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Do Village Girls Gain Empowering Capabilities through Schooling and What Functionings Do They Value?

Abstract This paper explores the relationship between girls' schooling and empowerment in western China in the first decade of the 21st century. This paper adopted a capability-empowerment framework based on Sen's capability approach into which were integrated concepts by Bourdieu, Appadurai, Nussbaum, Kabeer, and Unterhalter, to help to understand the tenacity with which village girls pursued schooling. In interviews with a group of 23 girls and young women, several valued functionings of intrinsic capability sets in the freedom dimensions of well-being and agency and their association with rising levels of school attainment were found. The girls were found to be gaining empowering capabilities through schooling, but that these were not equally distributed, neatly slicing the group into two sharply defined groups with different life paths. One set dropped out in the middle school years with a smaller set of empowerment capabilities to work in low-skilled jobs in cities, which offered them new places to change. The other set remained in school longer to achieve a larger set of empowering functionings that they converted into more substantive freedoms in a variety of settings.

Keywords rural girls' schooling, empowerment, capabilities approach

Introduction

In remote areas of western China, well beyond the edge of globalization, the past

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decade has seen village girls pushing their way into schools. Despite extreme family poverty, the vulnerabilities and low status associated with their gender, remoteness and inhospitable terrain, deplorably poor schools, rural class disadvantage, as well as the intrusion of push-pull factors of globalization, village girls have exhibited dogged tenacity in getting an education.

A persuasive body of evidence has been gathered on the beneficial transgenerational effects of girls' schooling, delayed marriage, reduced number of offspring, improved family health care, and children's wellbeing (e.g., for China see Li & Tsang, 2003; Stephens, 2000; for cross-cultural studies see Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004; Lewis & Lockheed, 2006; Mathur, Greene, & Malhotra, 2003; Plan International, 2009; Tembon & Fort, 2008; UNESCO, 2004; UNICEF, 2004, 2005). These studies, valuable and useful for policy and resource allocation, have paid less attention to the participants themselves, seeing girls and young women largely as "tools" for development (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, February; Bicego & Boerma, 1993; Caldwell, 1979; Cochrane, 1979).

Nevertheless, since the 1980s, development literature has started invoking the notion of *empowerment* to explain beneficial individual and social outcomes of girls' schooling, such as gains in political position, legal rights or employment, and furthering economic development. Kabeer (1999) noted that these outcome indicators do not reveal the nature of a connection to either empowerment or education. Here the works of Amartya Sen on the capability approach, particularly his seminal work *Development as Freedom* (1999) adds a missing dimension. Sen theorizes the "condition of being educated" itself is a girl's *capability* and a *valued freedom*. Her state of being educated or more educated constitutes an enhanced "substantive freedom to achieve alternative *functioning* combinations" (Sen, 1999, p. 75) which a person might have "reason to value." Here Sen reminds us that education in itself has intrinsic value, adding a moral and ethical element to the notion of education by calling it a substantive freedom. Nussbaum (2000, 2003, 2005, 2011b) proceeded from that ethical place by naming education a human right and one of several "core capabilities" of human beings. Kabeer enhances the role of capabilities by connecting education with empowerment, clarifying that the opportunity structure, often constraining, is embedded within the process, rather than acting as an outside force on the process of "doing or being" educated (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Unterhalter (2007) calls attention to the need to understand empowerment and capabilities within the complexities of each setting, mindful of the diversity of peoples and their histories.

The work of Sen, Nussbaum, Kabeer, Stromquist, and Unterhalter lays the basis of the *capability-empowerment* framework developed by Seeberg (2011). Seeberg integrated two further notions, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus* and

Appadurai's *capacity to aspire* to further explain the relationship between capabilities and empowerment. Bourdieu's habitus clarifies Sen's construction that opportunity structures are embedded in capabilities. *Habitus* mediates the relationships between humans and society, producing patterns of behavior shaped by social norms and internalized by individuals (Bourdieu, 1990); it mediates between opportunities and possibilities and the dispositions and skills of the individual. A person's habitus is constantly remade by these negotiations and choices (Calhoun, 2002). The habitus of the village girls' in this study can be better understood as embedded within the process of getting, doing and being in education, rather than as an outside force. Appadurai (2004) takes on the notion of possibilities when he theorizes a subjective *capacity to aspire*, to envision freedom and locate "pathways between aspirations and reality." Seeberg suggests that education is one such pathway and that future-orientation is an inherent component of those engaged in it, which creates a fertile social space for empowerment.

The empowerment-capability framework as an analytical tool captures dynamic movement in educational functioning along a chosen vector, enhancing freedoms within the limits of a social space, school, and the collective habitus. The framework does not specify thresholds or ranges of functionings. As an analytical tool, it can partially fulfill the evaluatory objective necessary for policy formation by characterizing the *functionings valued* by village girls and young women as they relate to school and education. The reason for determining sets of empowerment capabilities is that they directly or indirectly benefit the "expansion of human freedom to live the kind of lives that people have reason to value.... more fruitful lives" (Sen 1997, p. 1960).

In the remote villages of western China, minimal human rights which constitute *minimal social justice* (Nussbaum 2011b) were not present. Multiple material constraints and deprivations of freedom (Sen, 1999) interfered with girls' attempts to develop capabilities, yet girls sought ways to break out of their deprivations or unfreedoms (Seeberg, 2006; 2007; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007). The authors set out to understand this process because it shows how change occurs and its potential for social and individual justice.

Purpose of the Study

To understand the relationship between empowerment as defined by our capability-empowerment framework and schooling, the authors let the "agents," village girls involved in the experience, describe *worthwhile functionings* (Sen, 1999) they experience and enhance in school. Their answers provide an

understanding of the overarching question of how to interpret girls' eagerness to be in school in conditions of minimal livelihood and security. Answering this question through the lens of the capability empowerment framework can, by implication, shed light on similar trends across the developing world. It can also provide themes and guidelines for policy formation.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions. Firstly, which theorized functionings of intrinsic empowering capabilities of *well-being* and *agency* are associated with schooling? Secondly, with what levels of school attainment are these functionings associated? As qualitative researchers, the authors do not claim to evaluate the causal effect of schooling on empowerment capabilities. Instead they are concerned with how theorized functionings associated with empowerment are experienced and what patterns of association exist across levels of schooling. Stemming from this, conclusions about the nature of the relationship between schooling and empowerment capabilities can be made.

Operationalizing the Capability-Empowerment Framework

Clearly the several dimensions of freedom, capabilities and their related functionings overlap and interrelate. It remains to operationalize capabilities in relation to education and its empowering possibilities so that the relationship may be described and possibly evaluated. *Habitus* is embedded throughout the framework, delineating, circumscribing, and enhancing each capability. Due to the linear nature of writing, the *habitus* of the village girls is briefly described at the top of the findings.

To operationalize the intrinsic capabilities of the first dimension of freedom, well-being, Seeberg adopted as functionings *enjoyment* and *playfulness* proposed by Nussbaum (2000, 2011b) which Seeberg (2007) found to be effective in a previous study of the same population. Control of *cognitive and psychological* functionings is explained by Stromquist (1995) as "understanding of their conditions" and "feelings that women can act" (p. 14) as components of educational empowerment. To operationalize the intrinsic capabilities of the second dimension of freedom, agency, Seeberg drew on the work of Sen, Kabeer, Unterhalter, and Appadurai. Kabeer (1999), examining agency from a feminist perspective, focuses on the collective arena of the family and evaluates for *decision making with negotiation power*. Unterhalter (2007) offers the functioning *self-expression* (p.106). From Appadurai (2004) Seeberg adopts the functioning capacity to aspire. The capability-empowerment framework is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Freedoms, Intrinsic Capabilities and Functionings in Education

Dimensions of Freedom	Functionings: Activities Related to Schooling, Literature Review	Feelings and Schooling, Interview Questions (Line of Questioning)
Well-being	Enjoyment of learning; playfulness (Nussbaum, 2000; Seeberg, 2007)	What do/did you enjoy about your schooling? Teacher role model? Courses? In the different levels of school? What do/did you like best or very much about life while in school?
	Confidence (Nussbaum, 2000); cognitive & psychological control (Stromquist, 1995); affective reflection and cognitive control; reason things out (Nussbaum, 2000)	What did you learn in school that you value? Do you feel you can reason problems out more easily, step by step? Are you/did you gain in confidence when in school? Do you feel more confident about yourself more now than before school?
Agency: Choosing a functioning (Sen, 1999)	Choose learning something specific (Seeberg, 2011) or make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999) or capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004)	If you don't test into academic high school will you consider vocational technical school? If you don't test into academic high school will you stop going to school? If you stopped, what was/were the reasons that you had then? Was that a good decision as you reflect on it now?
	Speak up on own behalf (Kabeer, 1999); self-expression (Unterhalter, 2007); participation in resource distribution in the family (Kabeer, 1999); participation in structures (Narayan, 2005)	Are/did you gain in strength to tell others, like your family, about what you want to do in life? Does/did education make you more able to tell others what you want? Have you talked to them about your views towards marriage?

Methodology

The present paper is derived from a 10-year, long-term study of the impact of a scholarship program in a village. The larger study includes a variety of data sets, both quantitative and qualitative. For this study the authors used interviews conducted in the summer of 2010, and included some voices from earlier letters or subsequent QQ or email correspondence. The authors' understanding developed over the course of the larger project influenced the interpretation of the 2010 data set as well.

As is common of qualitative basic interview projects, research design is recursive, starting with a theoretical conceptualization, followed by semi-structured interviewing and a reiterative process of coding and analyzing, and resulting in

particular characteristics describing the capability-empowerment framework. An interpretation of the rich theoretical description can imply a more general theoretical dimension or issue (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Participants

The participants, known as the Guanlan Sisters (GS) resided in one cluster of villages and attended the same school district. They were or had been recipients of a scholarship extended to girls in that district, which was funded by the small, U.S. based Guanlan Scholarship Foundation, and provided partial support for schooling expenses between 2000 and 2011¹. The scholarship was founded and led by Vilma Seeberg, also the principal investigator (PI) and lead author of this study. In summer 2010, the participants voluntarily responded to solicitation from the scholarship representative in the village to be interviewed. Most of the participants had been in mail and some telephone contact with the PI and various assistants for several years as part of the scholarship program.

Of the 21 interview participants, one was a primary school graduate in her late 20's, five were middle school graduates or incompleters, six were continuing in middle school, two were high school graduates or incompleters, two were in high school, and five were continuing in college (see Table 2).

Table 2 Participants' Attainment Level

Attainment level	Participants out of School	Participants in School
Primary graduate, middle school incomplete or graduate (6–9)	6*	6
High school graduate or incomplete (10–12)**	2	2****
College students (13+)***	0	5
Total	8	13

Note. * In addition, two older GS who were functioning as adults, are occasionally referenced where they responded to the protocol; ** High school both academic and vocational-technical; *** College: includes academic and vocational-technical institutions, such as junior colleges; **** One GS returned to high school in 2011.

In addition, the authors interviewed two older GS, who were functioning as adults. These interviews were partial as the participants could not recall how to answer most of the protocol. In the analysis their reflections were occasionally recorded where relevant, throwing additional light on the issue discussed. In general, the authors will refer to the strictest interpretation of 21 interviewed participants.

The participants were contacted in the summer 2010 by a fellow villager, who

¹ The Guanlan Scholarship continues to and past publishing of the current study.

recently had begun to serve as the scholarship representative, and were interviewed voluntarily, at their convenience, and in locations that were either familiar, or their home or school, or a comfortable, local hotel. The research assistant (RA) was close to them in age, herself a Chinese village girl, and the PI, V. Seeberg, was perceived by participants as a benevolent grandmotherly figure. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the interview. At no time were they pressed to respond.² The participants chose their own timing and location and some chose to arrive together. The GS who were interviewed together might have been affected by others' answers, depending on personality factors.

Interview Process

The interview protocol was developed from findings in previous research (Seeberg, 2006, 2007; Seeberg et al., 2007) and familiarity with cultural traditions. It was structured by the capability-empowerment framework (see Table 1). The semi-structured interview included 45 open-ended questions which matched the theorized functionings. Some functionings had to be explored through several questions, particularly those which appeared to be less culturally responsive. Some participants were asked all the questions while others who appeared confused or maintained silence on a related set of questions, were not. Participants also did not uniformly answer all the questions. These cases are noted in the findings as having either not at all or not fully articulated the functioning in question. Particularly the younger GS did not appear to understand some lines of inquiry despite questions being rephrasing in several ways. For example, questioning about "confidence" was met by smiles only rather than words by the younger participants.

Limitations

A limitation on frank discussion with the Guanlan sisters (GS) was introduced by the strict patriarchal order that silences girls. GS with a few notable exceptions were timid and slow to express themselves and did not easily claim empowerment capabilities. The PI, and S. J. Luo, her assistant, were both aware of these cultural restrictions and worked around them as much as possible. Many of the younger and middle-school leavers were unable to address some themes during the interview process.

It should be no surprise that GS with higher school attainment were generally more adept at answering. However, it is important to remember in the

² The approved IRB review is on file with the Kent State University Research Council.

interpretation that the lack of expression does not mean a negative or non-answer. Numbers of responses demonstrate the fragility of the interview process and its limitations on finding truth in voices.

Positionality of the Researchers

The authors were sensitive to the double role played by “Guanlan Mama,” the scholarship founder, and the PI. It was sensed that this would set up certain unspoken parameters for the interviews with GS. From the local organizer it was heard that the GS who were still in the area were excited to meet Guanlan Mama and be interviewed. They treasured the long-time commitment and sincerity of their “mama,” a quality highly prized in traditional Chinese culture.

At the time of the interviews, only eight GS were still in school and receiving the scholarship for the coming school year, and might have hoped to receive scholarships for subsequent years. For these GS a conflict might have arisen in terms of wanting to please the interviewer; however, the magnitude of the scholarship is so small compared to other resource-related factors in the decision to stay in school, and the interview questions were so low-risk and did not address resource availability, that it was not thought the dual role compromised the answers in a specific direction. The fact that 12 GS of the 21 participants who were no longer receiving the scholarship volunteered for the interviews also militates against concerns about issues of power relations between the scholarship founder-PI and participants.

The researchers consciously mitigated the dual role of the PI by having the RA, S. J. Luo, conduct the oral interviewing with some assistance from the PI. It is likely that the GS believed that their scholarship mama did not understand much of their dialect or language, hence could speak as if the PI was hardly present. In sum, the dual role of the PI made possible the interviews and disposed the participants favorably toward the interviewing process which the researchers and participants shared.

The context of the scholarship gave meaning to the interviews and possibly restricted commentary considered unnecessary to school that was about life issues in general. To broaden the focus, the interviewers often prompted participants to express themselves more generally about life at school rather than just schooling and learning itself.

The authors believe the research design and expertise of the researchers provide the foundation for credibility in these findings (Seeberg, 2006, 2007, 2011; Seeberg & Luo, 2011, May; Seeberg et al., 2007).

The conclusions drawn on this small-sample analysis need further research with more participants to improve confidence in findings and transferability.

Analysis

The interviews were translated from the sound record by a team of five graduate students in education who were cultural insiders. Two of them were Chinese university faculty of English Translation. They supervised the translation into English of the Chinese sound recordings. The RA checked and edited the accuracy of the translations of the interviews, all of which she had attended. To address concerns of credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), each interview was first coded by the RA, using NVIVO software, and then checked by the PI. The coding framework, namely the capability-empowerment framework (see Table 1), was established a-priori by the PI. The RA and the PI went through the coding summary, highlighting relevant and indicative phrasing and summarizing responses in a draft analysis.

Findings

The findings of the interview analysis are presented in the order of the capability-empowerment framework, after first situating the habitus of the GS.

Habitus of the Guanlan Sisters

The authors adopted Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus in the empowerment-capability framework, because it theorizes social location as a dynamic process and an inherent interaction between subjective mind or behavior and external opportunity structures. They confined their description of the GS habitus to cultural schemas, socioeconomic structures and regional conditions which affect individual beliefs and dispositions. This description starts with a sketch of five elements of social location, regional, socioeconomic, Confucian tradition, gender location, and school provision in which the lives and choices of the GS are embedded.

The GS's home is a remote mountain village in western China, lying at an altitude of 2,000 meters (6,000 feet) along the slopes of a mountain gorge. Crops, nut trees, and minimal animal husbandry are relied on for food. Subsistence farming was supplemented by fathers' and/or mothers' cash remittances from short-term migrant labor. On average, family income fell below the 1 USD-a-day UN extreme poverty line.³ This and surrounding counties were designated by the PRC central government as official "poverty counties."

³ In a similarly poor region in the same province, the annual per capita income was about RMB 1,000 or 0.35 USD-a-day in 2006 (Young, 2007).

A Confucian world view emphasizes a close kinship network enforced through role obligations. It is expected that if success is to be obtained, it is through diligence and perseverance and is associated with being educated (Ho, 2003), which in turn obliges the cultured person to be useful to society (Hieshima & Schneider, 1994). In the past this net of core values has applied largely to men. Girls or women were not expected to be a success, but rather seen as a burden to be traded in marriage, and become a good daughter-in-law and mother. The GS grew up in such a closed patriarchal society where they faced traditional gender discrimination. Chinese girls, especially in the village, were expected to be timid and quiet. “In China, men are more favored than women ... and in remote rural areas like ours, some girls don’t get the chance to go to school. I’m a country girl and a victim of this prejudice against women” (participant Qin Ting, grade 12, letter, 2007).

Some of the functionings were particularly affected by patriarchal silencing of girls. As late developing regions, the remote areas of China were subject to the rising credentialism proposed by Dore (2000). China in addition has a millennial-long tradition of academic credentialism; today the importance of high examination scores required for promotion to senior high school and higher education cannot be overstated. Rural Chinese schooling, from the 1950s until the urban transition spreading out from coastal manufacturing regions, had been the only channel of social mobility and a highly valued ritual of passage to employment. The schools in the GS’s valley were singularly focused on certification and essentially alienated from village life.

In the 1990s the Chinese central government began aggressively investing in schooling under its “Develop the West” strategy. In the GS’s school district, leaky dormitories and classrooms were repaired, and more remote schools closed in favor of improved, more centrally located schools. However, staff vacancies and severely late teacher salaries (Seeberg, 2007, 2010) remained the norm. The GS still scrambled over back country goat paths for an hour or more to get to primary school. On weekends to and from middle school, the GS walked the only recently paved road for four to five hours each way. For most Guanlan families the annual fees and costs, approximating for primary school RMB 600 (92 USD in 2011), for middle school fees and boarding RMB 1,700 (262 USD in 2011), and high school tuition, fees and boarding RMB 7,700 (1,186 USD in 2011), were a heavy burden often carried by several family members and relatives. In addition, the indirect utility costs were incalculable and often fell on the girls, taking them out of school for months at a time. Parents and relatives were often chronically ill, unable to perform productive labor and in debt for medical bills, and there were younger children to raise.

The authors consider the attainment levels of the GS in this study as a context factor, as part of their habitus, rather than as an achievement outcome. To

understand the intrinsic meaning that education has for these girls and young women, the authors explore what they say their enhanced capabilities are by looking at their attainment level. The hypothesis is that enhanced capabilities are associated with additional schooling (see Table 2).

The socioeconomic location and habitus of the GS consisted of massive constraints that confined persons well below a level of minimal social justice as defined by Nussbaum (2011b). Yet the GS were observed seeking schooling which often meant promoting one capability at the expense of another, giving up one freedom for another, making a “tragic choice” (Nussbaum, 2011b) resulting in a tragic situation. For the GS, seeking empowerment and freedom from some of these constraints by developing their capabilities, meant grasping what opportunity of schooling was available.

Well-Being

In the current manuscript, the authors were focusing on the *intrinsic empowering capabilities* and what functionings the GS associated with them. The two intrinsic empowerment capabilities are part of Sen’s dimensions of well-being and agency. Both these two dimensions and the third, achievement, also are defined by instrumental capabilities, but these are not under investigation in this manuscript. For the dimension of well-being relevant to schooling for the GS we explored the following functionings of intrinsic empowerment capabilities, *enjoyment of learning, playfulness* (Nussbaum, 2000), *confidence, cognitive control or reasoning things out* (Nussbaum, 2000; Stromquist, 1995), and *psychological control* (Stromquist, 1995). The interviews explored other functionings such as *reflective insight* (Nussbaum, 2000) from the literature, but the data showed that they were not functionings valued by the GS. Analyzing their responses, the authors found that GS drew fewer distinctions between some of the functionings, hence they were compared as follows, (a) enjoyment of learning and playfulness, and (b) confidence, and cognitive and psychological control.

Enjoyment of Learning and Playfulness

When asked questions regarding enjoyment of learning, some of the 21 GS seemed confused and unresponsive. In the Chinese schooling context, traditionally and until the “suzhi jiaoyu” (quality schooling) reforms trickled down to rural schools in the first decade of the 21st century, the good student was to study hard, and put forth effort; “enjoyment” was not part of schooling. Indeed it seemed foreign to many of the GS. “Xiang shou” (enjoying) had to be

translated as “xihuan xuexi” (liking studying). In addition, it was circumscribed as “making you feel happy or joyful.”

Among the 11 GS with middle school attainment, school years 6 to 9, and the single primary school graduate, Pang Qiaoqiao, and three middle-school GS, Chen Jiajia, Wang Yun, Dang Yanfen, were clear that they liked studying, liked learning “academic knowledge,” which “enriches life and makes it more meaningful.” They were happy to share the subjects they liked best either because of the course content or the teaching. Another three middle school GS, Jing Jian, Pang Ranting, Duan Ranqing did not respond clearly about liking studying but mentioned liking some subjects and doing poorly in other subjects in middle school. The authors inferred that they experienced both satisfaction and challenge in middle school. The four GS, Pang Shishi, Duan Shishi, Jing Minlin, Pang Linsha who had dropped out during middle school and the middle school graduate who did not continue to high school mentioned enjoying only primary school, because there had been “no worries,” no “pressure to study” and fewer courses. These four GS exhibited only a vague understanding of the enjoyment functioning, therefore it cannot be said that they had enjoyed schooling and learning. The authors postulate that their lack of enjoyment may have been a contributing factor for not continuing schooling.

However, among the four GS with high school attainment, level 10 to 12, three GS expressed that they enjoyed learning the most in high school because they “learned new things every day,” and felt “happy and fulfilled.” One student Pang Nini was explicit that social relations in high school enhanced her well-being and enjoyment, “I enjoy learning in high school; it brings me happiness. I learn a lot from my friends and teachers. They teach me wisdom about life experiences.” The only GS Pang Ranran who made it into a high school, a vocational one, also made her own decision to drop out after one year because, she said, she did not enjoy learning, the courses were a waste of time, the school was bad, and she was eager to find a job and “gain real life experience.” For her, she said, not enjoying schooling was one of the biggest contributing factors to dropping out.

For the five GS with a 13+ attainment level, i.e., college, learning had been enjoyable especially in high school or middle school, and continued to be so. They “enjoyed reading,” “studied diligently” and aimed at advancing in higher education. “I enjoyed studying in high school because it kept me busy and I learned a lot,” said Chen Yaya. “In high school, all the students were studying hard. The atmosphere was very tense. Gradually I too took the initiative to study,” according to Chen Linlin.

In order to get more directly at the notion of enjoyment eight of the 21 GS who seemed to catch onto the notion were asked whether they had experienced a

sense of playfulness in school. To get any response from the middle schoolers, they were specifically asked “what subjects and extra-curricular activities were fun for you?” Six GS, from different attainment levels, answered that extra-curricular activities only were fun, “music, I liked singing and playing table tennis and badminton ... at school” (participant, Pang Ranting). “In high school we had volunteer activities ... it was relaxing” (participant, Pang Jin). Only two of the GS, Pang Nini in high school and Dang Yanfen who attended a relatively prestigious urban middle school, answered clearly, “primary school was the most fun... I played all day long with my classmates.” For Dang Yanfen “chatting with classmates makes me happy. One of our teachers is very nice to me.” Due to the variety of experiences regarding playfulness and the relatively small sample, little can be told about how playfulness is associated with attainment level. The authors can conclude only that students experienced pleasure at playfulness in social relations at various levels of schooling. It can be presumed that playfulness may have contributed to functionings such as confidence/emotional control which are directly related to progressive school attainment, that is, retention. Only a few high school and college students had written in previous communications that they felt the joy of learning. Dong Miao, as a high schooler and an advanced college student at the time of the interview, had written “when I read a good book, I feel like a hungry person grabbing a piece of bread. I forget about myself when I read ... I feel happy.”

Confidence, Cognitive and Psychological Control

For this intrinsic capability function, three lines of questioning were followed, “Are you confident? Do you think education has improved your ability to think? Do you think education makes it easier for you to figure out how to solve a problem? Do you feel you are more psychologically able to withstand stress and pressures?” Culturally speaking, it would be inappropriate for young Chinese girls, especially in the villages, to speak too openly about being confident; the GS admitted only to being more confident than before. They were more able to answer about the cognitive effects of schooling. Almost all participants who were directly asked answered these questions affirmatively. With advancing attainment level, the GS were more positive that their ability to think had improved.

Five out of 11 GS with middle school attainment replied positively that they had gained confidence over primary school. Some became more confident as their studies improved, “in teachers’ eyes, what counts is my performance. I become more confident because I have made progress [in my studies]” (participant, Ren Qiqi). Others gained confidence as they adjusted to the school life, improved relationships with classmates and overcame difficulties in certain subjects. Three replied negatively that they had lost confidence during schooling,

claiming poor performance in some subjects and failure to overcome difficulties in their studies. Among these three, Pang Qiaoqiao, whose parents forced her to leave primary school, and who was older than most of the other GS, had become disheartened during her 10 years of unskilled work experience in the city. She said that she had no confidence in herself due to her inadequate education. “Now that I’m working I see clearly that knowledge is power. I don’t have a solid educational foundation. What I know is very shallow and superficial, so I do not feel qualified in my work.” The other four middle school drop-outs, working unskilled jobs in factories or small shops, did not express any confidence in themselves either.

In the interviews, *cognitive thinking and reasoning skills* was rephrased as an “ability to figure things out,” or “logical thinking, analytical skills.” Of the GS with middle school attainment, four were silent, but the others spoke about thinking through emotional and ethical problems better now that they were “grown up.” “I used to sort things out in my mind with others’ help; now I can do it independently,” though a few made the cognitive connection, “I get there in my mind faster than I used to,” “the more I learn, the more I can sort things out... and think logically.” The answers of the high school GS referred to thinking through choices regarding the future, a more complex level of thinking which they attributed to both maturing and knowing more through school. All four college GS agreed that after they got to college and “got in touch with more people, [they] knew more things, so [they] could figure out problems more clearly,” and logically.

To explain psychological control functioning, this was translated as the “ability to withstand stress,” “solve problems calmly,” and “be in control of one’s emotions.” Seven GS with middle school attainment were asked this question; five GS answered that since being away from home in boarding school they had become calmer, braver, and more independent in solving their problems. “I used to be at odds with my parents over little things very often. But now I see that they have a point sometimes. I understand them better” (participant, Pang Ranting). Dang Yanfen in middle school said she was more able to deal with stress, due to being able to make friends and play with them at school. Studying in the prestigious urban middle school, she averred, “I used to be very emotional and anxious, now I am more rational and calm from reading books.” It is unclear from these statements whether being on their own in boarding school or schooling itself contributed to their increased psychological control. The most confident middle school graduate GS Ren Qiqi clearly stated that she was more optimistic than before. “Now I believe as long as I try my best, I can find a way out of any problem that comes up.” These GS attributed their improved sense of psychological control to being away at school, getting help from friends and teachers, or participating in activities in school. The answers regarding

confidence, cognitive and psychological control heard from middle school GS, whether early leavers or completers, made the authors aware of the factor of the boarding middle school per se as different from schooling. The boarding middle school was related to becoming independent and more confident.

Among the four high school participants, two were confident and attributed this to teachers' encouragement or the development of academic and social skills. "My teacher tells me that everyone ... has the ability to achieve something. What is different is the degree of hard work and ability. If others can make it, so can I" (participant, Pang Jin). Pang Ranran who dropped out of high school found she had no vocational skills and had lost her confidence toiling in one menial job after another in the big city, "when I tell others that I come from small mountain village, they mock me, saying that even birds won't poop there."

Two of the high school GS, Pang Jin and Pang Nini, answered positively that they had improved their cognitive thinking skills, "think more thoroughly" and "have a clear goal before setting out to do something, knowing how to do it, and what the result will be." The last GS Pang Ranran answered that she had had lots of new ideas and made plans in high school, though she was not able to carry all of them out.

They also articulated how they were more able to withstand stress as they encountered more pressure. The fiercely-competitive atmosphere in high school pushed them to improve their ability to deal with pressure. "I read a psychology book and it helped me handle my stress about my studies" (participant, Pang Jin). Similar to the case of the middle school students enhancing their psychological functioning in part due to the boarding school factor, the high school students' experience with hyper competitiveness aside from schooling may have contributed to the achievement of valued functionings, enhanced intrinsic capabilities of well-being and greater real freedom.

To our surprise, the college students did not give an affirmative answer to confidence building. They mentioned that they had been very confident in high school, but in the context of college, among a larger group of superior students, they had re-evaluated themselves and lost confidence. "There is always someone who is better than me. Compared with others, I find that what I know is very little" (participant, Chen Yaya). "I used to live in a small circle and knew only a few people. Then I was confident. But now, as my social circle is much wider, I know more smart people and I feel more pressure" (participant, Qin Ting).

They did, however, talk about how their thinking was "more comprehensive" and "logical" as they advanced through school. They attributed this improved functioning not only to learning but also to socializing with more diverse people and to becoming more mature. Dong Miao reflected, "in middle school, I ... would say anything that came to my mind. In high school, I learned to consider

the consequence of my words and think more deeply. In college I made big progress when I met students from different provinces.”

The three college students, like the high school students, mentioned being more able to deal with stress and keep an inner balance between their studies and life. They added that they were more able to deal with loneliness and adjusted better to college life than some of their college mates who had not gone to boarding schools since middle school.

I am more psychologically able to deal with problems or stress in college. Many young college students don't adapt easily to college life because their parents were not around. I boarded in high school and became very independent, so I quickly adjusted to life in college. (participant, Qin Ting)

As for the middle and high school students, for the college students, the early removal from the parental village home offered opportunities and challenges from which they gained independence and confidence, greater emotional control, accumulating a greater number of vectors of choices in their intrinsic capability sets of well-being, and more real freedoms. However, they also showed unresolved anxiety about having to set post-college goals and make life choices.

Summary of Well-Being

For the dimension of well-being, the functionings enjoyment of learning, playfulness, confidence, cognitive control and psychological control emerged in the voices of the GS. The findings showed that all GS experienced some well-being related to schooling, at least related to school mates and teachers, and particularly to attending boarding school in their middle school years.

In this set of intrinsic capabilities, a variation emerged associated with continuing in school or terminating in middle school. Those GS who dropped out of middle school did not articulate enjoyment in their studies nor did they appear to be able to answer the confidence and control questions. In other answers it was found that they did not show any kind of confidence in their later working environment. Those GS who continued in middle school and those who had continued to higher attainment levels remarked on improvement on several functionings as they progressed through school.

Most GS who were in school at all attainment levels expressed some enjoyment of learning, despite challenges, and with higher attainment a better ability to express how they enjoyed learning. This is likely associated with enhanced cognitive and psychological control at higher attainment levels and age.

The GS who had terminated schooling, mostly in middle school, did not express themselves regarding enjoyment of learning, but some did enjoy playing with friends, art and extra-curricular activities. It is reasonable to conclude that a low level of enjoyment functioning, led toward a capability set associated with dropping out, or at least did not prevent dropping out. The authors conclude that advancing in school and greater enjoyment of learning are cross-related, one contributing to improvement in the other. Low enjoyment, on the other hand, is a significant contributor, to leaving school early, along with other school-related functionings.

Confidence was not a functioning the GS were easily willing to claim as valuable; it is not sanctioned culturally for girls in China especially not in the more traditional villages. Some GS related gaining confidence to support from teachers and classmates. All the GS conflated independence with confidence when they reflected on their middle or high school boarding school years. Only the college GS lost some of their confidence in their learning as they compared themselves to the many, very able college classmates. Even the college GS who claimed some loss of confidence compared themselves favorably on independence to classmates who had not been to boarding schools. The boarding school had offered more opportunities, triggered more choosing to achieve valued functionings. Their confidence peaked in middle and high school. The opportunities embedded in the middle school boarding experience enhanced the intrinsic capabilities sets of achieved well-being and more real freedoms than the confines of their village homes had provided.

As would be expected, with advancing attainment levels, the GS gained in cognitive and psychological control functionings, which they attributed to a) schooling opportunities to learn more, to help from teachers, and b) to independence gained by boarding and socializing at school, away from their parents.

The authors add as a caution that some of the enhancement of functionings, for example independence and psychological control in the middle school years, is attributable directly to age-related human development, which were not explored.

Agency

The second dimension of freedom, agency, is on its face the capability set most readily associated with empowerment. Sen (1997) and Kabeer (1999) focus their discussion of agency on conversion of resources into capabilities, or the ability to convert resources into valued functionings “that causally influence the effective freedoms that people actually enjoy” (Sen 1997, p. 1960). Neither Sen nor Kabeer indicate a clear distinction between aspirations and concrete actions. The authors find that Appadurai adds a significant aspect to the concept of agency

when he points out that individuals must have a capacity to aspire before they can pursue or act. In this study the dimension of agency was defined as the capability to *choose a functioning* (Sen, 1999), *decision making with negotiation power* (Kabeer, 1999), and the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004). In relation to schooling, the interview questions asked about *choosing a specific learning, making strategic life choices* (Kabeer 1999), and *aspiration*, and about *self-expression* (Unterhalter, 2007) by using Kabeer's (1999) *speaking up on own behalf*.

In the first review of the data, the authors found that the first three functionings, *choosing, making, and aspiring*, were frequently confounded. Differences in these functionings sharply divided the GS into those still in school at various attainment levels and those six who had left school. Those who had terminated their schooling largely spoke about aspirations or wishes. Those who remained in school on the whole had strategically applied themselves to making life choices, had converted resources into exercising agency functioning. Individual factors rather than attainment level also played a role in determining the level of putting aspirations into action.

Choose Learning Something Specific, Make Strategic Life Choices, Capacity to Aspire

Three GS, Duan Linxia, Jing Weiwei, Pang Qiaoqiao, had dropped out before finishing middle school (Duan Linxia and Jing Weiwei were only partially interviewed), and were 10 years older than the others. Duan Linxia and Jing Weiwei were married with children and farming in the village. Duan Linxia was confined to her birthing bed for her second child, a daughter, after doing migrant work in the city along with her farmer husband and first child, a son. She was in the village temporarily to take care of her old parents and children, but she and her husband planned to get back to the city so they could enroll their children in a better city school.

The other GS Pang Qiaoqiao had left the village right after primary school, working for years as a clerk on a construction site. She was still single and had enrolled in a four-month training program on construction project budgeting. "If you want to get promoted in the company, you need to get some training ... I want to improve my skills," she said. Years of working in the city opened opportunities for her to make strategic choices to further her professional skills. However, her low school attainment level had limited her capability set, "even very simple problems taught in class, high school graduates seemed to have no difficulty solving, but for me, it was hard."

The four middle school dropouts spoke at length about how they wanted to learn more. While their interests were specific they were not necessary strategic,

varying from English, mathematics, piano, and computers to hair styling and cosmetics. They had found work in factories, supermarkets, and small shops and rarely had time to plan or enough money to realize suitable career training. Pang Ranran bought “books on how to develop sales skills.” They had no family resources to convert into action. Their habitus and low school attainment constrained them to unsatisfying low-skilled jobs.

I work in a supermarket as a cashier ... Sometimes the boss asks me to do some calculations. So ... I want to learn more about mathematics ... in a training seminar ... or I can get some learning materials from the web [at an internet café] ... maybe spend 30 minutes or an hour every day to learn it by myself. (participant, Pang Linsha)

Only Ren Qiqi had strategically converted her aspiration into a vocational choice that could advance her capability set. Due to the huge market for hair styling in urban China, many opportunities are available to those willing to work long hours as apprentices in tiny beauty salons. Ren Qiqi had loved fine arts in school, but after calculating the cost of seven years of high school, college and fine art school, decided that apprenticing in a beauty salon would help her become a cosmetician where she could use her arts. Ren Qiqi was already tired of apprenticing and aspired to more professional training, possibly in business. Ren Qiqi converted her intrinsic well-being functioning into an instrumental functioning wherein she allocated her resources to a strategic life plan, agency exercised. This is one of several examples among these GS where individual factors clearly contribute more than attainment level to enhancing life-changing vectors of functioning.

All of the other six GS who were continuing in middle school were making strategic choices and investing all available resources in studying for promotion to the next level. First they belittled their performance and then vowed that through diligence they would progress. “I am not good at mathematics. But I can make much progress by doing more exercises and asking teachers and classmates” (participant, Duan Ranqing). They “took every minute” to learn the subjects they were interested in or “purchase books,” “ask classmates questions” on subjects they were poor at. Three of them specifically said “I never think of dropping out,” and aimed at getting into good high schools via hard work. Dang Yanfen said, “My short-time goal is to study hard and get into Shanglou High School, the best in the county capital, which is very competitive.” Jing Jian estimated that she had little chance to get into an academic high school, but, “I will persuade my parents to support me in vocational school.” Only Pang Yantin was less sure, “I will see what I can do after graduating from middle school.” During this stage, going to high school was their prime goal.

Like the above six middle schoolers, the two high schoolers articulated their

dedication to studying hard to continue schooling. The other two high school leavers, Pang Junjun and Pang Ranran, made different choices. Pang Ranran, frustrated with poor education quality in her vocational school, chose to leave school to get practical experiences in the work environment. However, she kept on learning by reading books and strived to plan a better future. Pang Junjun on the other hand was forced to leave school because she had run out of money and instead accepted an engagement. With the help of the scholarship she chose to go back to a vocational school and broke off her engagement. To conclude, GS in this stage of school attainment were clearer about what they wanted and turned their aspirations into strategic choices for their future.

The college students had already converted an interest in learning into a strategic life choice. “As I’m faced with graduation [with an accounting degree], I would like to learn something practical. In school, what we’ve learned is mostly theoretical, not so useful in real life. So I plan to get some practical experience” (participant, Dong Miao). A year later, Dong Miao wrote that she had gotten an accounting job in Lhasa where there were more opportunities than in the interior provinces.

In order to learn about GS aspirations for the future, they were asked the question, “what do you want to do in the future, do you have any job or further education plans?” All the GS who were asked the question, no matter at what attainment level, had some idea for a future career.

Three middle school GS spoke of dreams of becoming doctors, nurses, or work in a large company. Two others had thought about their wishes more concretely. Jing Jian said, “I have two ideas for what I shall do after graduating from middle school. One is to study singing; the other is to learn nursing. Because I am a kid from a village, being a nurse suits me.”

The high school and college GS aspired to becoming teachers, or office workers, aspirations that were related to their education. “I want to be a high school history teacher, because I am studying history in college” (participant, Chen Yaya). “My major in college is marketing, so I want to work in a marketing company. Right now I want to find a part-time marketing job, so that I can get experience” (participant, Chen Linlin).

Only two responses exhibited the insight and reflection that Nussbaum (2000) attributed to an education capability. Since the responses were given by GS at the opposite end of the attainment levels, both of whom were older than most of the other GS, the authors conclude that these were individual age-related factors of human development. Dong Miaomiao, the college senior, wanted to create a new, re-gendered role for herself in society,

My schooling is to make me live a better life ... With more knowledge, I can find a better job and be economically independent. I won't have to depend on a man. Otherwise, after

I got married, I would have to depend on my husband and feel inferior to him.

Pang Qiaoqiao, the older primary school graduate, thought of herself as having few prospects, but held an aspiration for the next generation, “I would want my future daughter to go to a more advanced big city to seek self-development. If girls stay in our village where everyone lives in the same way, they won’t have any motivation to improve themselves.”

Speak Up on Own Behalf

Intending to know whether and when the GS would speak up on their own behalf, it was found that most of the GS still in school gave more assertive answers, but four who had dropped out did not appear to know what to say. Ren Qiqi, the confident and out-of-school middle school graduate, raised an interesting point.

When I was young, my mother was very sick and my father had to work hard all day, they didn’t have much time to take care of us. So I’m used to being on my own. Now I’m assertive. I know my own mind and I stick to it.

Two of the continuing middle school participants answered that they became more able to express themselves in middle school and won more respect from their family. Pang Ranting said “when discussing something about our family or about me, before my parents did not always take all factors into consideration. Now they ask for my opinion.” Dang Yanfen proudly told,

My parents have asked for my opinion in decisions on family issues, and sometimes my dad has accepted my advice. For example, my dad quit smoking because of my advice. I encouraged my mother not to be depressed about her illness.

At middle school attainment level, the in-school GS were only somewhat more outspoken than the out-of school GS. Of the four GS in high school, three spoke up more bravely at home, even when relatives disagreed with them. Pang Nini was one of the more outspoken,

Actually since I went to high school, I argue with my parents more often and tell them my own point of view. If my opinion is reasonable, my parents, especially my father, will agree with me, but not often. Right after I graduated from middle school, they introduced me to a lot of boys from our village, and asked me if I was willing to get engaged? I said no, I want to go to college, and I don’t want to get married to someone in the village. They listened to me.

Of the five GS in college, two spoke up at home with very different stories about how their parents disagreed with them.

In middle school, I didn't dare tell my parents what I wanted. But in high school, when my mom said it's not necessary for me to get more education because I'm a girl, I argued with her and told her I wanted to go to university. (participant, Chen Yaya, college student)

One time when I was in high school, I did speak up. I wrote a letter to my parents, that I didn't want to stay in school any longer because the financial burden was too heavy on the family. My parents didn't agree and told me that they believed "knowledge can change your fate," and I stayed. (participant, Dong Miaomiao)

The courage to speak out seemed to be associated with the more confident GS regardless of attainment level, though the strength and clarity of speaking out increased with higher school attainment.

Summary of Agency

The dimension agency is the most overtly related to empowerment capabilities. The data for *choose a specific learning, make strategic life choices* (Kabeer, 1999), capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) overlapped strongly, hence they were analyzed together. *Speaking up on own behalf* showed different and more common relationship with attainment in schooling.

The GS divided sharply on the functioning, *aspiring-choosing-making* by whether they had terminated or continued in school. The former largely expressed aspirations or wishes, the latter had strategically converted resources into exercising agency. For the in-school GS, higher school attainment levels were related to greater clarity of aspirations and plans. Individual factors rather than attainment level also played a role in determining the extent of transforming aspirations into action.

It was found that holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings among all the GS, and was often put into improving skills or learning rather than materialist objectives. Only with college level attainment were GS able to effectively convert their aspirations into practical career goals.

Speaking out on one's own behalf was a functioning not highly endorsed by GS, who were in general reserved and as one said, docile at home. Individual variation on confidence was more directly associated with speaking out, though the strength and clarity of speaking out increased with higher school attainment.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to understand a process of change occurring in remote western China, where even minimal social justice is lacking. The authors sought to understand girls seeking an education and what the potential for greater social and individual justice may be. Seeberg's empowerment capability framework applied to schooling provided the lens for understanding. The framework is based in large part on Sen's human development and capability approach, wherein enhancing capability sets directly and indirectly benefit the "expansion of human freedom to live the kind of lives that people have reason to value.... more fruitful lives" (Sen 1997, p. 1960). The authors asked the following research questions. Firstly, which theorized functionings of intrinsic empowering capabilities of well-being and agency are associated with schooling? Secondly, with what levels of school attainment are these functionings associated? In this discussion section, conclusions are drawn about the nature of the relationship between schooling and empowerment capabilities.

Through the early stages of analysis, functionings were identified as they emerged in interviews. The voices of the GS told us which functionings associated with schooling were valued by the GS and what the pattern was. The authors are aware that a lack of expression does not mean the GS had no response, but only that she did not answer at that time. One explanation of silence might also be constraints introduced by a patriarchal culture that silences girls.

Well-being is perhaps the essential intrinsic *substantive freedom* to be obtained by achieving *alternative functioning combinations*. The authors were curious to see if the GS associated well-being with their school experience given its traditional rigidly rote style, a curriculum alienated from their village lives, and its inferior quality and status. The two functionings identified as related to schooling were enjoyment of learning or playfulness and confidence, cognitive and psychological control. In interviews, the idea of enjoyment in relation to schooling needed explanation, to transform the Chinese cultural precept that the value of education lies in achieving a certificate of completion by diligently applying oneself. However, the GS generally acknowledged that they enjoyed certain periods and aspects of schooling. In the earlier school years the GS enjoyed playfulness and lightheartedness, friends, supportive teachers and arts. As time went by, the rigors of school seemed to outweigh enjoyment. The authors began to notice a pattern of variation by continuing versus terminating schooling in middle school. Only the GS who continued through high school affirmed a deepening of enjoyment, that the more they learned, the more enriched and fulfilled they felt.

The second functioning of well-being, confidence and cognitive-psychological control, required further cultural translation. GS were not easily willing to claim confidence as valuable; it is not culturally sanctioned for girls especially in the more traditional remote villages. They did however speak about independence, particularly related to middle or high school boarding school years. The boarding school, both middle and high, offered a variety of opportunities and triggered more choices to achieve valued functionings and freedoms than the confines of their village homes. As expected, the GS gained in cognitive and psychological control functionings with advancing attainment levels, which they attributed to opportunities to learn more, get help from teachers, and gain experiences from boarding and socializing at school, away from their parents. Unexplored age-related human development can be assumed to also contribute to greater control.

Research questions were answered thus: One, that theorized intrinsic well-being functionings were associated with schooling, and, two, that enhancement of this capability set was associated with higher levels of school attainment particularly for those GS who continued in school through high school and above. It was noted that there was a related but sufficiently different pattern of association as well. For the middle-school leavers, either by omission, or due to less or no association with learning, these well-being functionings did not construct a capability set that led to school perseverance.

The second intrinsic capability explored, agency, is the most overtly related to empowerment. For the GS, the three separate functionings that had been theorized, aspiring, choosing, and making a choice, were often conflated. Holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings and expressed by most GS, and it was centered on skill improvement or learning rather than anything materialistic. Only those who had expressed the well-being associated with learning, had strategically converted resources into making life choices and exercising agency. The GS who had terminated education prior to or in middle school, talked of aspirations or wishes rather than choosing a specific learning, or making strategic choices. These GS rarely had time, enough savings or any disposable family resources; they had too little education to convert into strategic action such as suitable career training to leave behind their unsatisfying, low-skilled jobs.

The second agency functioning, speaking out, like confidence, was not culturally valued for girls, particularly village girls, and hence received only some endorsement from the GS. Again those continuing in school were more vocal than those who had terminated, but advancing school attainment was directly related to claims of improved ability to express oneself and gain respect from the family. For both functionings of the agency empowerment capability set,

individual factors and the well-being function, *confidence* played a role in determining the achieved level.

Conclusions

The authors conclude that the GS obtained an *empowerment capability set* by achieving the following *alternative functioning combinations* in the following patterns of association across levels of schooling,

- Greater enjoyment of learning and progressive school attainment are cross-related, one contributing to advancement in the other;
- Low enjoyment of learning is a significant contributor to leaving school early along with other school-related functionings;
- Greater confidence and independence were functionings achieved by all GS through the mechanism of boarding at middle school;
- Improvement in speaking up on own behalf was directly related to progressive school attainment;
- Confidence and indeterminate individual factors were implicated in determining the achieved level of speaking up functionings in the agency capability set.

Schooling at any attainment level, at minimum removed young girls from the encapsulation of their village world and exposed GS to opportunities and challenges that enhanced their empowering capability sets and substantive freedoms.

In middle school, differentiation in the empowering process of schooling came into high relief. The poverty of habitus weighed strongly against aspirations and life choice strategizing. A very limited set of opportunities forced a high stakes choice, whether to attempt the steep narrow path of the high school-college route, or to escape to the temporary labor market in nearby cities to help the family manage, only to risk eventually returning to the village and a life like that of their parents. The burden of the choice rested heavily on the shoulders of the GS, as their parents were ill-prepared for it. The less than minimally just socioeconomic location and habitus imposed this tragic choice as Nussbaum (2011b) called it on about half of the contemporary GS.

The other eight GS who had over the years taken the narrow path through high school and into college, had developed a more complete set of empowering capability functions and appeared prepared to make beneficial life choices.

The strong strain of caring for their families' present and future condition shone through in their discussion of forced choices. Regardless of attainment level, many of the GS centered their aspirations on a better present and future for their families.

Prospects for Achieving Substantive Freedom

Those who had terminated their schooling and were jobbing in the city had achieved an empowerment capability set that was reduced in several functionings as compared to the GS continuing in school. In the city the GS found themselves in a *place to change* deep cultural preferences (Appadurai 2004), and, their capacity to aspire intact, they needed only to garner some resources to convert this into strategic life choices from the expanded opportunities all around them. For example, the tradition of early betrothal and marriage was giving way to new pathways between aspirations and reality. Those GS who remained in school had achieved a larger set of alternative functionings that they converted into exercising agency and developed into more substantive freedoms. The empowerment capability sets though were distributed unequally, neatly slicing this group of GS into two sharply defined groups with different life paths.

The schooling provided all the GS with identity, legitimacy, visibility and respect in the eyes of their families and local communities and has elevated the value of schooling for future daughters in the village (B. L. Pang, personal communication, February, 2012). The expanded empowerment capability sets helps the GS “to lead longer, freer and more fruitful lives, *in addition* to the role they have in promoting productivity and economic growth or individual incomes” (Sen, 1997, p. 1960).

Implications

Since the sample and the context are richly and specifically described and analyzed, the authors believe the findings of this case study may well be transferable to carefully evaluated similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), for example, to other Han villages at the margins of the Chinese economy where the poor are hard to reach. The findings from using a capability-empowerment evaluatory framework can provide a nuanced and clearer understanding of how to structure opportunities to achieve valued lives (Unterhalter, 2007). Using a capabilities-empowerment framework of evaluation can provide a clear picture of what people value and strive to achieve within the real contexts of their lives. By focusing on empowering capabilities, the authors can identify the lever that generates movement. From this, priorities for policy action and resource allocation linked with macro level policy can be deduced.⁴

⁴ This formulation shares similarities with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach as developed by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (n.d.).

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