

New VET Theories for New Times: The Critical Capabilities Approach to Vocational Education and Training and its Potential for Theorising a Transformed and Transformational VET

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Introduction

There is a growing sense that the orthodox set of theories and policies for VET don't work (cf. McGrath, 2012; Zancajo and Valiente, 2018; Bonvin, 2019; McGrath et al., 2019, Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019; Powell and McGrath, 2019a). This is particularly true in the South where all such Northern theories and policies face the common problem of being constructed for other contexts and then imported. In the light of persistent poverty and inequality; widespread precarious and indecent work; continued concerns about educational access, retention and achievement; and a rising environmental crisis, VET must be transformed to address a new and challenging set of objectives. Whilst VET currently has some challenges in delivering on its existing narrow vision, we will argue that a transformed understanding of the broad range of VET actors and outcomes helps us to a more positive reading of what VET already does and what it can do in the future. Developing appropriate VET theories for new times is not just an urgent task for academic purposes but is an essential underpinning of the new policies and practices required to transform VET so that it can contribute to societal transformations that support human flourishing across economic, environmental and social domains. Of course, in positing this transformational role for VET, we are not claiming that "skills can save us" (cf. Allais, 2012) but, rather, that VET can support wider societal attempts to develop just transitions (cf. Swilling and Annecke, 2012). In part, this may come from supporting VET learners both to realise the limitations of their presents and the possibilities of their futures, as we shall explore later.

At the heart of this article is an exploration of a theoretical approach to VET research that has emerged in the past decade and which offers new insights into how VET can be transformed in order to contribute to the wider transformation agenda around sustainable human development. This is what we term the critical capabilities account of vocational education and training, CCA-VET. The use of critical here has attracted some push back from those who argue that the capabilities approach is itself critical (cf. Robeyns, 2017 for a broader review of the debate regarding how critical the capabilities approach is). Whilst we accept that the capabilities approach does offer much that is explicitly critical of development and education orthodoxies, here we are following De Jaeghere (2015) in using critical to point to a more explicit drawing upon critical theory generally and, in some cases, critical realism specifically, which characterises the work we are summarising.

How are we summarising this work? It is important to stress that we are not engaged in a critical review of a literature from the outside. Rather, we are all engaged in writing in this space and have done the more systematic, critical reviewing of the literature in books, theses and articles. Our purpose here is to offer a sympathetic summative review of where this new approach has got to in its first decade, whilst noting some areas for further development. In what follows we largely draw our concrete examples from our own work in various contexts but this is not to suggest that those studies are the sum or summit of

the approach. It is our contention that the contextual variety that has accompanied the approach's development has helped its theoretical richness and robustness.

As will become apparent as we develop our argument, we suggest that CCA-VET currently offers two key contributions to thinking about VET theory. First, it offers a combined ontological, epistemological and methodological response to UNESCO's call for a transformed and transformative VET by bringing public deliberation and deliberative democratic approach to the forefront. Here, it sits very squarely within the wider traditions of the capability approach. Although we note that our approach in this paper has methodological implications, we do not explore these in as much depth here as the theoretical. Nor do we explore the many policy implications of this work here.

Contrary to historical top-down policy- and enterprise-led approaches, the voices, experience and aspirations of students are placed at the centre of the discussion (Powell, 2012). This is not only an ontological shift in the way in which VET students are perceived and neither is it simply an epistemological and/or methodological shift in the way in which knowledge for VET is produced (cf. McGrath et al., 2019a). Instead, it is a profoundly differently way of orientating the purpose of VET towards the wellbeing and needs of those that VET serves rather than towards the needs of capital. In the extractive economies of the South, it challenges the historic colonial roots of VET by opening debate and public deliberation on what the purpose of VET in these contexts might be. In the North, it addresses the role of VET in a post-industrial era of austerity. In so doing, it provides a space and a method to expand our imaginations regarding the possibilities for and of VET.

In drawing on one of Amartya Sen's key questions: "equality of what", it moves the VET debate away from equality in terms of parity of esteem of knowledge or qualifications towards considerations of equality in terms of human freedoms and flourishings. As we will argue below, it challenges what we understand as poverty but also recognises the capability to aspire and unequal capacities to participate in deliberative democracy as key poverties/wealths. It places what matters to students at the centre of our attention, whilst resisting the danger of seeing them as atomised and simply rational economic actors.

Second, it sees this transformed and transformative role for VET also in terms of emancipation, reflecting both its roots in the capability approach and in strands of feminist theory. This begins in an insistence in not just identifying injustice in the interplay of structure and agency but looking at how individual aspirations, valued capabilities and collective action can bring about radical changes in lives. Crucially, the approach makes it clear that education alone cannot be emancipatory and transformatory but must be understood and acted upon together with analysis of the current realities and future possibilities and challenges of the multiple worlds-of-work. It sees better learning, better work and better lives as inextricably interrelated.

In focusing on CCA-VET, we are not claiming that other theoretical resources are not important. We are not engaged in developing 'one theory to rule them all' but in growing one of a thousand flowers that need to bloom. Other important traditions include those of political economy of skills; vocational knowledge; community skills development; and skills for sustainable development (cf. McGrath et al., 2019a). As will become evident in this article, these theories share important characteristics, as well as disagreeing on certain key points. However, for our purposes here, other traditions will only be referred to when they relate to CCA-VET.

Introducing CCA-VET

The capability account element of the CCA-VET name makes clear one of the most important inheritances of the approach. It begins with the work of Amartya Sen and most significantly with *Development as Freedom* (Sen, 1999). Most fundamentally, what it takes from Sen is the argument that development is about human flourishing. In Sen's view, individual income and national economic development are simply means to this greater end.

Sen's work was adopted in the following decade in education research, most notably by South African scholars, Elaine Unterhalter and Melanie Walker (e.g., Walker, 2003 and 2006; Unterhalter, 2005; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007; Boni and Walker, 2013; Walker and McLean, 2013; Walker and Fongwa, 2016). Walker and Unterhalter note that both Sen and his key interlocutor, Martha Nussbaum, see education as crucial to the larger human development project. In the smaller literature on education to work transitions, education to work transitions the accounts of Bonvin and Farvaque (2006) and Harreveld, Singh and Li (2013) are noteworthy.

The core of the notion of capability is that individuals can identify their "valued beings and doings" through reasoning, which in turn is facilitated by education. Education, thus, primarily is about human flourishing, not human capital development. The human development and capability approach (HDCA) places much emphasis on evaluation, and the shift in focus towards human flourishing allows new questions to be asked regarding the ways in which educational institutions are successful or not in supporting the achievement of human flourishing.

A significant strand of the capabilities literature has sought to move beyond the individualism at the heart of Sen's approach. Though this remains a matter of considerable controversy within the tradition (cf. Robeyns, 2017), Deneulin (2014) in particular has argued for a notion of "collective capabilities", whilst De Jaeghere (2019) has raised the importance of relational capabilities. Walker and McLean (2013) and Powell and McGrath (2019a) have argued that educational institutions can also be conceived as having organisational capabilities, in a way that evokes the use of a different notion of organisational capabilities in evolutionary economics (cf. Kruss et al., 2015). Conradie and Robeyns (2013) and Moodie (2019) make the connection that such intermediate organisations as schools, churches and community groups play a key role in the development of collective and relational capabilities.

Much of the HDCA and education literature is concerned with schooling. However, through Walker's work in particular, HDCA increasingly has been applied to higher education. Her principal focus on South Africa has helped her to develop an account that reflects many of the concerns explored below with linking the agentic strengths of HDCA to a more structural reading of contexts.

In the 2010s, a new literature developed that applies HDCA to VET. It seeks to address both inequality in skills development and how we might move away from a narrow focus on immediate employability and production, and attempts to return to wider questions of the purpose of vocational education as part of individual and communal striving towards human flourishing. This first decade has seen the approach reach a degree of maturity and critical mass, marked by the first book length treatments (De Jaeghere, 2017; Powell and McGrath, 2019a) and a dedicated section in the new *Springer Handbook of Vocational Education and Training* (McGrath et al., 2019b). Therefore, this article seeks to summarise the developments in the literature thus far, and to note some current weaknesses and limitations.

In keeping with the wider HDCA and education literature, it moves beyond the atomised individualism of the orthodox human capital approach by developing a far stronger account of agency. At the same time, it has also expanded beyond early work on capabilities and education in schooling particularly by drawing on the powerful political economy of skills tradition, which has been the principal counternarrative in the VET literature for the past two decades. However, it also draws rather eclectically on a series of other critical theories, such as critical realism, strong structuration theory and several strands of feminist theory, whilst pointing to the need for stronger engagement with postcolonial and sustainability accounts.

Crucially, the CCA-VET literature has developed as a conversation using both Northern and Southern theoretical roots. As well as Sen, it has also drawn theoretically on several Indian theorists, such as Appadurai (2004) and Ray (2003). Simultaneously, CCA-VET has developed to explore both Northern (e.g., Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; Lopez-Fogues,

2016; Bonvin, 2019; Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019; Suart, 2019) and Southern contexts (e.g., Powell, 2012; Tikly, 2013; De Jaeghere and Baxter, 2014; Powell, 2014; McGrath and Powell, 2015; De Jaeghere, Wiger and Willemsen, 2016; Hilal and McGrath, 2016; De Jaeghere, 2017; Hilal, 2018 and 2019; Powell and McGrath, 2018; Powell and McGrath, 2019a and b; Alla-Mensah, 2018).

Whether focused on the global South or North, the approach places young people's voices at its centre and seeks to listen carefully to their stories of where they have come from before VET, often including accounts of marginalisation and disempowerment; their hopes for and experiences of VET; and their aspirations for their future lives. In all of this, work is seen as central and not just learning. At its heart, CCA-VET has eight key elements:

- VET learners' experiences of multidimensional poverty
- a gendered perspective
- interaction with the political economy of skills account
- a broad conceptualisation of work
- a focus on flourishing
- the centrality of aspirations
- a multiplicity of decision points in vocational learning pathways
- an evaluative dimension

VET Learners' Experiences of Multidimensional Poverty

If our understanding of VET is to begin from the learners, then we need to start from where they come from. Whilst VET is so broad that learners come from all possible backgrounds, the majority of VET learners, and particularly those in informal and non-formal VET, are from backgrounds in which poverty plays a key role in their lives. Moreover, their experiences of education to date have often been disenabling, frequently characterised by symbolic violence (Bonvin, 2019; Duckworth and Smith, 2019). However, it is important to stress that this does not lead to a neoliberal view of these learners as being in deficit. Nor does it reduce poverty to income poverty, as is common in economic understandings.

Rather, one of the important strands of the HDCA approach is an emphasis on multi-dimensional poverty (Sen, 1999). That is to say, HDCA conceptualises poverty as capability deprivation across multiple dimensions, an important potential contribution to VET theory's engagement with poverty. Powell and McGrath, for instance, suggest six dimensions in their study in South Africa's Western Cape:

- household income
- individual income
- single parent households
- highest parental qualification
- drugs and gangsterism
- housing (Powell and McGrath, 2019a: 74-83)

Other factors will appear more important in other settings. For instance, Lopez-Fogues' (2016) and Suart's (2019) work on VET in Europe in times of austerity; Hilal's (2018 and 2019) work on Palestine in the context of occupation and resistance; and Alla-Mensah's (2019) work in the Ghanaian informal economy each highlight important local experiences of multidimensional poverty, such as prior educational levels and experiences, and limitations on freedom to travel and work.

Hence, the message here is that these need to be understood by researchers, practitioners and policymakers involved in VET. Whilst these experiences do not determine decisions about enrolling and staying in VET; or student performance or labour market outcomes, they clearly are important to these. As such, they form part both of the sets of endowments

that learners bring to vocational learning and of the decision-making processes that we outline below. As Powell and McGrath (2019a: 174) note from their study:

The majority of the learners interviewed had experiences of poverty that went far beyond income deprivation and these experiences affected their decisions about study, work and their broader lives.

A Gendered Perspective

Much of the VET literature historically has been implicitly (and often explicitly) masculinist in its assumptions, reflecting broader patterns in the gendered division of labour (McGrath, 2012). Historically, VET was understood first as being about the learning of young men in male-dominated trades and crafts. CCA-VET, in keeping with the HDCA tradition (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005; Nussbaum, 2011), draws heavily on several strands of feminism. Writers in the CCA-VET tradition have often added further feminist literatures in order to strengthen HDCA's contribution to thinking about how gender inequality is structured.

CCA-VET's broad view on work (see below) is powerfully influenced by arguments about how much of women's work is invisible (e.g., Waring, 1988); how women's experiences of and access to the formal labour market are profoundly shaped by patriarchy (e.g., Walby, 1986); and about the need to include the caring economy into the conversation about work (e.g., Donath, 2000).

Suart (2019) draws on Fraser's critical feminist theories of social and gender justice (1997; 2007; 2008a and b; 2013). Like Sen, Fraser argues that the "interpretation of needs" is not neutral but political, and calls for us to question who decides what women need and why. Her three dimensions of social justice provide a lens which allows us to focus on the interimbrication of cultural and economic injustices and questions of who can make a claim for justice.

Hilal (2018 and 2019) draws upon Kabeer's (e.g., 1999) work on gender and development. In particular, she explores, in the context of VET in Palestine, Kabeer's understanding of empowerment as a process that can bring change to those who have been denied the power of choice. Kabeer further argues that having the agency to choose is vital to the achievement of capabilities and functions. Hilal complements this use of gender and development theory with an insistence that intersectionality is crucial to explaining the multiple layers of inequalities that are typically faced by individuals (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989).

CCA-VET stresses how women experience intersectional disadvantages that shape the decisions that they make about education and work throughout their lives and the outcomes they achieve. This point is highlighted by the young women in Suart's study (2019) where traditional gender norms (e.g., undertaking significant caring responsibilities) hampered their participation and achievement in compulsory education. This complexity is experienced differently by the young women as the inequalities of race, ethnicity, and class intersect in powerful ways. Consequently, these early life experiences lead to women withdrawing from education to take up low paid/skilled work and committing to long term relationships/motherhood, which compounds the inequalities they face in education and work.

Alla-Mensah (2019) focuses in her work on informal sector apprentices in Ghana on the ways in which access to, experiences of and learning in particular trades are all shaped by prevailing gender norms, whilst Hilal (2018 and 2019) notes how the intersections of capitalism, patriarchy and occupation constrain young Palestinian women's ability to access both vocational institutes and the formal labour market.

However, befitting its emphasis on agency and transformation, CCA-VET authors argue that such structural obstacles are not passively experienced, nor do they necessarily overwhelm possibilities for resistance and reframing. Hence, the approach also offers a strong sense of VET as a space in which people (but particularly women) can attempt to

identify different agentic responses to structural obstacles, thus potentially reshaping those structures.

For instance, in England, Suart (2019) discusses the ways in which the young women use education to gain freedom from negative circumstances such as abusive relationships, precarious low paid work and mental health problems, which are often experienced simultaneously rather than in isolation. The young women in her study described how, in spite of complex constraints, they were determined, agentic and thoughtful in their plans to resist, escape and recover so that they could lead flourishing lives where work, wellbeing and agency were central.

In Ghana, trades in the informal sector are highly segregated by gender. Nonetheless, Alla-Mensah (2019) found that many females who enrol in trades dominated by men overcome gendered norms that shape their choice. At certain stages in their lives, they also contest patriarchal norms which threaten their employment prospects in the occupations they have chosen. Female apprentices and journeypersons in the mechanic trade in Ghana resist these or negotiate support for better conditions of work within the trade. They feel empowered by their occupation and prefer their choices to be respected by all in society, especially men. Their agentic conducts are changing the landscape and paving the way for more females to achieve their aspirations of succeeding in non-traditional trades.

In the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) women face mobility restrictions, disruption of the social cohesion and impoverishment caused by the occupation. They are also overburdened by gender norms stemming from patriarchy. These social challenges restrict women's and girls' access to education, training and work, and to participation in wider society. Within this context, marginalised women are attracted to VET. Hilal (2017) found that the majority of female VET graduates she surveyed reported that VET had enabled them to achieve empowerment through enhancing their self-confidence; their ability to contribute to the surroundings and challenge gender-norms; their active participation in public life; and their achievement of freedom of decision-making over life choices. Although faced by major structural obstacles, these women had entered VET and found it supportive of their visions of better lives.

In South Africa, many young people, and especially young women, have family responsibilities, either as a parent or for younger or older relatives. Powell and McGrath (2019b) report on the concerns of many regarding how they can seek, let alone acquire, formal employment in the face of these responsibilities.

By focusing much of its attention on women's work and lives as well as skills acquisition, CCA-VET makes a contribution to wider debates about VET and gender. Crucially, it emphasises the need for emancipation, a key concern of critical theory. Moreover, this does not consist of doing to/for women but in seeing women as agents capable of transforming both their own lives and wider society, notwithstanding the structural forces arranged against this. Indeed, the evidence from these studies points to women's actions in reframing elements of the structures they encounter. In this area, CCA-VET offers significant new insights for a sociology of VET.

Interaction with the Political Economy of Skills Account – the Effects of Macro Structures

As we noted earlier, the 'critical' part of CCA-VET is about stressing that a sociological reading of VET is required in which a careful exploration is provided of the ways in which structure and agency interact, and power operates. We have already outlined some of the structural effects of poverty and gender, whilst insisting that there is still a vital place for individual (and collective) agency that can act upon those structures in turn. In the VET research field, there has been much work in the North that draws on sociological theory, most particularly Bourdieu, to understand individual trajectories through education, VET and work. However, in the South, and most particularly in South Africa (e.g., Kraak, 2004; Allais, 2012; Wedekind, 2018), there has been a stronger drawing on the political economy

of skills tradition, which sits in an interdisciplinary space in Europe and has a number of British and continental strands (e.g., Soskice and Hall, 2001; Thelen, 2004; Busemeyer and Iverson, 2014).

For CCA-VET researchers, the more general dynamics of race, gender, class, etc. need to be brought to the analysis alongside an understanding of how VET systems have evolved alongside education systems and labour markets (e.g., McGrath, 2002; Powell and McGrath, 2019a). These structures and their dynamics are not understood as natural but as social constructions that reflect broader societal and historical patterns of contestation and compromise. As De Jaeghere (2015 and 2019) reminds us, in the African contexts in which much of the new CCA-VET literature has developed, it is impossible to understand current political economies and the problematic relationships between schools, skills and work without understanding the persistent effects of colonialism (and Apartheid). Therefore, she calls for a postcolonial lens on VET that is conscious of VET's complicity in colonial and continuing extractivism (cf. McGrath et al., 2019a).

For CCA-VET, a political economy reading of whichever context is under consideration allows a better understanding of how VET systems and organisations evolved, and the potential for change. The political economy approach insists that any new plan for making VET and work contribute better to human flourishing needs to take careful account of the pressures and opportunities that firms and economies have for promoting more decent work. Moreover, its comparativist core emphasises that contexts matter hugely.

A Broad Conceptualisation of Work

However, a weakness of the political economy account is that it tends to think at the system level and to emphasise the formal economy over the informal or subsistence economies. This has been a major challenge to the approach in expanding in the South (cf. McGrath et al., 2019a).

In contrast, CCA-VET insists on a broad conception of work. Powell and McGrath (2019b) go back to earlier writings of Sen (1975) in which he argues that work has three aspects:

- the production aspect (the outputs of things that are needed),
- the recognition aspect (the self-identity, self-worth, and meaning that comes from being engaged in something worthwhile), and
- the income aspect (the livelihoods earned).

Whilst he acknowledges older traditions that see decent work as central to the development and maintenance of human dignity, Sen argues that not all work provides all three aspects to individuals. Powell and McGrath (2019a and b) reflect on this in South Africa, providing multiple stories of how young people are experiencing the South African labour market as precarious, indecent and riddled with race and gender prejudice. They argue that these realities, which are well-understood by young people, make conventional notions of employability and (un)employment deeply problematic. Hence, the judging of young people and vocational providers as failing is based on unsound foundations.

This critique of the orthodoxy leads to a stress on how work's potential to fulfil wider human needs can be maximised. As Bonvin (2019) argues, the importance of the notion of capabilities for VET thinking is that it emphasises a focus on what people want to become as a result of VET participation, not how they can acquire 'employable skills' most efficiently.

Likewise, De Jaeghere (2017 and 2019) stresses the social dimension. One of the important capabilities for young people in her work in East Africa, she suggests, is about becoming, and crucially, being recognised as, an adult member of their community. Thus, the notion of 'decent work' needs to be protected and expanded. However, as we have already suggested, the approach notes that access to and status of VET and many forms of work are unequal and structured profoundly by class, gender and race (Powell and McGrath, 2018 and 2019b).

Given the intended tight relationship between VET and work, these perspectives are crucial for a vision of transformed and transformative VET. Across CCA-VET research, there is a strong insistence on understanding the real labour market experiences and possibilities of young people.

For instance, the Palestinian labour market is characterised by high levels of unemployment and considerable barriers to both accessing and maintaining employment. The effects of the occupation and the multiple checkpoints that slow down movement have a profound effect on trying to operate economically, whilst patriarchy and security concerns significantly limit female economic participation outside the household (Hilal, 2018). Drawing on Folbre (2011), Hilal shows the importance of non-paid work as an essential capability.

The Ghanaian economy is comprised of a large informal sector (c.90%) and a small formal sector. Inevitably, the former is the destination for many graduates of formal VET. The majority of those who work in the informal sector are self-employed with only a few being wage employees. Artisans typically engage in precarious work; lack security and protection; and receive low incomes. Transition from training to self-employment for apprentices is difficult because it requires access to different forms of capital. There is little support from the state for these young graduates, thereby increasing their vulnerabilities in the labour market (Alla-Mensah, 2018).

These are not just Southern experiences. The young women Suart (2019) interviewed in England explained how engaging in VET was driven by hopes of escaping the low paid, precarious, unfulfilling and gendered work that they had been doing. This is not to suggest that their goals were simply confined to employability, rather they were keen to achieve greater well-being for themselves and their families also. Their quest to gain new skills for new work was balanced by unpaid invisible caring and domestic work which remains hidden.

Returning to our arguments for a gendered perspective above, it is essential that work be defined "broadly to be an activity which seeks to sustain an individual or society" (Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019: 23). Many of the young people that we have interviewed are engaged in activities that bring value to them and those around them but which are not formally defined and remunerated as work in the official sense.

CCA-VET begins a rediscovery of older debates about education and training for the informal sector. De Jaeghere (2019) examines education and training interventions in East Africa that aim to support entrepreneurship. She classifies these into two different types: poverty alleviation for "necessity entrepreneurs", and job creation and economic growth, for "opportunity entrepreneurs". Powell (2019) suggests that survivalists can be further divided into five categories:

- core identity entrepreneurs, for whom their occupation is central to their identity and who aspire to graduating to opportunity entrepreneurship within their existing occupation;
- oscillating entrepreneurs, who may work for a time in food or retail but do not identify themselves with either their occupation or entrepreneurship;
- second stream entrepreneurs, who see this activity as a means of supplementing income and who are not yet convinced about it becoming core to their identity;
- scurrellers, who are the closest to pure survivalism, working to survive; and
- community empowerment entrepreneurs, who are responding to a community need and who may aspire to more formal NGO status.

By focusing on these aspects of occupation, identity and aspirations, Powell further highlights the importance of understanding work, like poverty, in a multidimensional way.

There are increasingly powerful arguments that the future world of work will be very different from today, with immense implications for VET. Whilst some of this appears to be a rerun of futurist debates of the past half century and more (Avis, 2018), where these

debates appear most pressing to us is in the area of how we might transform our current societies and economies so as to achieve sustainable human development and just transitions (McGrath and Powell, 2016). There is a growing literature on skills for just transitions (e.g., Rosenberg, Ramsarup and Lotz-Sisitka, 2020) but the attempt at synthesis between this and CCA-VET is only in its infancy (cf. McGrath et al., 2019).

As we noted above, work has two faces. It is both a space of learning, belonging and flourishing, and also a space of violence and “a Monday through Friday sort of dying” (Terkel, 1972: xi). How these two faces are experienced is shaped, though not determined, by key characteristics such as gender and race, acting intersectionally. Importantly, these dynamics also influence the types of work (e.g., formal, informal, caring, subsistence, etc.) that individuals do, often sequentially or simultaneously. If VET is truly about preparation for work in terms of both skills and socialisation, then it must also be about these complex realities and possibilities of work and not some masculine, industrial and urban myth of real work that simply cannot be sustained. This is a vital and original insight for VET theory.

A Focus on Flourishing

As has already been highlighted, Sen seeks to shift our attention to the extent to which development interventions support the achievement of human flourishing rather than narrow economic considerations of income, productivity and growth.

Hence, CCA-VET argues that our focus for VET should be on how it supports what individuals want to pursue in order to flourish (see Bonvin, 2019, for an extended discussion of this point). This moves the gaze of VET analysis from considering what the capitalist state argues should be the purpose of VET and life to attention to what individuals’ value and why they participate in VET (cf. Powell and McGrath, 2014a).

This is most often reflected in the development of capability lists that outline the major dimensions that respondents valued from their VET participation. Four of these lists are presented in a comparative table below (Figure 1). While there are similarities across and between them these lists closely reflect the contexts in which they were created. Indeed, they are all developed within an understanding that such lists cannot be universal but must always emerge from careful engagement with actors in specific contexts.

Figure 1: Sample VET capabilities lists

Powell 2014 – South Africa, urban, formal VET, male/female	Hilal 2018 – Palestine, rural and urban, formal and non-formal VET, female	Suart 2019 – England, rural and urban, formal VET, female	Alla-Mensah 2018- Ghana, informal urban labour market, male/female
Economic opportunities that matter	Economic opportunities that matter for all	Education and training	Basic requirements of life and training
Active citizenship	Domestic work, unpaid work and non-market care by choice	Happiness and wellbeing	Growth of enterprises
Confidence and personal empowerment	Economic resources for poverty reduction and wellbeing	Agency over one’s own life	Opportunities for further learning within apprenticeship
Bodily integrity	Active citizenship	Time autonomy	Transition from training to self-employment

Senses and imagination	Confidence and personal empowerment	Health - physical, mental and emotional	Independence
Recognition and respect	Bodily integrity	Respect and dignity	Recognition of skills
Upgrade skills and qualifications throughout the lifecourse	Senses and imagination: developing creativity	Geographic mobility	English literacy
	Recognition and respect	Valued employment	Bodily health
	Upgrade skills and qualifications throughout the lifecourse	Community participation	Bodily integrity and respect
	Enabled transition to world-of-work through awareness, preparation and connections for all		

Notes:

These lists illustrate what informants reported valuing from VET. It should be noted that the elements on each list, whilst presented as distinct, overlap and are often mutually reinforcing.

Whether or not we use formal capabilities lists, this perspective is important for re-emphasising that learners hope for multiple things from VET. Of course, jobs and money are very important part of what they value. However, the above makes it clear that there is much else that is important. Such an argument is not new. In the Anglophone tradition, it reminds us of the work of Dewey (1916) but also of more recent authors such as Unwin (2004). A broader sense of vocational purposes has long been part of the strong Germanic tradition of VET theory. However, in the Anglophone world in which we are writing, there appears to be merit in reinsisting on VET's broader purposes. The use of capability lists offers a contribution here that is particularly valuable due to its grounding in the views of VET learners rather than in philosophical principles. However, it is important to go beyond 'just' listening to learners. At the heart of the capabilities approach is an insistence on the importance of deliberative democracy. Mainstream Anglophone VET has a democratic deficit in which only the voices of the state and (some) employers matters; what is required is genuine deliberation that represents the views of all interested parties.

The Centrality of Aspirations

Aspirations are often part of the VET policy discourse. In orthodox policy accounts, aspirations are a problem: they are a deficit of young people. The argument goes: if only these youth had better aspirations, then their prospects for employment, income and well-being would increase. From a structuralist political economy perspective, of course, this is wilfully wrong, placing the blame on the weak, rather than seeing issues of employability, poverty and ill-being as being driven by the operations of capitalism and the decisions of the powerful. From the more agentic perspective of capabilities, the orthodoxy doesn't address young people as thoughtful actors, cutting them out of deliberative democratic processes.

A growing body of sociological literature, which draws both on Bourdieusian and Foucauldian approaches, acknowledges the key role that structures play on young people's aspirations (Hart, 2012, 2016; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015; De Jaeghere,

2016; Spohrer et al., 2018). At the same time, it insists that structural accounts offer a limited explanation of how aspirations are formed and, importantly, ignore the degree of agency that individuals have over their lives. Gale and Parker (2015: 82) are critical of structural theories which are “too formal and static (structuralist) to explain how aspirations are formed”. Moreover, they emphasise that aspirations must be understood as dynamic, formed in the thick of social life (Hart, 2012; 2014; De Jaeghere, 2016), emergent (Gale and Parker, 2015) and future-oriented (Zipin et al., 2015).

The CCA-VET account has responded to the limitations of structural accounts (especially lack of attention to agency and the social nature of aspirations) by drawing on aspirations concepts that can be traced back to HDCA. Foundational here is Appadurai’s work on the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004), in which he acknowledges the influence that Sen’s critique (1985; 1999) of Elster’s “adaptive preferences” (1982) has had on his own work, and in particular the insistence made by Sen that preferences can obscure various inequalities associated with poverty, traditional norms and the expectations of others. Rather, Appadurai views aspirations as a “metacapability”, insisting that poverty and inequality affect one’s ability to aspire, to see beyond the current lifeworld and to navigate the route to achieving a different life.

The capacity to aspire is central to Suart’s critical capabilities aspirations model (2019), which theorises the extent to which learners are able to imagine a better future and plan the route to achieving their aspirations. One key criticism of the capacity to aspire is its failure to explain how aspirations are formed, enacted or transformed. A small, but emerging, body of literature draws on Ray’s (2003 and 2006) concepts of the “aspirations window” and “aspirations gap” (Hart, 2012, 2016; Mwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018a and b; Suart, 2019), which offer a person-centred perspective of not just how aspirations are:

Formed from an individual’s cognitive world, her zone of ‘similar’, ‘attainable’ individuals. Our individual draws her aspirations from the lives, achievements or ideals of those who exist in her aspiration window. (Ray, 2003: 1-2)

Suart contends that Ray’s aspirations window is a useful metaphor as it describes the ways that the individuals in her study may not have the capacity to aspire because their view from the aspirations window has been restricted, concealed or revealed to them in stages. The aspirations gap is a useful construct for helping learners to reflect on where they are now and where they want to be, as well as what they will need to achieve their goals. In addition, Suart’s construct of initial aspirations works alongside the capacity to aspire to anchor the aspirations learners hold when they start their VET courses. This is significant theoretically as it enables new reflections on the ways that aspirations change, expand or contract in relation to exposure to new opportunities.

A Multiplicity of Decision Points in Vocational Learning Pathways

CCA’s understanding of people as thinking actors building life projects and aspirations is underpinned by a sense that re-evaluations may take place at a number of points. This draws attention to the series of decision points that individuals experience regarding their learning and work trajectories. Such a focus leads to a realisation that such decision points are unique to the individual in terms of the exact dynamics that both cause a moment of decision and that shape their calculations at that moment. Nonetheless, many of these are caused by system effects that can at least be predicted in terms of their timing, as Powell and McGrath (2018) have detailed in South Africa.

There they show that the typical learner in public VET is initially faced with a funding challenge. Many learners, and, indeed, their families, are dependent on state bursaries to attend college and to get on with their wider lives. However, these bursaries can take six months to arrive, leaving many learners to scramble for enough money for travel, food and life more generally. Inevitably, many of them drop out before bursaries arrive.

Inevitably too, many of those who do manage to hold on have their learning undermined by the struggle, which exacerbates existing levels of multidimensional poverty, as noted above. This contributes to poor performance in examinations. Resits are expensive and not covered by the bursaries, resulting in students having to drop out to get fees, adding two years to the journey through college in some cases. Even where students do complete the college programme, they are then required to do an 18-month internship before they are formally qualified, yet there are far too few internship opportunities, resulting in further delays and non-certifications.

At all these points of potential difficulty, students are faced with very real questions regarding how to proceed. Though the details will be different, such sets of decision points will be experienced by vulnerable learners in all settings. The approach highlights the need to go beyond simple notions of why students enrol in VET towards an understanding of how they may have to make regular decisions throughout their studies regarding continuation. Although the examples given here are of negative pressures to leave studies, in buoyant economic conditions there can be other pressures to enter the labour market before certification due to the availability of high wages and potentially stable employment. This offers a further complexity to how we theorise decision-making in VET research.

The Evaluative Dimension: Do Vocational Institutions Support Human Flourishing Adequately?

By shifting the focus of thinking about VET to questions about human agency and flourishing in specific contexts of multidimensional poverty and structural injustices, the CCA-VET approaches points to the need to reassess what counts as success for vocational providers (cf. Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019). Conventional evaluative frames, such as pass, throughput or employment rates, remain important but for how they contribute to our understandings of how providers are supporting learners to flourish (Powell and McGrath, 2014b).

This transformed approach to evaluation necessarily builds on many of the insights discussed above. Following on from the discussion of capability lists and questions of what individuals value, an approach to evaluation needs to start from what it is that counts as VET success for individuals, groups and society. This has to be grounded in deliberative processes, reflecting patterns of inequality and injustice, as success will never be neutral and technical. Evaluation can then be developed that measures the performance of institutions and systems in terms of how far they support flourishing and how those institutions and systems are themselves resourced and empowered to do their job. This requires a careful analysis of where their learners started in terms of multidimensional poverty and local labour market realities. Transitions from learning to work, of course, are essential elements of this evaluative process but they are neither simple nor sufficient.

Conclusions

We started this article by arguing that the orthodox set of theories and policies for VET don't work as they misunderstand the current worlds-of-work and desires for human flourishing of individuals and communities, and are incapable of addressing the ways that these are likely to be shaped by the profound challenges of the near future. We argued further that VET is required to achieve a double revolution- transforming itself in order to be an agent for a wider transformation towards sustainable human development. We suggested that a particularly fertile theoretical response to this huge challenge lies in the critical capabilities approach to vocational education and training, which has emerged over the past decade.

Whilst still in need of further development, this approach offers both a combined ontological, epistemological and methodological response to the double imperative by

bringing public deliberation and deliberative democratic approach to the forefront, and it sees this response as emancipatory, rooted in an insistence in not just identifying injustice in the interplay of structure and agency but addressing simultaneously how individual aspirations, valued capabilities and collective action can bring about radical changes in lives.

We outlined eight aspects of CCA-VET that we consider particularly important for richer theorisation of VET. The approach begins from a focus on the experiences of individuals and communities that seeks to stress the complex interplay of structure and agency. In this it draws particularly on feminist theory to see gender as a major, though typically intersectional, factor in individuals' lives, learnings and workings. It goes on to insist on the multidimensional nature of individuals' experiences of poverty and work. An understanding of these, it argues, should be the basis of where educational organisations and systems begin their interventions. Moreover, the approach places the challenge of understanding how and why learners make decisions about participation in labour markets at the centre of a new theorisation of VET. The simplicity of human capital logic and the employability discourse are rejected. Rather, there is a recognition that people take part in VET for a variety of reasons; repeatedly revisit that decision in the light of new constraints and opportunities; and that those decisions are profoundly shaped by both initial aspirations and the ways in which these are altered by education. Finally, the approach argues that it is on its performance in supporting learners to move from complex pasts to complex futures that an educational organisation and system should be judged not on some predefined performance targets.

There are a wide range of theoretical, policy-oriented and practical implications of the approach that make it, we believe, highly significant. However, we do not see the approach as being fully-formed yet. As some of those engaged in developing this new account, we should note some of its current weakness and limitations, and acknowledge our share of culpability for these. Here, we will explore only the theoretical domain.

We foregrounded this article with the notion of the need to theorise VET's contribution to a wider transformational agenda. We explicitly placed this within broader notions of sustainable human development (McGrath, 2012; McGrath and Powell, 2016) and just transitions (Swilling and Annecke, 2012). However, as we noted above, an adequate theorisation of how the approach works together with the emerging skills for just transitions literature has not yet emerged, though some of us are working in this area presently (cf. McGrath et al., 2019).

Whilst gender has received much attention in the approach thus far, and in the wider capabilities approach's interplay with feminist economics, there is largely silence about other areas of inequality and disadvantage, such as disability. Race and ethnicity do feature in many of the accounts of the realities of labour markets and educational institutions but they have not been formally theorised. As noted in the brief discussion of the approach's relationship to the political economy tradition, class remains at best implicit in the current theorisation. Whilst the approach is reaching out to sociological traditions in VET research, there is clearly much more to be done in advancing this synthesis.

De Jaeghere (2015 and 2019) and McGrath et al. (2019) point to the need to develop a stronger postcolonial account of VET, but this too has not yet emerged and must be a priority. Current VET systems cannot be adequately understood outside colonial patterns of uneven development and extractivism that shaped what VET was conceivable for which work across the globe. In Africa, for instance, post-independence imaginaries of VET and decent work are inseparable from colonial legacies and aid dependencies (Openjuru, 2010; Jjuuko, 2012; McGrath, 2018) A postcolonial account of VET is needed that acknowledges pasts of unequal access to knowledge and skills, land and work opportunities; histories of racialised ideologies of hierarchies of work, education and language; and continued dependence on extractivist economies.

The approach also needs to go further in its engagement with current changes in the world of work (cf. Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019) and, particularly, the so-called Fourth

Industrial Revolution skills debate (cf. Avis, 2018); in its ability to work across economic scales from the individual to the global; and its detailed engagement with debates about vocational knowledge (cf. McGrath et al., 2019; Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019).

We believe that it is vital that we have credible theories of VET and development. It is our contention that CCA-VET has much to recommend itself as one such theory, not least due to its development in a number of very different contexts, which it allows it a degree of richness not easily present in mono-contextual theorising.

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