Introduction

Amartya Sen’s (1985) capability approach is a theory of justice that emphasizes assessing inequality in social arrangements. When justice is evaluated through capabilities, the role of social arrangements becomes expanding individuals’ capabilities by enabling the achievement of valued functionings, or the activities and states of being that are valued given personal, social, and/or cultural reasons (Alkire, 2008). The capability approach has been used to address issues of justice across different social institutions, including recently in the field of education (Terzi, 2005b). In particular, the capability approach has been examined for its potential as a theoretical framework for the just design of educational structures, with a focus on the entitlement of children with disabilities to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers, in other words, inclusive education. The capability approach shifts the assessment of justice from meeting the needs of children with disabilities to expanding capabilities. An inclusive educational setting framed in the capability approach expands and equalizes the actual freedom of children with disabilities to choose and achieve valued doings and beings, with that of their non-disabled peers.

This paper begins with the notion of justice as conceptualized by Sen (2009), argues for inclusive education as a matter of justice, problematizes the conceptualization of justice within which the notion of inclusive education is currently situated, and reframes inclusive education through a comparative realization-focused conceptualization of justice. Next, the paper examines three significant issues of inclusive education raised by critical scholars: universalist approaches to inclusive education, the conflation of inclusive and special education, and the need-based language of current theories of inclusive education. Third, this paper presents the model of relational inclusion (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016a, 2016b) to discuss the ways that the capability approach can be used to inform the education of children with disabilities. Relational inclusion provides a practical frame for contextualizing democratic practices of inclusive education, with an emphasis on
collaborative effort among educators, parents, and children. The paper concludes by providing directions for future educational research.

**Capability Approach and Justice**

The capability approach, developed by Sen (1985; 1992), aims to create a plane on which to assess equality on a multidimensional scale, or to answer the question “equality of what” as it applies to various aspects of persons’ lives (Terzi, 2005a, p. 449). In assessing justice, the focus of the capability approach is on “the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that – things that he or she may value doing or being” (Sen, 2009, p. 232). A thesis of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people’s capabilities: their freedom to choose and obtain valued functionings (Walker & Unterhalter, 2010).

The capability approach examines *functionings* and *capabilities* (Sen, 1992). Functionings are “the beings and doings that individuals have reason to value” (Terzi, 2005a, p. 449). They vary greatly in complexity: survival or wants related, personally or socially significant, and concrete or abstract (Alkire, 2008). Related to functionings are capabilities: the real opportunities and freedoms people have to achieve these valued functionings, or the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for people to obtain (Sen, 1992). Through the capability approach, social and institutional arrangements are examined based on their enactment of “the value of equal concern by aiming at equalizing people’s capability to function” (Terzi, 2007, p. 758). Social arrangements are assessed based on their allowance of people’s capabilities to be expanded, rather than only needs to be met, for their “well-being and hence for living good lives” (Terzi, 2007, p. 758).

Diversity and human heterogeneity is central to the capability approach. Diversity in personal characteristics and external circumstances impacts the ability to use resources to obtain functionings; the same amount and type of resources may open doors to more functionings for one person than another due to intrinsic and/or extrinsic factors (Alkire, 2008). This impact of human
diversity emphasizes the importance of focusing on capabilities and functionings, rather than needs or resources, in evaluating the quality of lives (Hinchcliffe & Terzi, 2009; Mitra, 2006).

Agency, another significant notion, is “a person’s ability to act on behalf of what matters to her or him,” or the ability to choose and act on choices (Alkire, 2007, p. 163). Choosing valued functionings is an exercise of agency; functionings can have various personal, social, or cultural reasons to value (Alkire, 2008). In assessing capabilities, people’s choices and obtainment of valued functionings is taken into account. A just society is one where people exercise their agency to obtain valued functionings (Terzi, 2014).

Context and culture shape people’s valued functionings. While capability approach scholars agree that valued functionings and capabilities should be justifiable, many are reluctant to pose an algorithm to determine what qualifies as such in all situations (Alkire, 2008). Sen (1999) maintained that reasonability should be determined through a democratic process involving public dialogue, debate and participation by those who will be affected by the capabilities in question. This democratic process is influenced by the context and culture in which public dialogues happen.

Sen’s conceptualization of justice. In formulating the capability approach, Sen (2009) shifted the conceptualization of the notion of justice, away from the conventional transcendental institutionalism perspective, adopted by most individuals and organizations. Transcendentalism refers to proposing universal measures to attain the perfectly just society; these measures are seen as the singular path to achieving a justice ideal. Institutionalism is the focus on the design of institutions to achieve justice (Sen, 2009). Justice is engaged with in politics as being transcendental and institutionalist (Sen, 2009). By virtue of declaring the characteristics of a justly designed institution and posing measures to attain these characteristics as being universal and undeniable, a dichotomy is created between the just institution and others. Transcendental institutionalism poses all institutions that have not attained the ideal as being unjust. Furthermore, although institutions
may be redesigned in accordance with the ideal, there is little attention to the realization of individuals’ lives.

Sen (2009) argued that focusing on impartial measures of justice is not useful for evaluating relative justice in existing or possible societies, as absolute justice measures are not always compatible with reality, and cannot apply indiscriminately across all contexts. Furthermore, while social institutions have the material and political means to shape the freedoms of different individuals, Sen (2009) questioned the focus of justice on institutions’ designs, rather than on the quality of people’s lives, suggesting that “perfectly” designed institutions may still overlook the injustices that people can face within them. For the assessment of how the quality of human lives may be improved from a justice standpoint, Sen (2009) suggested a comparative realization-focused conceptualization of justice. Comparative justice contrasts existing or possible societies with each other, rather than attempting to match up existing societies to justice ideals through absolute measures (Sen, 2009). The focus of justice is the outcome of people’s lives, rather than institutions (Sen, 2009). This notion signals a shift in the goal of justice, from an ideal social organization to strive for, to the continual enhancement of people’s lives. The capability approach is concerned with a context-responsive notion of human development that focuses on the continual enhancement of justice within people’s lives through comparative means, grounded in realizable societies (Alkire, 2008).

Educational Entitlement as a Matter of Justice

Sen (1999) listed education as a basic capability, a capability that is fundamental to human welfare, without elaborating this further. Terzi (2004a) presented two reasons for education being a basic capability: the withholding of education actively harms deprived individuals, and access to education is foundational for the expansion of other capabilities. The two reasons consider the
quality of being basic from two different but related standpoints: basic as necessary to uphold a minimal standard, and basic as foundational (Terzi, 2004a).

A responsive notion of human development—the primary concern of the capability approach—is compatible with the idea of Sen’s (1999) basic capabilities. As the enhancement of one’s future can be understood as a form of preventing harm to her/him, the provision of basic capabilities can be supported through evaluating existing and possible social institutions and social interactions to further the cause of comparative justice. For instance, evaluating the fundamentality of education, the capability approach looks at the capabilities that are expanded for individuals in a community through the availability of different levels of education. The present situation is compared with what is possible, and the scenario that would further equalize the relative freedoms of different people within a society is followed as the path. Education is a fundamental component of human development, as the provision of it to all members of a community would expand more people’s capabilities when compared to scenarios in which some individuals are not allowed any education.

**Inclusive education as a basic capability.** Inclusive education started with a call for equal provision of educational rights for children with disabilities. The inclusive education movement was a reaction to institutional segregation and thereby deemed itself to be pro-justice, from a transcendental institutionalist standpoint. The foundation of inclusive education in a transcendental institutionalist conceptualization of justice can be seen in how national and international bodies have engaged with inclusive education: The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), for instance, has greatly impacted legislation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Over 20 years ago the statement declared the education of children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers to be a basic human right, with the mission of “enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special needs” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii).
A two-decade timeline was posed as a deadline for the implementation of the Statement’s proposals, yet Salamanca’s stated mission has not been addressed successfully (see Kiuppis & Hausstatter, 2015). While the Salamanca Statement announced the principle of inclusion as a “major reform of the ordinary school” to “include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs,” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii) special education—placing children from special schools to regular schools through the rehabilitation, alteration, and assimilation of children with disabilities to the standards of regular schools—has modified students, rather than school systems (Reindal, 2015).

The failure to effectively translate inclusive education legislation to practice (see Slee, 2014; 2015) is related to transcendental institutionalism. Transcendental justice has declared inclusive education to be a stable concept that can only be accomplished through a certain set of measures, independent of context. The transcendental justice creates abstract standards that real or feasible societies are often not able to attain perfectly, aims to impose these standards through practices that are assumed to be universally applicable, and deems societies that cannot achieve these standards as all being unjust. Institutionalism has been the attempt to attain to justice ideal of inclusive education through focusing on and reforming the social institution that is held responsible: “the ordinary school” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii). For example, the Salamanca Statement suggested that schools would be the center of analysis for the provision of children’s rights, and implored governments to focus their educational legislation on opening schools to the presence of children with disabilities: change at the institutional level (UNESCO, 1994). While the Statement triggered a global movement in restructuring schools so that children with disabilities could be present in classrooms, it did little to ensure that these children would have an increased quality of education as a result (Dyson, 1999; Slee, 2015). Emergent integration practices focus on the design of educational institutions alone, rather than the lives of children with disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011). Children
with disabilities are officially allowed in regular schools, but improved education quality and social-emotional support is not secured for them.

Despite critiques of transcendental institutionalism, it has conveyed the provision of inclusive education as a necessity or a standard of justice (Terzi, 2014). To preserve the sense of necessity while conceptualizing a more applicable notion of educating children with disabilities, some scholars who engage with the capability approach have adopted education as a basic capability, but without necessarily promoting *inclusive* education (Terzi, 2004a; 2005b). To petition for inclusive education’s status as a basic capability, we argue that inclusive education is a culmination of two basic capabilities: education, and engagement in *social interaction without shame* (Sen, 1992; Terzi, 2005b).

Social interaction without shame suggests that people should be able to actively engage within their community without being shunned for their differences. It is a basic capability and contributes to human development, as people who are enabled this capability can be participants of social arrangements and expand many future capabilities through their participation. Social arrangements are obliged to protect diversity and respect agency in the expansion of capabilities as individuals strive to participate in their communities. All members of a community should be free to participate in social institutions that claim to serve the *general* population. Actively segregating a portion of people—who differ from the rest of their community because of a personal characteristic—to a separate institution without their democratic consultation, denies them this basic capability.

This, in principle, is what institutional segregation does. An example of segregation in early childhood education illustrates this: a child with an intellectual disability is enrolled into a specialized cognitive therapy program rather than a preschool. The *special school program* contrasts a mainstream preschool, and intellectual disability is used to divide the greater population
of children. The mainstream preschool, despite being designed to serve the general community, funnels out the children with intellectual disabilities to the special program. Both institutions provide education to children, with the aim of expanding other capabilities in the future. However, the special program denies the basic capability of social interaction without shame to the child with an intellectual disability, as he does not attend the mainstream school, and thus is not provided the opportunity to expand the capabilities that social interaction without shame would enable.

Inclusive education, on the other hand, aims to provide education to children with disabilities among their peers. The freedom to engage in an inclusive setting is the capability of social interaction without shame; as well, the overall purpose of inclusive education settings as social arrangements is to provide the basic capability of education. As educational institutions must ensure these two basic capabilities simultaneously for the enhancement of justice and for further human development, and as inclusive education attempts to enhance both basic capabilities, inclusive education should be considered a basic capability itself. It is essential to frame it as such, as many still justify segregated education as satisfactory or preferable for children with disabilities. Inclusive education being framed as a basic capability in and of itself asserts inclusive education as a freedom that should be ensured for all children.

Reconsidering Inclusive Education through the Capability Approach

This section discusses how the capability approach as a theoretical framework can foster more just inclusive education practices. Three main issues of contemporary inclusive education practices are examined.

Universalist perspectives on inclusive education. Universalism, refers to a complex notion that something can exist or hold true across time, geography, cultures and contexts. It is engrained into the inclusive education movement, and has enabled the movement to establish itself on a global scale. However, depending on the interpretation of universalism taken, different things hold
universally true, resulting in conceptual confusions. With inclusive education, universalist declarations on ethics suggest that inclusive education must be a universal provision for all children, while other universalist perspectives also suggest that there is an absolute construct that is the *inclusive classroom*, thereby suggesting a set of practices that must be applied consistently across different contexts and with different individuals. The multiplicity of its meanings, among other factors, has resulted in problematic approaches to universalism dominating inclusive education perspectives and practices (see Kiuppis, 2014; Kiuppis & Haustatter, 2015).

Universalism is integral for the inclusive education movement; any declaration on the rights and freedoms of children is an assertion that *something* should hold true in all cases. The *things* holding true are ethical statements, or perspectives that can be applied in a flexible manner. The principle of Education for All is a universal declaration (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement approached the matter of educating children with disabilities within mainstream classrooms among their peers as an undisputable matter, providing a foundation for the movement’s legitimacy and sparking changes in the design of educational institutions (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Slee, 2015). However, universalism in inclusive education becomes problematic due to the dominant understanding of a single type of “inclusive classroom” and a single set of “inclusive practices” for a given disability label and corresponding age of the individual regardless of their context and culture.

Due to universalism in measures to attain to justice ideals, contextual and cultural factors in inclusive education are dismissed. Inclusive education has focused on how to design the *perfect inclusive school*, through a set of universalized practices. These measures assume: there is one type of classroom with one type of educator, the nondisabled children are the same type of learners and fundamentally differ from children with disabilities, children’s diagnoses make them predictable in relation to the practices used for their inclusion, all families of children with disabilities value the
same educational goals for their children (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016a, 2016b). Little is done
to assess whether practices stemming from such assumptions satisfy the values of educators,
children, and families within their given culture and context. Contemporary enactment of inclusive
education ultimately involves institution-focused changes that are meant to be applicable for all
educational settings, but do not ensure that children with disabilities have enhanced educational
experiences in which they are free of marginalization, and limitations of their agency (Naraian,
2013).

While universalism in ethical declarations has been crucial in establishing inclusive
education as a significant global movement, the taken-for-grantedness of *universal* notions have
also enabled universalism in measures to follow and in stereotyping, that erase the importance of
cultural and contextual factors and diversity among individuals despite the sharing of common
traits. Universalism, as an epistemological position, promotes an ethical anti-individualism that
ultimately prevents children with disabilities from expressing and obtaining valued educational
outcomes and contributing to specific aspects of their well-being.

Reframing inclusive education through the capability approach as a foundational component
of human development provides an alternative to universalist perspectives and practices; the
implications of inclusive education as a human development initiative are concerned with further
expanding children’s capabilities. Capabilities to expand—and the practices that will expand
them—are chosen based on what are valued, and what are agreed upon to be reasonable, through a
democratic decision-making process involving the educator, the child with a disability, and the
family of the child, situated within the culture and the context. Rather than attempting to make all
educational institutions be similar in character—and match up to the ideal of an inclusive school or
preschool—this approach is responsive to the diversity between different educational settings, and
to the diversity among different individuals who use these settings. The selection of educational
practices is guided, implicitly, through the comparison of existing ones and the ones that are possible given the context. Educational practices are selected in relation to which approach will expand the valued and reasonable capabilities of the child at hand, rather than selected based on which set of practices will replicate the structure and organization of singularly-constructed ideal school.

Pathologizing diversity in inclusive education. Practices of schooling under the guise of inclusive education have been strongly influenced by perspectives on disability adopted by educational professionals and policy makers. A medical model of disability has dominated the education of children with disabilities (Slee & Allan, 2001). This model has resulted in practices that are geared toward the regulation and assimilation of children with disabilities into a normative mould of typical development, particularly through techniques of behavioural modification (Baglieri et al., 2011; Danforth & Naraian, 2015).

The medical model of disability is based upon the fabricated norms of typical development, and identifies disability as being inherent in an individual with impairment. The model uses the presence of impairments to categorize people distinctly into one of two groups: those with disabilities, and those without disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are considered “imperfect versions of humanity” whose patterns of development need intervention, rehabilitation, and modification (Danforth & Naraian, 2015, p. 78). The marginalization that individuals with disabilities face in society is seen as a direct and unavoidable consequence of having impairments (Allan, 2010). The alleviation of social exclusion thus rests in the individual’s impairment being erased.

In educational settings, the medical model of disability translates to practices of special education (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005; Slee, 2001). Special education, as an application of developmental psychology into classrooms, sets a rigid and normative binary of
typically developing (*normal*) versus atypically developing (*special needs*) students. The exclusion that students with disabilities face is seen as an unavoidable consequence of the physical, emotional, behavioural, or other pathologized indicators of atypical development. Special education seeks to remedy the exclusion faced by children with disabilities in their learning environments by reversing these indicators, often through employing practices of behavioural modification (Baglieri et al., 2011). For example, techniques such as applied behavioural analysis (ABA), used frequently on children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in both preschool and K-12 classrooms, target many behaviours of children that may be mundane (not causing harm to either themselves or others around them) but are different from their peers’ ways of acting in similar situations, such as peer interaction, participation, and focus of interest. Children with disabilities have, essentially, one of two choices: either assimilate into a classroom that was created for their non-disabled peers through undergoing regulation and becoming different people, or be marginalized as the person that they are (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2015).

In response to special education practices, education theorists from critical perspectives have called to adopt a social model of disability in education (Allan, 2010; Mitra, 2006; Terzi, 2004b). The social model of disability emerged to challenge the conceptualization of disability as a characteristic that resides within an individual, and to critically engage with discourses surrounding disability such as “the formidable tragedy discourse... that depicts disability as a deficit, a tragedy and abnormal, and something to be avoided at all costs” (Allan, 2010, p. 605). This model understands disability to be a form of oppression, rooted in the disabling conditions and restrictions set by society (Broderick et al., 2005). However, critique of this model is also emerging (Reindal, 2008; Terzi, 2004b). Mainly, the social model is dismissive of the role of impairments, as characteristics possessed by individuals, in constructing the notion of disability. Therefore, the social model describes the condition of disablement as if it has no discernible origin, or that
disabled individuals also having impairments is a coincidence of society. The dismissal of impairment overlooks the experiences of many people with disabilities, and the various difficulties they may face as part of their everyday lives.

Although the medical and social models of disability fundamentally differ from one another in many aspects, and are seen to be polar opposites by many, a commonality they share is that they do not consider impairment to be a human characteristic and a form of diversity. The medical model of disability sees impairment as a problem that must be fixed before an individual is considered whole again, implying that impairments cannot be characteristics of people, and thus problematizing impairment. The social model of disability, on the other hand, dismisses impairment in the analysis of disability, thus failing to consider impairment as a human characteristic.

Rather than as a personal fault or as a socially constructed form of exclusion, the capability approach defines disability as a limitation of capabilities within a particular society and its confines (Terzi, 2004b). However, to not oversimplify what constitutes a disability, the capability approach does not consider all limitations of capabilities as falling under this category. People’s capabilities may be limited in different ways due to a variety of personal characteristics, which may impact their freedoms or their ability to use resources to obtain valued functionings. Specifically, disabilities are limitations of capabilities that are due to some form of impairment. This definition, while acknowledging that impairments have a role in the construction of disability, does not suggest that disability is the fault of an individual (Mitra, 2006). While impairment is a necessary condition for the experience of disablement it is not a sufficient condition, in that all individuals with disabilities have some form of impairment but not all individuals with impairments are disabled (Reindal, 2008). What impairments lead to disablement is dependent on the social arrangements—interactions and institutions—within which people operate, as social arrangements enable individuals differently in expanding their capabilities to obtain valued functionings (Mitra, 2006; Reindal, 2009).
As the status of disablement necessitates impairment and is relational to social conditions, a capability-oriented model of disability is a social-relational model (Reindal, 2008; 2009). Diversity is at the forefront when considering capabilities, and the approach does not encourage the removal of diversity. As impairments are considered human characteristics, and a form of diversity, the social relational model does not advocate for education practices to regulate children into fitting a construct of typical development. Instead, the social arrangements of schools must focus on how capabilities may be expanded to grant the freedom to obtain valued and reasonable functionings for children with impairments. Diversity among children is taken into account, not to erase impairment but to consider how impairment may impact the conversion of resources to capabilities.

**Inclusion as a process of meeting needs.** The language of inclusive education is heavily based in meeting the needs of children with disabilities. Contemporary educational practices directed at children with disabilities aim to compensate for their special educational needs. This language of needs removes agency from children with disabilities and reduces inclusion to a matter of resources.

The passivity ascribed in the language of needs is used to remove agency from children with disabilities in their education. Inclusive education as a needs-focused intervention requires professionals to identify needs that have not been met for the child, without consulting the child (or her/his family) in the discussion on the purpose of the educational practice directed at the identified need. Although it can be argued that no child is consulted in curriculum development or setting educational goals, this holds truer for children with disabilities, whose choices are more limited. The language of needs assigns passivity to children with disabilities; education serves to compensate for their needs and the helplessness that is implicit to their need status, rather than for personal growth, enhancement, and valuable experiences. Children with disabilities, perceived as helpless and passive relative to their peers and adults, are not provided the means to express their
values and educational aims; these are perceived as secondary to addressing needs.

The idea of meeting needs also has resulted in inclusive education being approached as an intervention program dependent on the allocation and provision of resources through the institutions that govern education. Resource distribution has been prioritized as a primary way in which inclusive education can be realized, a trend that dates back to the Salamanca Statement, which urged governments to “give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their educational systems to enable them to include all children,” and called for the “[investment of] greater effort in early identification and intervention strategies” (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix). Inclusive education has been practiced as an effort to diagnose children’s needs, select the correct intervention strategy to meet needs, and to allocate resources for intervention purposes (Baglieri et al., 2011; Danforth & Naraian, 2015). However, it is limiting to expect institutional processes involving resource allocations alone can instigate the shift in educational perspectives and practices that inclusive education requires, especially when the necessity, sufficiency, or the impacts of these resources are not evaluated (see Terzi, 2005b). Resources do not change the dominant attitudes about children with disabilities as being inferior to their peers, or necessarily guarantee children’s agency to learn and participate in the educational program, as children have different abilities in converting resources to valued ends.

It has been difficult to unite early childhood education with the capability approach and the notion of agency, as the participants of education are young children with disabilities (e.g., Devecchi, Rose, & Shevlin, 2014). There is a concern that young children with disabilities are not equipped to determine the constituents of their own well-being (Underwood, Chan, Koller, & Valeo, 2015). Children’s agency in choosing valued functionings is overlooked in favour of adult decision-making (see Terzi, 2007). Children are thought of as too young to be able to make decisions, and particularly the neurobiological development of young children with intellectual
disabilities is not considered sufficient for them to choose their values. However, age and neurobiological development are arguably manifestations of human heterogeneity (Taylor, 2013). An important consideration is why age and neurobiological development, as diversities, should be treated as criteria for assessing the legitimacy of an individual’s exercise of agency. The opportunity to choose valued functionings must be accessible to all people, even for children with disabilities in early learning settings.

While children with disabilities do not lack the ability to choose their values, social arrangements like schools may dismiss their choices. One reason for this is the communication barriers between practitioners and young children with disabilities. However, the inability to communicate in one mode, such as verbal language, does not mean communication is impossible to establish between children and educators. Underwood et al. (2015) proposed a capability-oriented approach for acknowledging children’s choice of their valued functionings, arguing that young children with disabilities are able to express their valued functionings when provided with a wider array of communication methods. A second reason is that the structure and framework behind schooling practices may disregard children’s values. Using the example above, the child’s wish may be understood, but still declined due to assumptions regarding children’s needs for healthy personal and social development. Here, the discussion of valued functionings also incorporates their reasonability. The dismissal of children’s agency in education leaves functionings in education systems to be selected based on whether they are necessary, ethical, correct, and achievable, as determined by policy makers and professionals. The consideration of children’s agency requires that a discussion of reasonability also include the child at hand, and his/her parents who may add certain considerations of reasonability in functionings. While the language of needs ascribes passivity to children, the language of capabilities encourages an active and agentic role from them. The capability approach empowers a person through examining which capabilities are valuable to them,
and constitutive of their well-being. The capability approach, informing inclusive education, enhances participation through focusing on the realization of valued functionings as a result of expanded capabilities (Terzi, 2004b).

**Relational Inclusion: The Capability Approach in Educational Practice**

The significant issues of inclusive education, discussed in this paper, are resultant of the theoretical foundations of inclusive education. Inclusive education must undergo an ideological shift at a foundational level. Situating inclusive education within the capability approach as a novel framework has considered how this foundational shift may impact various educational issues. Here, we take up the call by scholars for a remodelling of inclusive education (e.g., Slee, 2001; Terzi, 2010), and consider how inclusive educational practice can be informed by the capability approach, via the principles of *relational inclusion*. Relational inclusion (Dalkilic, 2014) originally was proposed as an alternative inclusive education model that was responsive to the individuals, and built through their relationships with one another. Currently, it is founded on five principles that are closely linked to the capabilities of children within schools, and that communicate a requirement for the centrality of culture and context, a holistic view of the child, a non-binarist view of inclusive education, a perspective on the education of all as an enactment of democracy in schools, and a necessity to focus on a relational ontology in practice (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016a; 2016b).

**Culture and context responsive inclusive practices.** This principle was developed as a response to the problem of universalism in current inclusive education practices. Universalized perspectives on the measures to foster inclusive education decontextualize educational practices, and have the potential to inhibit the attainment of children’s and families’ educational goals. The first principle of relational inclusion, drawing on the insights of the capability approach on cultural and contextual indicators of capabilities, emphasizes the centrality of the context and the cultures of educators, children, and their families in determining which practices would expand on the
capabilities of children, for them to obtain their valued functionings.

To clarify this principle further and to illustrate what it might look like in practice, we provide an example. This particular example is based on the first author’s experiences as an early childhood educator. It was suggested that a young child with severe hearing impairment be provided an interpreter throughout the duration of her time at the preschool. However, the parents who were both Deaf, and immersed in Deaf culture objected to their child’s dependence on an interpreter, and stated that they wanted their child to gain some fluency in lip-reading through immersion; this interest was shared by the child. Although a universalist assumption would have been that a child with severe hearing loss would require an interpreter around her, and that the parents would support that decision made by experts, this was not the case. While not negating that an interpreter may be appreciated and valued by some families, to expand the capabilities of some children, in this case the family had a different set of cultural values that informed their chosen functionings as constituents of the child’s well-being. A consideration of these values led the educators to decide that, rather than providing an interpreter, some of our educators would learn basic signs for accessibility purposes and that we would enunciate our words more carefully to provide some opportunities for the child to practice lip-reading. In this example, similar to what relational inclusion suggests, rather than following universalized standards of care, the cultural values of the family were taken into account, to adjust education practices with those values in mind. Through building practices based on these values, the educators were able to provide opportunities for the child to expand her chosen capabilities.

**Holistic child-focused inclusive pedagogy.** The second principle of relational inclusion is also a response to the problem of universalism. This particular principle considers children’s identities beyond the label of disability ascribed to them, and beyond what their impairments entail. Informed by the capability approach, relational inclusion views impairment as manifestations of
human diversity, and objects to the “practice of [inclusive education that are based on] assigning children to categories and levels of disability and considering their entitlements according to category attenuates” (Slee, 2011, p. 157). Further, Nussbaum (2006) asserted that,

…it would be progress if we could acknowledge that there is really no such thing as ‘the normal child’: instead, there are children, with varying capabilities and varying impediments, all of whom [require] individualized attention as their capabilities are developed. (p. 210)

Building practices of inclusive education primarily based on labels of disability, objectifies the child and pathologizes diversity. On the other hand, a holistic child-focused pedagogy looks at the child as an individual, without the need to be intervened and mediated to count as a complete person. This principle is designed to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and intentions, “and to open the possibility of counter intelligence” (Slee, 2011, p. 157). This is only possible by an active attempt to change the focus on labels.

**Inclusion as a spectrum of practices.** Drawing on the capability approach’s focus on the expansion of capabilities, in reference to entitlement of children with disabilities to inclusive education, relational inclusion does not rely on a binary classification of classrooms as inclusive versus exclusive. Rather, in principle, relational inclusion acknowledges that not all “inclusive” practices similarly expand the capabilities of children with disabilities. More importantly, this particular principle is an assertion that the practices in any educational institution can be simultaneously inclusive and exclusive (Slee, 2001). For this reason, it is fundamental to relational inclusion that there is ongoing dynamic assessment of the educational practices in classrooms to evaluate how these practices may enhance or hinder children’s ability to obtain their valued functionings. In examining educational practices, relational inclusion takes the capabilities of the individual child as the unit of analysis; educational practices informed by relational inclusion are
examined based on the extent to which they expand children’s actual freedom in choosing and obtaining their valued functionings in terms of educational outcomes.

The ongoing evaluation of the program is done through a collaborative effort of the educator team, families, and the child at hand. The data for the evaluation, so to speak, is collected through the observational notes of educators in classrooms, and anecdotal observations of families. Children contribute their perspectives to the analysis through their preferred mode of communication: play, drawing, singing, picture exchange communication, among others (see Underwood et al., 2015). Collaborators share their observations on regular basis, and as a result practices are continuously modified for new ways to further expand on capabilities of the children, and hence to be more inclusive.

**Inclusion as democratic participation in classrooms.** As an assertion that “inclusive education is first and foremost a political position” (Slee, 2011, p. 14), relational inclusion informed by the capability approach views classrooms as spaces that present the challenge of bringing values and offering of different children together and a place to exercise building a community, despite differences. To build this community, “all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others,” to contribute to the community and to benefit from it (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 80). This principle is to shield practices of relational inclusion from ascribing passivity to children with disability. It asserts that “inclusion is not something that [is done] to discrete populations of children,” but rather it is a form of democratic participation of all members of the classroom community (Allan, 2005, p. 293). This is best exercised through the active engagement of children with disabilities in decisions regarding identifying valued and reasonable functionings. Including children in the decision making process, where they contribute through their preferred modes of communication, allows the exercise of each child’s agency and democratic participation.
**Ontological shift toward relational practices.** The final principle of relational inclusion informed by the capability approach is a call for a relational ontology,\(^1\) or a relational way of being, in inclusive education practices. As part of a relational ontology, educators must embed within their practice the awareness of the ideas they regularly engage with, and how these ideas shape the lives of children and their families. For a relational way to practice education that is more inclusive, educators must understand the significant connections and relationships that they are part of, and must build their practices based on those relationships.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This paper applied the principles of justice as defined by Sen (2009), and the capability approach developed by Sen (1985; 1992), to inclusive education. In connecting capability to the demands of justice, following Sen (2009), this paper shifts from transcendental institutionalism to a comparative realization-focused conceptualization of justice, wherein justice is examined on its effectiveness as a process of enhancing the freedom of individuals in obtaining the functionings that are constitutive of their well-being. Current perspectives and practices of inclusive education were problematized in relation to three main shortcomings: universalism, pathologization of diversity, and a needs-based language. A reframing of inclusive education through the capability approach was proposed; this paper examined how the capability approach conceptualizes justice and how it can be applied in education to enhance the well-being of children with disabilities.

Although scholars have begun to theorize on capabilities in education, empirical studies are needed to further examine the application of these theories. Currently there are few empirical studies on inclusive education situated within the capability approach (e.g. Underwood et al., 2015). The lack of research in this domain invites more empirical research to elevate an emerging

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1 The term “relational ontology” is taken in its basic connotation, simply highlighting the fundamental importance of the relationships between entities, over the isolated entities themselves (Wildman, 2010).
educational theory to a practical level. By employing a methodology that enables ongoing formative evaluation of the model of Relational Inclusion, the feasibility of the model and applicability of the principles to practice needs to be examined. A fundamental question of the study needs to be on how effective this model is in addressing its theoretical focus: the enhancement of justice through the expansion of capabilities of children with disabilities in education.

References


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