of education.

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