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Author(s): Wilson-Strydom, Merridy; Okkolin, Mari-Anne

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Enabling environments for equity, access and quality education post-2015:

Lessons from South Africa and Tanzania

Merridy Wilson-Strydom

Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Research on Higher Education and Development
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein
South Africa
Email: wilsonstrydommg@ufs.ac.za

Mari-Anne Okkolin

Post-doctoral researcher
Centre for Research on Higher Education and Development
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein
South Africa
(And Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland)
Email: mari-anne.l.okkolin@jyu.fi

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Abstract

In this paper we seek to contribute to the post-2015 education agenda by shifting the focus from considerations of what education goals and targets should be to a people-centred exploration of enabling environments, within and beyond education, for equity, access and quality. Theoretically, the paper draws on the capabilities approach. Empirically, we present data from two independent qualitative studies conducted in South Africa (n=40) and Tanzania (n=10) with university students who accessed higher education despite trends of low participation for their social class and/or gender. The paper highlights the importance of taking account of both instrumental and intrinsic values of education. Enablers in the domains of school, family and community are identified and their contribution to educational well-being and achievement are demonstrated.

1 Introduction

Widespread debate about education within the post-2015 development arena has taken place in the run up to 2015 and continues today – most recently in the form of the Incheon Declaration which was the outcome of the 2015 UNESCO World Education Forum (UNESCOPRESS, 2015). From the outset, the global consultation processes, led by UNESCO and UNICEF, have emphasised that regardless of the form the educational goals and/or targets take, the emphasis must be on *equity*, *access* and *quality* learning (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013a, p. 792). This emphasis is reflected across all seven targets included within the ambit of Goal 4 of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. Goal 4 seeks to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, 2015, p. 7).

However, arguments about the role education should play in the post-2015 development agenda have also been uncertain and contradictory. For instance, as noted by McGrath (2014), MyWorld survey showed that while education was the number one priority amongst the more than one million respondents, in contrast, within the development “expert” community, education is not a major focus. Instead, education hardly features in mainstream development accounts and, when it does, the understanding of education is highly instrumental and problematic – often seen as “a relatively simple technology that can be delivered in a way that is little different from distributing mosquito nets” (McGrath, 2013, p. 17; see also, Mercer, 2014). Further, there is also concern that despite the potential of global target setting for change, there is ample evidence of unintended consequences of targets such as those specified within Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (for example, Fukuda-Parr, Yamin, & Greenstein, 2013; Unterhalter, 2013; Unterhalter & North, 2011). Presumably it will be difficult to avoid these pitfalls in the case of the SDGs. Notable have been concerns about what equality in education really means

when the focus is on input and output measures, with little emphasis on educational processes and without sufficient consideration of educational quality (Unterhalter, 2013). Also important, but receiving relatively little attention within the global debates, is a consideration of the complex social and gender dynamics that play out within families, communities and educational institutions, all of which have both positive and negative implications for equity, access and quality in education (Unterhalter, 2009). Concerns have also been raised that inputs from the global South to the broader debates about the post-2015 agenda remain relatively few and far between (Alhawsawi & Hanna, 2013; Sayed & Sprague, 2013; Tungaraza, Sutherland, & Stack, 2013).

In this paper we contribute to these debates by shifting the focus from the considerations of what suitable education goals and targets might be to a people-centred exploration of enabling environments within and beyond education. In doing so, we are particularly drawing on the rich perspectives from qualitative and interpretative development research that places emphasis on people's life-worlds and 'voices'. We acknowledge the call for more creative communicative and collaborative exercises across methods and disciplines (see also, Fennel & Arnot, 2009; McGrath, 2014), and thus our aim is to advance such epistemological and methodological engagement in educational debate that validates the voice and subjectivity of those who are 'the targets' of the SDGs (see, Unterhalter, 2007). In this manner, educational solutions take "into consideration not only the global benchmarks, but also, and most importantly, the situation on the ground" (Lehtomäki et al., 2014, p. 42).

Theoretically our argument is rooted in the capabilities approach. Drawing on two independent studies conducted in South Africa and Tanzania, with participants who have beaten the odds of low national participation ratesⁱ and reached higher education, our focus of analysis is on the complexities and dynamics of social systems embedded in any human endeavours, including education. From such a point of view, educational advancement and

success seem to ‘have little to do with global policy goals but far more to do with smaller level interventions and dialogic practices in classrooms and communities’ (McGrath, 2013, p. 117). This paper addresses explicitly in-school and out-of-school environments and highlights the critical issues which *enabled* the research participants to reach higher levels of education than most others of their social class and/or gender. Hence, there are lessons to be learned, we argue, from their experiences and insights, to be utilised in support of meaningful achievement of equity, access, and quality in education in ways that take account of local specificities. Our analysis highlights the complex intersections, and sometimes contradictions, of equity, access and quality in local contexts.

The paper begins with a brief consideration of some of the central issues within the post-2015 agenda, with a focus on those conversations that our studies can inform. We then provide a brief overview of the capabilities approach, drawing particular attention to what capabilities informed research contributes to broader post-2015 education issues. After introducing the studies conducted in South Africa and Tanzania, the remainder of the paper presents our empirical results identifying enablers of educational access and advancement, so providing evidence that can contribute to post-2015 conversations (cf. Faul, 2014; Skelton, 2014).

2 Post-2015 education agenda

To situate our findings and to locate the arguments we make in this paper, in this section we briefly discuss some of the key aspects of post-2015 education debates and the emerging education agenda. Since in the post-2015 educational domain lessons from both EFA and MDGs are important we reflect on both here. To start with we must acknowledge that to construct meaningful goals and targets *is* undoubtedly a difficult task, the complexity in

definition reflecting the complexity of reality and heterogeneity of contexts. However, much of the post-EFA criticism is directed towards the lack of conceptual clarity (for example, Palmer, 2014 from a skills/vocational education perspective; Subrahmanian, 2005 who highlights the lack of clear conceptualisation of gender).

In addition, there is the much broader debate around the understanding and conceptualisation of *quality* with serious methodological implications (see for example, Buckler, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). In consequence, one of the critical lessons for the future to be taken from reflections on the existing goals is that they need to clearly expressed and defined (Rose, 2015). In an effort to reclaim EFA's broader agenda, many in the education community began calling for a shift from a focus on access to a focus on *access plus learning* (Winthrop, Anderson, & Cruzalegui, 2015). This focus on learning, or educational quality, has carried over into the post-2015 debates and is reflected in the formulation of the SDG targets for Goal 4. Thus, in current debates we begin to see a somewhat more expansive view of education that takes account of access and learning, and moves beyond narrow considerations of promoting basic literacy and numeracy. As a result, what is different now, compared to when the EFA and MDG goals were being formulated, are the strong calls for access to be conceived of beyond primary education, to include secondary and tertiary education and the embracing of a more expansive view of educational quality (Roberts & Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013b).

Reporting on the post-2015 recommendations made by Commonwealth Ministers of Education to the High Level Task team, Bunawaree (2013, p. 831) presents three principal goals for education. The third goal is of particular relevance to this paper. Principal goal three is to “[R]educe and seek to eliminate differences in educational outcomes among learners associated with household wealth, gender, special needs, location, age and social group”. In explaining the goal further, the Commonwealth Ministers of Education note that

“[P]rogressive reduction of the gaps in achievement caused by disadvantage, in conjunction with the improvement of overall achievement, is key to the attainment of all development goals” (Bunwaree, 2013, p. 831). While few would disagree with these formulations, what is missing is a sense of *how* this might be achieved. Further, while it is fairly common for the literature on the post-2015 education agenda to draw attention to obstacles to access, equity and quality, there tends to be rather less emphasis on reporting about *enablers*. For example, in the UNESCO/UNICEF report on the education thematic consultations, the following main obstacles to educational quality are noted: social context, narrow focus on primary education, inequity, inputs and infrastructure, governance and narrow conceptions of educational processes (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013b, p. 23). Little is said of enablers, although a few examples of relevant projects are noted.

The United Nations Report of High-Level Eminent Persons proposed four targets making up goal 3, to ‘provide quality education and lifelong learning’. The approach to target setting was one of formulating global goals, but allowing space for national specificities. Although the currently proposed SDG for education differs somewhat from this formulation, there are important nuances in the goals set in that report. The educational targets for goal 3 were specified as follows (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013b, p. 36, emphasis added; see also, Revaz & Gragert, 2013):

- a) Increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete pre-primary education
- b) Ensure every child, *regardless of circumstance*, completes primary education able to read, write and count well enough to meet minimum learning standards
- c) Ensure every child, *regardless of circumstance*, has access to lower secondary education and increase the proportion of adolescents who achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes to x%

- d) Increase the number of young and adult women and men with the skills, including technical and vocational, needed for work by x%

Of particular importance in this formulation of possible targets, we argue here, is the inclusion of the phrase ‘regardless of circumstance’. Our research in two African country contexts, working with young people who have beaten the odds and made it into higher education, shows how complex a phrase such as ‘regardless of circumstance’ is. Circumstances, within education, but particularly in young people’s lives outside the formal sphere of education, matter a great deal. This is particularly so when we consider the complex social dynamics at play at the intersection of access, learning and quality education with both in-school and out-of-school dynamics. While it is promising that the Eminent Persons make specific reference to circumstance in the context of educational targets, little is said about what ‘regardless of circumstance’ might mean in practice. Perhaps this is why the phrase is not retained in the proposed SDGs.

In this paper we provide some pointers for thinking about the role of circumstance through our research on enablers of educational achievement. Working within a capabilities approach framework which provides a lens for understanding people’s lives in practice (or their circumstances), we draw on rich narrative data collected from higher education students in South Africa and Tanzania to highlight the centrality of enabling environments (i.e. enabling circumstances) in school, family and broader community contexts. In this way we also speak to the concern raised by Sayed and Ahmed (2015), that including too ambitious a variety of responsibilities for educational institutions (without taking account of the broader dynamics outside of education itself) runs the real risk of overstating the potential of schools and their teachers to effect broad social transformation. As we explain below, the capabilities approach provides a generative framework for considering both in- and out-of-school circumstances and the impact of this on educational access, learning and quality.

2.1 *A capabilities lens on the post-2015 education agenda*

Our focus in this paper is on the capability to be educated (Terzi, 2007) which encompasses equity, access and quality. We pay special attention drawn to the conditions that can *enable* this capability for diverse young people living in diverse contexts. In presenting our argument we build on the work of authors who have applied the human development and capabilities approaches in their research and writing about the MDGs and the post-2015 education agenda (Barrett, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2013; Unterhalter & Dorward, 2013; Unterhalter & North, 2011). Several key concepts are foundational when working within the capabilities framework. We briefly introduce these below and explain how we are using them in this paper.

The capabilities approach assumes that in assessing how well someone is doing (their well-being), the focus needs to be on “the ‘wellness’ of a person’s state of being ...The exercise, then, is that of assessing the constituent elements of the person’s being seen from the perspective of her own personal welfare” (Sen, 1993, p. 36). In this sense, the capabilities approach differs from quality of life measures that focus on outcomes such as generating wealth or achievements, but say little about personal welfare or human flourishing. Applied to education – educational well-being is about much more than student performance or the achievement of narrowly defined global targets (Walker, 2005, 2008). Sen (1992, p. 40) argues that instead of focusing on resources, income, or utility, assessments of quality of life or well-being should be done in the realm of capabilities, defined as ‘the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that a person can achieve.’ Functionings refer to achievements, what a given person is able to be and to do, and what they value being and doing, such as being able to read, being able to write, and completing high school for

example. Capabilities refer to opportunities to function, or the freedom one has to enjoy various valuable functionings, whether or not the person decides to put the capability into action. Thus, one may have the capability to attend university, but choose not to in order to join the workforce or to take a gap year. This distinction between capabilities and functionings is important as it allows for expression of individual agency and freedom in making choices about available alternatives.

Within the capabilities approach individual differences are central, rather than incidental, to understandings of equality and well-being (Sen, 1999). This explicit recognition and foregrounding of diversity is of particular importance in the context of globally defined targets that allow limited space for diversity at national levels, and very little space at community and individual levels. As we show in this paper, detailed understanding of the nuances of individual lives and the influence of social contexts on educational well-being and broader flourishing is critical to formulate meaningful interventions that can help in meeting global targets in contextually relevant ways. Social norms and opportunities can expand or diminish one's agency. Often social norms construct disadvantages, even where public resources (such as schools – or mosquito nets) are equally distributed and accessible (see also, Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). Thus, while agency is an important element of the approach, it is explicitly recognised that individual functionings are influenced by one's relative advantages or disadvantages in society. Further, a person's capability to be educated will also be enabled or constrained by the choices and actions of others; for example, the quality of teachers, productive peer relationships, family norms regarding girls' education and so on.

Applied to the post-2015 education debates, this understanding means that we need to look beyond attainment of narrowly defined targets to ask whether these targets enable educational well-being and take account of the contexts within which different individuals

function (for a related argument but in the context of teacher education and deployment see, Tao, 2014). In sum, we need to ask what the enabling environments are for diverse individuals that facilitate educational well-being and the equitable attainment of global educational targets taking explicit account of differences in circumstances, because, as we show in this paper, circumstances matter greatly in fostering educational opportunities.

3 The studies

The two studies on which this paper draws were conducted at different points in time, and each had its own specific research agenda and set of research questions. In common, was a concern to understand how it is that some young people succeed in education against the odds in conditions of inequity? In considering our two sets of data, we have been struck by the similarities, and some differences, with respect to schooling, family and social environments that have enabled educational achievement amongst those who are typically marginalised within education.

The South African data is drawn from year one of a three-year longitudinal study (2014-2016) focused on understanding the enablers and constraints on students' access to and well-being in higher education. A group of 40 students, all from poor and marginalised home and schooling backgrounds, was selected at the start of 2014 from a larger group of students who volunteered to participate in the research. The group of 40 includes a mix of genders and students studying across a wide range of disciplines. All the students were in their first year of university study in 2014. Due to the complex journey's marginalised students often travel on their road to university, the group includes students who transitioned straight from school to university, others who entered university via bridging programmes, and students who were only able to enter university after working for several years. The study is qualitative and

makes use of annual narrative interviews as well as participatory workshops where various participatory research methods (including visual methods) are used. The data presented in this paper was drawn from the narrative interviews conducted in year 1 of the study.

The qualitative in-depth interview data for the Tanzania study was acquired through three fieldwork periods in 2005, 2006 and 2008. The study was about experiences and insights of ten women who had succeeded to reach higher education – placing them amongst a tiny proportion of Tanzanian women. The aim was to identify factors that had supported them to construct their educational pathways to the university and master's degree level. The women diverged in their backgrounds with regards to geographical location and ethnicity; their parental educational backgrounds varied from no schooling at all to the doctorate level. They came from families with three to six children, and basically all of the siblings were educated at least to the secondary level education. The women defined their families as 'normal and middle-class' in the Tanzanian context; yet, they all emphasised financial constraints in pursuing education and described various modes of support from their extended families. At the time of carrying out the study, most of the women were in their early thirties, the youngest was 26 and the oldest 53 years. Eight of the women were qualified teachers.

Drawing on these two studies, we have selected one South African and one Tanzanian student's story to illustrate our argument. These two narratives are typical of the stories students within each study told so they represent the larger body of data, yet, also embody their own richness and individual specificity. Essentially, the stories show the complex and sometimes contradictory intersections of equity, access and quality and highlight our argument that circumstances matter immensely for education achievement. From South Africa, we introduce Motsamai who grew up in a poor rural village. His father was absent, his mother worked as a domestic worker in a city about four hours' drive away, and Motsamai and his brother were brought up by their grandmother. Their household was funded

only by his grandmother's meagre state pension. Growing up there was one person in Motsamai's family who had completed high school (and teacher training thereafter), his uncle who was working as a school principal. His grandmother emphasised the importance of education throughout his life. At the time of our first interview, Motsamai was in his first year of a law degree, he was 29 years old, engaged to be married and had a six month old daughter. His pathway into higher education and his dream of becoming a lawyer had been a long and winding one, with a false start at university after school, the completion of a nursing diploma due to availability of government funding, working for several years to save money for university, and eventually, now his new life as a self-funded first year law student.

From Tanzania we introduce Wema. Different to Motsamai, and on the surface, her formal educational career manifests successful, easy and linear. For primary education, she attended government school, performed exceptionally well and was selected to join government secondary school, where education was free and other costs relatively low. For higher education, she got selected to study law. To study at university, in one of the most competitive fields to gain a place and in one of the most respected faculties in the country, wasn't difficult for an excellent student as she was. Still she felt it wasn't what she really wanted. She had later decided to move abroad and go for a Master's degree in social sciences that was according to her own aspirations. At the time of the research conversation, she was 32, married and finalising the degree. Wema's parents had divorced and she together with her younger sister and older brother (who passed away accidentally) were raised by their mother, without any support from the father. Apart from the three children in the house, two of their cousins lived with them. The (extended) family was assisted by an uncle and grandparents. Wema's mother held a Master's degree and was working as a teacher. Wema explained how their mother had invested everything she could afford to ensure the children's educational advancement.

4 Understanding enabling environments

While it is common for educational researchers to look at the influence of the schooling environment on educational experiences and performance it has been somewhat less common to focus on the broader familial and community contexts within which learners/students are embedded (see Tao (2014) for research on contextual influences for rural teachers in Nigeria). This is partly because the potential for influence of educational institutions in broader family and community contexts is less obvious than within the school. Nonetheless, our research has shown that these external environments are often at least as, and sometimes more important than the school environment in determining who stays in school, how they perform and why. In the sections below we document the enabling conditions that were central in Motsamai and Wema's stories in the spheres of schooling, family and the broader community.

4.1 Schooling

The importance of enabling learning environments is explicitly recognised in the post-2015 agenda. Drawing on the priorities identified through their global consultation process, UNESCO and UNICEF (2013a, p. 796) note the critical importance of “ensuring safe and healthy learning environments, including safe, disaster-sensitive school buildings and classroom, safe and clean drinking water, school feeding programmes, gender-sensitive sanitation and hygiene, and the integration into the curriculum of sexual and reproductive health education as well as indigenous knowledge”. While we are in agreement with this call, drawing on our research with young people who have made it through learning environments

that were less than ideal, we would like to draw attention to the functions schooling plays in young people's lives, even where quality maybe questionable.

When asked about his happiest moments growing up, Motsamai talks about school. He loved school and was an active participant in school activities such as debating and drama. Despite the fact that his schools were all very poorly resourced, being able to attend school opened up opportunities for Motsamai. In addition, school provided a refuge from the realities of growing up in poverty.

My happiest moment, or memories when I was growing up were actually at school. Ja. In most cases, I was highly participating in debating at school... I was involved in drama, so... that's where I really got to be happy. Otherwise outside that it was home, and then partly in the streets. I really enjoyed being at school, you know, with friends, and all that. So usually when it was time to go home I would get a bit wild in most cases, because now I had to go and face those challenges at home, you know. Sometimes there's no food and all that, but when I was at school I used to forget about everything, because that's where I got to be happy, I was passing well, I had quite... a lot of good friends around me, so they kept me busy and happy at all times.

In addition to providing refuge from the realities of poverty at home – even though the school itself was poorly resourced – the school and specific teachers also provided Motsamai with a space where he was valued as an individual, as 'a human being' and not as a boy living in poverty. This was particularly the case during his primary school years, although he did have similar reflections on high school too. This nurturing role of school that taught Motsamai the importance of being treated with dignity by others, and treating himself with dignity, is a thread that runs through his story – pointing to a much expanded notion of what schooling quality might mean.

That's what I've always had, and I had always been grateful for being in the midst of people who are actually able to nurture me into thinking in that positive way, especially my primary teacher especially, because I had quite a wonderful teacher when I was there, and she just could not want to listen whether you are from a well off family, or a worse off family. All she wanted was a human being, you know, an independent person out of you, and she was forever telling us that, you know,

for you to live like a king, you have to work like a slave. So those are the people that really shaped the way I perceive life, the way I think about life, and the challenges thereof, ja.

If for Motsamai school was a refuge, for Wema the school (primary) was the place where you go and play.

"My first memory from school, it's like, it was a place where you go and play. That's the memory I have. Yah, it was like this playing thing."

When asked about nice school memories, the research participants in the Tanzania study talked about playing with other children. Generally speaking they did not have much leisure time: even on Saturdays the first thing to do was to wash the school uniforms. At school you would have at least the breaks when you can go and play. Wema described how she had enjoyed the recesses and how she "was really happy about the friends". Interestingly in the following excerpt Wema narrates and exemplifies how the childhood association of school with play intersects with the above listed critical issues of physical school environment, school atmosphere and discipline, water, food etc.

"In primary school, we would go at 7 o'clock. You have to be there exactly at 7 am. The head student will sit on the gate when children are coming in, and he will write all the names of the children who are coming late, which will get punished at the end of the day. At 10 o'clock, we had break time, which was mainly just for playing. I can't remember if there was any food unless if you came with food from home and put it in the bag; still it was so bad because other children can take it away from you. [...] Basically, most children did not, we didn't eat during school hour time. You can go home, but it depends how far your home is. So, most of my friends, they didn't go home and even I didn't [...] When I was in Std VI, a little bit older, I used to run home, but the problem was that when you run home you have to cook, because my mum was at work, and eat, and then run to school."

The difference between Wema's primary and secondary school experiences was somewhat drastic. Despite the fact that neither the physical or learning environments in the primary school were particularly enabling, she had been top performing student and was thus selected to join government boarding secondary school. The school differed significantly from her first school experiences in the sense that 'for the first time' she was able to sit and

study in a ‘conducive learning environment’; the environment comprising of ‘all girls’, ‘no more caning’ and ‘good teachers’. When the Tanzanian research participants were asked about their teachers at different levels of education, the most representative adjectives used to describe them were ‘nice’ and ‘good’. When asked to clarify whether they meant that their teachers were ‘nice’ as a person or as a teacher, ‘good’ regarding pedagogical skills, etc., it was only after this question that the issues of qualification, subject knowledge, pedagogic capacities, and overall experiences concerning teaching and learning, were brought into the conversation. Similar themes were evident in the South African data, where the critical role of teachers who believe in the young people they teach, even where teaching skills/ content knowledge might be limited, was commonly noted, and was central to the achievement of educational well-being, and persistence.

Focusing on high school, Motsamai describes the lack of resources for learning such as a library and laboratory for science experiments. The school buildings were old and dilapidated and the toilets did not have running water. His teachers, on the whole, were not equipped with the content knowledge needed to teach their subjects, but still believed in the learners and ‘would force it out of us.’

In fact the kind of teachers we had, coming to think of it, they not quite brilliant teachers in terms of the skills they have, most of them are not good in maths, they are not good in physics, they are not good... others even the language that we speak, the... you know, the official language we use at school. But we were able to beget upon really making it out of such kind of situations. Despite the fact that they hardly had that skill themselves, but they would force it out of us...And I imagine that if we had such kind of people, but more equipped and skilful to deal with whatever content they have, the potential would have been huge. So... it boils down to the kind of education we have now, especially the basic education we have, because it informs this tertiary education we have now, so for me we are still way, way behind.

Only one teacher, the biology teacher had completed tertiary education and this teacher had a profound influence on Motsamai, and his own valuing of university qualifications.

There's a [teacher], Ja, he had a BSC, I think, in botany, so he was teaching us biology. So, that guy was very brilliant with his biology. Well, it's only now when I was at this age, when I had to reflect about the kind of teachers I had, that the reason why this guy was so brilliant was because he was actually the only one who had the university education. Because he did botany, I mean, he understood biology more than any other teacher would, and he was giving it to me in such a way that I can't even forget it, even now, you know. So he was quite brilliant.

Turning to the Tanzania data, it also seems that the experiences concerning learning, teachers' attitudes and relationships with teachers have a lot to do with everything else but teaching and learning as such. "It's like this kind of funny relationship", Wema explained, when asked to recollect her teachers in primary, secondary or higher education.

"There are so many memories about teachers in primary school. Like one teacher used to ask me to sell candies. [...] It is so normal, like every teacher will bring stuff to sell, and give students to sell during class. So, one teacher used to give me candies to sell, and I had to balance sometimes, if I was not careful enough or maybe some kids stole it, then I had to compensate with my own money, which I would ask my mother to give me."

An interesting detail as to why Wema felt that they were treated 'nicely' by their teachers (the exception being Wema's mathematics teachers) was that 'they were kind of known' because they were teacher's children. Wema considered that she had a good relationship with her teachers, especially the women, even some of the men, but still she did not *like* male teachers. According to her experiences, there were clear gender biased attitudes on behalf of male teachers that affected even the student's grades. Yet, Wema's experiences and insights are suggestive that, for the most part, she had good, encouraging, talented and qualified teachers in secondary education, enabling her to perform well, and pushing her to work hard and do even better. In addition to the teachers' significant support for the academic attainment, she narrated how the influence of some of the teachers was very empowering for her comprehension of being a woman. Wema pointed out the huge and positive role of the boarding school and one very strict matron for her self-image and comprehension:

“I don’t know... She just like... teaches you how to take care of yourself as a girl. As I said, my mother and I, we don’t discuss like personal stuff, maybe something, but not so much how to manage my life as a woman or a girl.”

Like for Motsamai who came to see the importance of being treated with dignity through his schooling experiences, Wema also took from school much more than the formal curriculum learning. The enabling environment created by teachers who believed in the children they were teaching, and, even where formal teaching skills, content knowledge, or basic educational resources, might have been lacking, the care and investment in their learners continued to serve as important enablers, leading to educational well-being for both. This points to the need to foreground both the instrumental role of education (obtaining a qualification) and the intrinsic role of education for young people’s development, far beyond the formal qualification.

4.2 Family

In both the South African and the Tanzanian data the role of family in one’s educational pathway and ultimate success was central. Families provided both moral and financial support in various ways. One way in which this was commonly expressed by the students interviewed was the role of family members as role models. Particularly influential in the South African data was having a family member – nuclear or extended family – who was a teacher or involved in education in some way. Motsamai looked up to his uncle who was a school principal and the “only one who was actually educated from my family and relatives.” Further, the family’s valuing of education, discipline and independence fostered through education was also a common theme across the student stories. For many of the South African students, education was positioned as a means of “getting out” of the conditions of poverty in which they were growing up. Motsamai speaks with fondness and

immense respect of his, now deceased, grandmother who played a fundamentally important role in his life, and in his persistence with his education.

To be honest I think my... in particular my grandmother, ja, she had quite a very immense influence as to how I perceived life, and how I tend to grew up. You know, she had nothing, yes, but she was one independent woman. She would... she was sewing, ja, so that she can be able to sell that, and with that money she would pay for our school fees, because what she was getting from grant was not really enough, you know, to sustain us throughout the month...She loved education so much, even though she was not educated, she would always tell us that the only way to get out of that place was to study really hard and make our own living out of that, otherwise, ja...And she would ensure that when there's school meetings she's there, she would ensure that we are doing our homeworks, even if she doesn't really know what we are writing there, but she knew how to write, only Sotho, but even English, mathematics and so on, she would make sure... because she would see that this one is right, this one is wrong. She would say, why did you go wrong here? And tell me the good reason as to why did you go wrong here?

The centrality of family was also woven into Wema's narrative. What may be concluded from Wema's narratives, similarly to Motsamai, is that the moral encouragement, on the one hand, and financial support, on the other, that she got from her (extended) family, were the two most critical factors enabling her to construct her educational pathway to university. The attitudes at her home were remarkably positive towards the education and schooling for all the children, girls and boys alike. She thought that 'to be educated' was seen as a privilege in their family. Wema referred explicitly to her mother in pushing and guiding her, and persistently pursuing the education of all of her children. Her mother (like Motsamai's grandmother) was highly committed to ensuring that all of her children were enrolled in schools, attended classes and completed their education. She invested a lot of money for tuition, for example, to make sure that the children were learning and performing *well*, in order for them to continue on and study further. Wema got good grades and was selected to government schools, which her mother could afford, and for university studies she was granted a scholarship. Nonetheless, there were textbooks, exercise books, and uniforms to buy, in addition to pocket money needed for personal items. "Yes, certainly, definitely, it

was hard financially to educate us”, Wema said, and this was ‘visible’ in the clothes that they were wearing, and exemplified in going occasionally to boarding school with hardly any pocket money, and having only the very basics such as uniform, shoes and soap with her.

Wema’s mother used to bake chapatti (bread) and sell it in the staff room and cafeteria at the school where she was teaching. To add, they were supported by her parents and other relatives. All in all, Wema recalled how she saw her mother really trying to make the available money be enough: “she said that there is only this (amount of money) and you could really see that there is only this.” She also explained how:

“I don’t know, we felt somehow that we had to help our mother. I knew how to make my bed and other stuff [...] when I was still in primary school, I used to make my own food: when we came from school, you still have to cook the evening meal for me and my sister and for mother; there was not so much cleaning, but cooking, just normal stuff. [...] and for example, my brother, when we were living together, he was supposed to clean his own room [...] and cooking, yes, he was cooking. Sometimes he would come and wouldn’t complain that ‘why there is no food?’ No, he would just go there (kitchen), get the pan and then call: ‘is there anybody who wants to eat?’ And then we just go and eat his cooking”.

She and the siblings also felt that they just couldn’t fail due to all the efforts and the fact that their mother was supporting them alone. Looking across Wema’s story, it is clear that Wema’s mother’s goals had been particularly influential, she had decided and she was determined that all of her children were going to school. That was the ethos in the house: and the children, including Wema, did not have any alternatives to negotiate with their mother, not until she started to consider the option to pursue the master’s degree. Motsamai’s story was remarkably similar in this regard, as were most of the other narratives. Constructing successful educational pathways is enabled by families who prioritise and ‘enforce’ a focus on education – both instrumentally in terms of future employment and moving out of poverty and intrinsically, as a means of becoming better people. For many families, the investment in

their children's education was seen as a contributing to their 'mental' inheritance, the only heritage the family was in a position to leave for them.

4.3 Community

All of the South African students grew up in conditions of poverty, even though the extent thereof varied amongst the group. Thinking back to his school days, Motsamai reflects on his experiences of walking relatively long distances to and from school, without school shoes, even in the winter. His home did not have electricity, so all his studying was done by candle light or at the local high school when his candles ran out and there was no money to buy more. At the time he did not realise how difficult his childhood was, but looking back has come to see that he overcame a lot.

We did not have electricity at home, so I had used candle, and I was always supposed to study, not... I mean before it's too late because some candles we were running out at some point, so I had to rely on that. Or what I would rather do was to team up with some high school guys from local area, we would go to their school and study there, and perhaps go with them there and then study at the local school. That's what I would do, yes.

Motsamai is driven to success in education through his passion for becoming a lawyer, but also as a result of his strong connections with his community. As a community with limited resources, it was necessary to find alternatives 'to team up' and find solutions such as studying at different schools where needed resources were available. This community connection is particularly important to Motsamai and he expressed a strong need to return and make a positive contribution.

as people we never have the same courage, others are easily shaken by life experiences. I guess I would have also been shaken, except perhaps that I had this kind of mentorship [from teachers and a close friend] that helped me to go through in spite of everything. So, I always have a dream that maybe one day if I get to be that good and academic, perhaps with whatever resources I have, try and have something there, established there. Maybe to try and help, you know, the coming ones so

they cannot come to experience that, because it would be like cancer where the whole community, instead of really progressing, it would be regressing... [so I plan to] consider going around the schools in my community, you know, sharing my experience, telling them that this is just more than possible, you know.

As previously described, in Wema's case the commitment was to recognise the investment her extended family made to her educational career, rather than a commitment to the broader community. This acknowledgement is seen in the excerpt below, in which Wema describes her experiences in a village school, into which she was temporarily shifted for a month:

In the village, it was so different. I was feeling like, I am this kind of queen among these children. I don't know. I was coming from an urban area, but somehow I knew that some of the children in the village, at that time, maybe they don't go to school or even at home their mothers have never been to school or doesn't have any idea about education, and there is no role model.

To look at the community issue from another angle, in the Tanzania study, one of the key assumptions was that the women's familial everyday-life arrangements and perceptions regarding education and schooling of girls and women had been somehow more enabling than the ones that were surrounding them. Although it was common for the women to position themselves as 'typical middle class families', they also identified differences about how 'us' and 'they' value education, especially girls' education. Generally speaking, the socio-cultural expectations for the future role of girls', that is, marriage and family, in addition to the high social status attached for marriage and motherhood and the contrasting pervasive gender ideologies at the community level, combined with some communities holding negative view of educated girls depress the demand for female education and promote gendered differences in educational opportunities and outcomes. In the Tanzanian women's narratives, these perceptions were manifested in the notions of 'Mrs Somebody' and 'Beijing', the former signifying the importance of marriage and family, the latter referring to difficulties to be expected once you allow your daughter and wife to participate in

education, particularly higher education. According to the women's understanding 'They' were different regarding the expectations of what to study for, due to the priority given for girls' future roles as mothers and wives. Basically, all of the women considered that 'They' do not value education as the first thing for a girl, but a girl is prepared for marriage and family life. According to Wema's experiences, 'They' had the idea that education is the end of being a woman, or to be more accurate, the end of presumed being (and doing) for a woman:

"You remember Beijing-conference? So, the women who went to this conference, when they came back, they were like ... with this power! So, from that time, if you are a little bit educated and you seem to know what you want, what you want of your life, and not to be ruled over by a man, then they call you Beijing!"

The sense of being different was also evident in some of the South African stories where students were motivated to learn in order to escape from their communities and to show those who did not support them that a different life was possible. Although this was not a strong motivator for Motsamai, for several other students, 'proving' that they are different from their communities was particularly important. These two studies thus point to the complex interplay between community and education. For some students, coming from a poor community that did not always value education was enabling as it served as a motivator for them (and sometimes their families) to be different, while for others, community connections, role models and support were enablers during schooling as well as enablers in aspirations for higher education, with the aim of returning to make a difference and show others 'that this is more than just possible', to borrow Motsamai's words. Educational achievement, particularly in unequal societies, thus has a complex (and sometimes contradictory) relation with equity, providing opportunities to promote more equitable communities through giving back, but also, for those who are able to access education, providing a pathway for being different and moving out of one's community.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we set out to consider enabling environments for achieving equity, access and quality education, positioned as priorities in the post-2015 education context. From the outset, our emphasis was on the importance of understanding lives in context, or the circumstances that so powerfully mediate educational opportunity. In doing this, we drew on two stories from students who in some ways are quite similar, and in others quite different. In both South Africa and Tanzania, access to higher education is not self-evident. Thus, understanding the enablers at play for students and graduates who made it to, and through, university despite the odds being stacked against them provides a unique window from which to identify points of intervention to potentially enable others. We did not delve into the broader national contexts of these two case studies because the purpose of this paper was not to present a comparative account of education in South Africa and Tanzania, but rather to understand students' experiences in two distinct contexts so strengthening our argument and its transferability to developing countries more broadly.

Theoretically, the paper provides evidence of the value of focusing on educational well-being and agency, together with the importance of understanding the contextual influences on well-being and agency, so contributing to the broader capabilities approach literature. In particular, we have demonstrated the complex and contradictory nature of educational attainment in unequal societies and shown how the capabilities approach enabled us as researchers to unravel some of these complexities. With respect to policy implications, what do we learn from these people-centred accounts that is of relevance to the post-2015 agenda, the SDGs and related targets? While it would be somewhat easy to draw an exhaustively long list of factors that constrained Motsamai, Wema and the other participants' in both the South

African and Tanzanian studies to function and pursue the educational goals that they had reason to value, we have sought to draw attention to the enablers in their stories. Despite the different national contexts, genders, and backgrounds of Motsamai and Wema, we can nonetheless, identify powerful enablers that they (and the other students in our studies) have in common. These enablers, which contribute to educational well-being and achievement, operate at the interface of the ideals of equity, access and quality and can be observed in the domains of school, family and community.

Both Motsamai and Wema's stories (together with the other research participants) have highlighted the need to look beyond the instrumental value of education when formulating targets and designing interventions to achieve them. Both stories showed how central the intrinsic value of education was in shaping their lives and educational pathways. This is important when thinking about education goals and targets that commonly focus on the instrumental – such as ensuring basic levels of literacy and numeracy, or universal access. The increased emphasis on quality in the post-2015 debates potentially creates the space for the intrinsic value of education to be considered, depending on how expansively the notion of quality is defined. Our research has shown the value of in-depth qualitative data for understanding the intrinsic value of education in a given context, together with how the intrinsic value might be realised. In both the South African and Tanzanian cases, the role of teachers – beyond the formal instrumental task of teaching specified content, as important as that is – was critical. The intrinsic value of education was also strongly promoted by families who placed immense emphasis on the idea of being educated. Neither Motsamai nor Wema were given the option by their families of not persisting at school – and this finding was common across most of the research participants in both contexts. In addition to this moral emphasis on being educated, extended families went to great lengths to ensure that their children's education could be funded. Policy and practice towards achieving equity and

access in education ought to include a contextually relevant focus on the role of the extended family.

At the level of schooling, while ongoing work to ensure provision of quality school environments, including good teachers, is essential, our research has shown the need to move beyond provision of school facilities to a consideration of the ambience of the school. In conditions of poverty and inequality, schools are more than places to learn. We saw from Motsamai's example how school became a place of refuge from his difficult conditions at home, and for Wema, school was where she went to play, and to be a child – away from childhood household responsibilities. From specific teachers who looked beyond Motsamai's position in society as a boy living in poverty and without shoes for school, he learnt the importance of human dignity, while Wema's relationship with a teacher (matron) was pivotal in her identity formation as a young woman. In both cases, the school became a place through which both educational and personal well-being could be fostered. We thus see how schooling is much more than a simple technology to be deployed like mosquito nets – to return to McGrath's (2013, p. 17) critique of mainstream development accounts of the role of education.

Lastly, our data also pointed to the complex location of education within communities. Although the community as an enabler was somewhat more complex to untangle, Motsamai's story highlights the centrality of community support as well as the bonds of commitment that encouraged him to persist so that he can return and work towards improving his community. Indeed, he is already doing this in a small way by visiting schools with information about study options and encouraging other young people to apply for university. For Wema, the role of the community was less obvious, but equally important. Wema and her family (as well as the other women in the Tanzanian study) defined themselves as different from the community, and so educational performance and achievement became important to maintain

their relative position of status. In this instance the complexity of equity and access – within local contextual environments is highlighted. While our research does not point to specific guidelines regarding enablers at the community level, it does show the importance of understanding the complex social dynamics of the communities within which education takes place. Against this backdrop, the importance of the phrase “regardless of circumstance” included in the report of the High-Level Eminent Persons is obvious. Rather than focusing our attention on measuring performance with respect to the new SDGs and targets *regardless* of circumstance, we would be wise to invest more time and effort in understanding the role of circumstance in particular contexts.

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ⁱ In 2012, GER in tertiary education in South Africa was 19.7% and the proportion of females 22.7% in comparison to 16.6% of male students. In Tanzania, the numbers were 3.9%, 2.8% and 5.1%, respectively. (UIS 2014)