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# **Being and becoming in teacher education: student-teachers' freedom to learn in a College of Education in Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on how people learn to become teachers. It draws on the experiences of student-teachers and tutors at a College of Education in the south of Ghana, who engaged with an iterative data-generation process over one academic year. While increasing attention is given to the learning experiences of children in Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers' learning experiences remain under-explored, under-documented and under-theorised. It makes an original contribution to the study of pre-service teacher education by combining a sociocultural lens on learning and becoming with an analytical framework based on the capability approach. This illustrates how student-teachers' freedom to learn is facilitated and constrained by structured and social contexts within a pre-service programme. The paper shows how understanding different perspectives on valued 'beings and doings' of teaching can help re-interpret and re-imagine processes for 'becoming' a teacher, which has practical application at policy and institution level.

Key words: Pre-service teacher education; sociocultural learning; capability approach; Ghana

## Introduction

For all of the attention given to education in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past three decades, it has been considerably more recently that this focus has included the purposes and processes of teacher education (Dlada and Moon 2013; UNESCO 2016). It is largely accepted that learner-centred teaching (variously defined, but generally used to refer to a constructivist approach which incorporates locally relevant content and interactive pedagogy) can improve children's experiences of school and raise learning outcomes (Brodie et al. 2002), and the pursuit of this is well-documented (Schweisfurth 2013). It is increasingly understood that shifts in how children experience schooling require concomitant shifts in teacher education (Anamuah-Mensah et al. 2013; Schwille et al. 2007). More specifically, it is suggested that these shifts need to go beyond curriculum reform: improving pupils' *and* teachers' learning experiences requires a sociocultural lens in which teacher education pedagogies are examined in a broader context which considers the individual-society duality (Murphy and Wolfenden 2013). In relation to this lens, the learning experiences of pre-service teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa remain under-explored, under-documented and under-theorised. This paper contributes to this documentation and theorisation.

There are many reports of low motivation and high levels of attrition among teachers in Ghana, and Sub-Saharan Africa more generally (Salifu 2014; UNESCO 2016). Akyeampong et al. (2011) suggest that unpreparedness of teachers for the realities of classrooms is a key factor. This paper interrogates this issue of unpreparedness. It argues that an important step in supporting teachers to stay in the profession is a better understanding of the professional capabilities they value, and how the process of *learning to become* a teacher supports the realisation of these capabilities.

The research mapped perceptions of learning across a Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed) programme at a College of Education in Southern Ghana. It makes an original contribution to the literature by combining a sociocultural view of pre-service teacher-learning with an analytical framing of the pursuit of valued learning goals drawn from Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen 2009; Buckler 2014) to explore student-teachers' freedom to learn across the formal and social contexts of the Dip.Ed. It suggests that valued knowledge associated with becoming a teacher is mainly seen to

belong to the tutors who are largely positioned as unchallengeable experts. This collective epistemological positioning influences the conceptualisation, pursuit and achievement of learning goals. I also illustrate how some tutors subvert the hierarchy to participate in alternative pedagogies that move beyond constructivist ideas and towards more mutual, relational ideas about learning which have emerged from the sociocultural literature. The data suggests that these alternative pedagogies can be particularly capability-enhancing.

The paper begins by setting out the context of teacher education in Ghana before introducing the conceptual and methodological approaches that frame the research. I then present three valued learning capabilities, identified by student-teachers, and explore the potential to realise these capabilities across the college's structured and social environments. I conclude by considering the usefulness (and complexity) of framing student-teacher learning in this way, how it adds depth to the 'unpreparedness' debate, and how this can help to understand and plan for more appropriate teacher education.

### **Pre-service teacher education in Ghana**

At the time of the research (2014-2015) there were thirty-eight government-funded Colleges of Education across Ghana<sup>1</sup>. The majority of prospective teachers study at these (residential) colleges and work towards their Dip.Ed, which is the minimum qualification for teaching at the primary level. The three-year programme consisted of two years spent at the college studying subject-knowledge<sup>2</sup>, educational theories and methods, followed by one year, known as the 'out-programme', working as a practice-teacher in a school.

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<sup>1</sup> The first formal teacher training institutes were set up by missionaries in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the system was expanded by the colonial administration and other mission groups. While several changes have been made by subsequent governments to the duration, qualification and content of training (and further expansion of the system) colonial influences remain in relation to structures and procedures within colleges, and more significantly the preparation of teachers for an education system which itself was imposed by the British and modelled on early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century western ideals, principles and processes (see Bame N.D., MacBeath 2010, Nyarkoh 2016 for accounts of the evolution of teacher preparation in Ghana). See also Rutazibwa (2018) on the importance of re-thinking our 'point of departure' and critically engaging with silenced historical influences on contemporary development challenges.

<sup>2</sup> The first-year maps onto the upper-secondary school curriculum as student-teachers have not studied all subjects for their school examinations.

In 2008 the Ghanaian Government began upgrading colleges to tertiary institutions. This necessitated a shift of responsibility for some (but not all) aspects of colleges' work from the Ghana Education Service to the National Council of Tertiary Education. The shift led to challenges at levels of administration and accountability (Newman 2013), staffing (Agbewode 2013), curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (GNA 2012). Newspaper reports document clashes over the status, salaries and professional development opportunities for tutors (which are considerably less desirable than for university academics), uneasiness with the title of 'sub-tertiary' (Afeti 2013)<sup>3</sup>, and the withdrawal of the student-teacher allowance which led to a strike in 2015 (Starr 2015). While it was intended that the shift to tertiary status and the upgrading of the minimum qualification for teaching (from Certificate to Diploma) would lead to a shift in pedagogy (MoE 2010a), Akyeampong et al. reported in 2011 that little had changed in colleges since their research a decade earlier described 'prescriptive [tutor] behaviours rather than critical reflection and personal agency' (Akyeampong and Lewin 2002:347). Stuart's (2002) report from the same study claimed colleges were characterised by 'deep-rooted conservatism' (p.372) in which tutors felt detached from a centralised curriculum and pedagogic content and processes. In 2011, Agbenyega and Deku (p.3) reported 'intensely oppressive' pedagogical practices in programmes which are 'prescriptive and mechanistic'. In 2017 Akyeampong highlighted examples of college-pedagogy which aligned with the processes but not the principles of learner-centred teaching.

These pedagogical practices were observed during a pilot-study<sup>4</sup>, but the pilot also highlighted that data which exists around these practices – in Ghana and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa – is largely descriptive, lacks a connection to the sociocultural (i.e. how they connect to cultural, institutional and historical factors) and positions institutions, tutors and student-teachers within a deficit discourse (e.g. Adu-Yeboah 2011). This discourse is helpful in identifying knowledge-gaps, but less helpful in identifying how the relationship between tutors and student-teachers can be supported to generate shared understandings of why these gaps are important.

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<sup>3</sup> The official term is 'pre-tertiary' (GES 2012), but 'sub-tertiary' was used by student-teachers, staff and media-reports during the fieldwork.

<sup>4</sup> A two-week study (June 2014) at the same college, funded by The Open University, UK.

Since the research took place, Ghana has launched a UK Government-funded programme to ‘transform’ teaching and learning at colleges of education. This study offers key insights for this, and other major pre-service interventions by moving away from a deficit narrative and towards a more constructive, inclusive strategy for change. The research approach was designed to capture pedagogical pursuits and practices, but also open up a space to identify realistic opportunities for pedagogical shifts that take into account wider discourses operating within, and on, colleges of education.

### **Theoretical framing**

UNESCO’s 2014 Global Monitoring Report presented four strategies for good quality teaching: ‘Recruit the best candidates from a wide range of backgrounds’; ‘Train teachers well, both before and during their careers’; ‘Allocate teachers effectively by offering incentives to teach in disadvantaged areas’ and; ‘Retain teachers through improved working conditions and career progression pathways’ (2014:187). These are important strategies which are absent or poorly managed in many countries (Buckler 2015b; McGrath and Gu 2015; Bird et al. 2013). However, they focus mainly on how teachers teach, rather than how they learn; a search for ‘pedagogy’ in the online version returns five results, all of which refer to children’s learning. The report also identifies a gap in policy-level thinking about teacher-learning by highlighting that only 17 of the 40 national education plans submitted included strategies for improving teacher education (p.22). Such omissions around teachers’ experiences perpetuate a common policy and practice misalignment which positions them as ‘passive enactors of pedagogic strategies’ (Murphy and Wolfenden 2013:264). It ignores that teachers’ own ideas about learning may be diverse, and develop through relationships in learning and practice environments (Robeyns 2006), the importance of community (Cuddapah and Clayton 2011; Dinsmore and Wenger 2006) and context (Vygotsky 1978) and the interaction of these (Lave and Wenger 1991) over time. These influences, which underpin sociocultural thinking, can be found in policy around children’s experiences of education systems in low-income countries (UN 2001), but are far less evident in policy around teachers’ experiences of learning in these same systems.

This paper draws on Wenger (1998). First it draws on the link between learning and participation. It begins with the proposition that the social community of the college shapes the learning experiences of student-teachers, but also that their participation shapes the community itself: ‘the transformative potential goes both ways’ (p.56-7). Secondly it draws on the idea of learning as a ‘process of becoming’ (p.215): the college constitutes a formative learning experience through which the identities of student-teachers are shaped; they develop as teachers through possibilities enabled by relations within the learning environment (Lave and Wenger 1991). Possibilities for being changed and for making change are shaped by student-teachers’ past learning, existing knowledge, and through negotiation within the community (Wenger 1998).

The purpose of this framing is to understand more about student-teachers’ perspectives on what they have reason to value in relation to learning to become a teacher and the freedom they have to participate in activities to support this learning. Here lies the link between the theoretical and analytical approaches: Amartya Sen’s capability approach (1999) focuses on the freedom (capability) people have to pursue functionings: ‘the various things a person may value doing or being’ (p.75). Capability is what enables people to live the life they want to live, and be the person they want to be. In this paper Sen’s notion of freedom to pursue valued functionings is overlaid onto Wenger’s notion of knowledge as a ‘matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises’ (1998:4): learning is intrinsic to the freedom to develop competences which underpin valued and aspirational teacher identities.

A key strength of the capability approach is its potential to account for opportunities and constraints within social and institutional structures (Robeyns 2005; 2017). However, the additional contribution a sociocultural lens can provide an evaluation of student-teacher capability development is three-fold:

First, the focus of this study is distinct from capability evaluations which seek to understand people’s ‘general’ capability, where articulated, valued freedoms are framed by an individual’s interpretation of and interaction with a broad range of social, cultural, political and economic systems (i.e. capabilities for *living*). This study capitalises on the broad application potential (Robeyns 2016) of the approach and

‘narrow[s] the coverage of capabilities for a specific purpose’ (Sen 2004:74). Its specific purpose is to understand how capabilities for *learning* develop within an institution dedicated to determining the parameters of and supporting this learning. It is reasonable to suggest that learning is central to all human development (Wenger 1998) and, consequently, should be more explicitly recognised in more general capability evaluations, but in this study in particular the process of capability development is inseparable from the process of learning. Robeyns (2017) suggests that ‘the dimensions one selects to analyse will determine what we observe’ (p.63). I suggest, additionally, that the dimensions one selects to analyse should determine *how* we observe them. Given the centrality of learning to this study, it seems important that we draw from an epistemological frame that shares core values with the capability approach.

The second contribution is that a sociocultural framing encourages an evaluation of learning that extends beyond what is formally taught, and disrupts common policy narratives which imply a straightforward link between curriculum-content and pre-service teacher development. While few people would disagree intuitively that learning to ‘become’ a teacher is a dynamic, career-long process, 80 percent of investment in teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa is front-loaded into the pre-service period (Anamuah-Mensah et al 2013).

A significant strength of the capability approach is how it ‘allows us to think of human beings in a dynamic frame in which they are constantly involved in the process of becoming themselves and realising themselves’ (Giovanola 2005:251). Buckler (2015b) models in-service teacher capability development as a non-linear process and presents a framework of capability constellations for teaching within which individuals move depending on the time (and the purpose) of an evaluation. Comim (2003) even evokes the language of Wenger by including a category of ‘becoming’ in the informational space of a capability evaluation to recognise intertemporal dimensions. So, while more general capability evaluations might assume an open-ended frame for capability development, the implicit framing of the pre-service system is that what student-teachers learn in the first two years of the college programme should be sufficient to support the development of freedoms related to becoming a teacher (at least, it should adequately ‘prepare’ them for the role). The

examinable component further reinforces which of these should be prioritised within the programme. Without the flexible temporal dimension of the informational space that a more general capability evaluation might offer, Wenger's perspective reminds us to look for other ways in which this space can be framed as multi-dimensional. A sociocultural lens challenges the normative curriculum-focused nature of learning in a formal programme to include a focus on how capabilities for teaching are facilitated within but also beyond scheduled classes (this has methodological implications which are discussed below).

Thirdly, capability evaluations tend to focus on the beneficiaries of public services, rather than the providers (Buckler 2014): the capability development of students has been widely explored (Smith and Barrett 2011; Walker 2007). Others (e.g. Buckler 2015b; 2015c; Tao 2014) have focused on teacher capabilities. A sociocultural study of capability for learning focuses on how different stakeholders in education make sense of the education system, and how they make sense of themselves and each other within this system (Reeves 2010). It recognises that educators *and* learners (in this case, tutors and student-teachers) co-participate in the learning experience, and that this co-participation will shape how capabilities for learning to become a teacher are identified and pursued.

Murphy and Wolfenden (2013) articulate learning as a process in the pursuit of valued education goals: 'a movement towards greater participation in both becoming and belonging' (p.265). The study reported here draws on and develops this alignment through an analysis of student-teachers' capabilities for learning in a college of education: who determines valued goals in the process of becoming a teacher? Does the college programme act as a 'conversion factor' (Sen, 1999), enabling student-teachers' ideas about learning to become a teacher to be realised? And, crucially, is the realisation of student-teacher-identified capabilities sufficient to 'prepare' them for the realities of teaching?

## **Approach**

These ideas were focused into three research questions:

1. What are student-teachers' valued capabilities for learning to become a teacher?
2. To what extent are these capabilities realised at a College of Education in Ghana?
3. How can the exploration of capabilities for learning through a sociocultural lens help us think differently about teacher education?

The research was intentionally iterative and inclusive. I – the author of this paper – was the Principal Investigator (PI), and I am a female, UK-based academic. A recognition that my personal ontology has been shaped by colonial influences and privileges underpinned the emphasis on collaboration, inclusion of multiple perspectives and 'reverence for other ways of knowing' (Moffat 2016:752). The research was developed with a Ghanaian teacher education policy-maker, and the focus and process were continuously reflected on through discussions with two Ghanaian research assistants (RAs).<sup>5</sup>

The methodology was designed to capture valued capabilities for learning as they were pursued by student-teachers through 'interaction, discourse and participation processes... across social and physical contexts' (Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011:813), over one academic year (2014-2015) at a College of Education in Southern Ghana.<sup>6</sup>

At the start of the year student-teachers attended a meeting about the study. Twenty-two student-teachers volunteered to participate in the qualitative data-generating activity and nine (three from each year group) were randomly selected by the RAs. Selected student-teachers were shadowed for 1-2 days at three points during the year: through this shadowing I observed 140 hours of college life which included 44

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<sup>5</sup> The RAs were tutors, recruited during the pilot and given research training as part of the capacity-building element of the project. They sourced documents, mediated access to classrooms and schools, administered surveys, helped to shape the direction of the study through team meetings, and provided logistical support when I was not in Ghana. The RAs were paid, and their roles were approved by the research ethics committee at The Open University. For ethical reasons RAs were not involved in the shadowing or interviews. Co-authoring was not possible without compromising college anonymity, although they were supported in their own academic writing projects.

<sup>6</sup> The Principal agreed to host the study, and following discussions about reciprocation, requested two staff research capacity-development workshops ('academic writing' and 'getting published'), after the data-generation phase.

lessons, assemblies, break-times, worship, chores, relaxation and the prefect election. The purpose of shadowing was to understand the sociocultural contexts, including, but also beyond scheduled teaching, which make up the learning environment.

Each participant was interviewed three times across the year. A core set of questions was used to map changing ideas around key issues, but student-teachers were also asked to reflect on things that were significant to them at that point in time. Interviews used terminology such as ‘important/not important’, ‘values’, ‘goals’, ‘limitations’, ‘support’ to mediate the language of capabilities, and sought to invoke ‘stories’ about aspirations for teaching based on their experiences and understandings of the Ghanaian education system. This paper draws on observational data, and the narratives of six campus-based first- and second-year student-teachers<sup>7</sup> and four tutors.

All text data (interview transcripts, field-notes, college and curriculum documents) were treated as narratives (Chase 1995; 2003). The analysis drew on established guides for scoping, selecting and determining valued functionings and capabilities through a process of inductive, then deductive analysis (Alkire 2008; Walker 2006b; Walker and Cin 2013; 2016), although the iterative nature of the fieldwork meant that there was overlap between these stages. The inductive stage sought to develop a characterisation of the kind of teacher the student-teachers aspired to be. The deductive phase aligned this characterisation with specific functionings, and necessary freedoms to achieve these functionings. A third phase returned to the narratives to re-examine these freedoms in relation to student-teachers’ ‘personal histories of becoming in the context of [their] community’ (Wenger 1998:5), to reflect on how the college experience shaped valued goals, and how (or if) these were pursued.

### **Capabilities for student-teacher learning**

This section focuses on the first two research questions: What are student-teachers’ valued capabilities for learning to become a teacher, and to what extent are these

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout. Buckler (2015a; 2015d) discuss data from across the three year-groups including the whole-college survey. Buckler (2018) focuses on data from the third, school-based, year.

capabilities realised at a College of Education in Ghana? Through the inductive data analysis there emerged a shared vision of a teacher as: knowledgeable; respectable and responsible and; capable of creating positive change in pupils' lives. The deductive analysis grouped student-teachers' descriptions of valued pursuits relating to these ideals into three capabilities: intellectual capability, reputational capability and agentic capability. This section explores these in turn.

### *Intellectual capability*

Intellectual capability refers mainly to the desire to gain subject-knowledge through engagement with tutors, peers and learning materials. It also refers to goals relating to pedagogy (although this term was not used by the student-teachers) which included knowledge related to teacher-pupil-interaction and use of resources. Intellectual capability was valued for its perceived intrinsic and practical benefits for teaching, but also because its validation through qualification would set the student-teachers apart from lower-status unqualified 'pupil teachers' whose contracts were under threat during the time of the fieldwork (Osam 2014). Student-teachers emphasised that tutors held the '*knowledge needed*' (Eunice, February 2015), and were key to facilitating intellectual capability:

*The way they teach is the same [as secondary school], but tutors are more experienced because of their degrees... they are not slaves to the syllabus, they go beyond it and really understand their work.*

(Moses, November 2014).

But while student-teachers felt that tutors' qualifications supported functionings related to subject-knowledge, the predominant teaching style (with the student-teachers in rows and the tutor at the front) limited other functionings within intellectual capability. The tension over the sub-tertiary status of colleges is relevant here. Student-teachers felt keenly that they were treated like secondary school, not tertiary students.

*...the tutors have studied to a higher level, we appreciate that... but because of this higher understanding they should also use and help people to understand different teaching methodologies and they are not doing that.*

(Muhammed, February 2015)

*...you heard the tutor suggesting we use a 'number board' – I don't know what that is! So 'what to teach' is ok, but 'how to teach' is neglected.*

(Ruth, June 2015)

While these other functionings were often not supported in class, they were sometimes supported by individual tutors outside the formal teaching programme. For example, one morning student-teachers arrived to find their tutor standing next to his laptop. As they were finding their seats he played a popular American song. When the class was settled he snapped the laptop shut and proceeded with the lesson. Later, he explained:

*It was a way of motivating them by showing them that in many ways we are similar, and liking the same music is one way. If they understand that, then they can contribute, they are free to interact with me.*

(Male tutor, June 2015)

Muhammed explained the significance of this to him:

*That lesson, with the song, it showed me that there are different ways of being a teacher. You can be creative, you can inspire people in different ways. It's not all about talk, it's not all about content, you can show yourself to be one with them.*

(Muhammed, June 2015)

While pedagogy-related functionings were valued by the student-teachers, they did not contribute to their grade. They were seen as positive additions to their learning experience, but not critical for qualification, which understandably (because the alternative was failure and unemployment) was their main pursuit. Limits to pedagogy-related functionings were seen as frustrating, but non-urgent. Limits to

accessing subject-knowledge, however, were seen as critical capability obstacles. Multiple threats to subject-knowledge-related functionings were proposed. These included out-of-date resources, the ban on student-teachers accessing the college Wi-Fi, and tutors charging for photocopies, but the biggest perceived threat was tutor absenteeism.

Three two-hour classes are time-tabled each day, Monday-Friday. Student-teachers are given a 'full' time-table with no free periods; additional, compulsory evening sessions are scheduled for homework and revision, and afternoons are set-aside for chores, resting, sports and clubs, depending on the day, gender or interests of student-teachers. Student-teachers should receive thirty hours of classroom-teaching per week. The data suggests that this is unlikely to be the case.

*Some teachers come early, some don't come at all, some come late... I don't know why, it's just the way it is here.*

(Peter, November 2014)

Through shadowing, the data captured 44 classes, totalling 88 hours of scheduled instructional time. The student-teachers' complaint about tutor lateness and absenteeism was corroborated through this exercise. Only four of these classes started 'on time'.<sup>8</sup> Twenty-four classes started late (often up to an hour late) and over one third (16) of the classes did not take place because the tutor did not show up. Of 88 hours of instructional time, tutors were present for 37 hours. Therefore, proportionately, student-teachers were taught for 2.5 hours per six-hour day. Student-teacher attendance is compulsory so it was normal for a class to be sitting at their desks without a tutor.

*The tutors being late really affects us. If you knew they weren't coming you could prepare other work... but you never know, so you just sit and wait.*

(Ruth, June 2015)

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<sup>8</sup> 'On time' was defined as the tutor being in class within ten minutes of the time-tabled start-time.

Often, if tutors were absent, student-teachers would volunteer to lead revision-lessons, and this peer-learning was valued by the student-teachers who appreciated the opportunity to ‘catch-up’ in their pursuit of intellectual capability. Ultimately, however, student-teachers saw tutors as necessary mediators of even peer-learning, so tutor-absenteeism was perceived as a daily, cumulative threat to the development of intellectual capability.

### ***Reputational capability***

Being a role-model was seen as a key aspect of teaching. Learning how to build a positive reputation for themselves in a community was highly valued by the student-teachers. Most of the data around this theme focused on dress, and disciplined, but inspiring, behaviour.

*...teaching is all about students trying to imitate you, they have trust in you, you become their guide to deliver the good aspects of life to them and they grow with it.*

(Robert, February 2015).

The college has strict rules regarding dress, which are routinely policed. The uniform resembles that of a secondary school in Ghana, with white shirts which must be spotless and crisply ironed. There are minimum lengths for women’s skirts, and a ‘no beards’ rule for men. Outside class-time, students must wear a college-branded t-shirt.<sup>9</sup> Practically the student-teachers highlighted how their freedom to adhere to the uniform-code was limited by heavy work-loads, mandatory chores, and unpredictable power-outs which lasted up to 12 hours. Some felt that learning to deal with these challenges facilitated reputational capability because it was preparation for when they would be teaching and likely living in shared accommodation:

*I have learned to keep myself and my belongings neat and take responsibility for this... I really feel that something good has been imparted... my mum was*

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Offence 17’ of college guidelines, ‘Refusal to wear prescribed college attire’ results in ‘attire confiscated and punishment’.

*shocked when I came home, she now sees me as a mature person who is tidy and not lazy. She thinks 'yeah, now Eunice can live on her own and take care of herself'.*

(Eunice, June 2015).

However, there was a tension for the student-teachers regarding the methods employed to encourage role-model characteristics. They were not allowed off-campus without written permission (although many did not want to leave because their uniforms were mocked by university students who saw them as inferior in the tertiary hierarchy). On two occasions during the fieldwork, prefects swept into a first-year classroom to inspect male students' stubble-length and banned those who had not shaved from the lesson. Although student-teachers understood and valued wider cultural associations between neatness and respect, they resented the lack of room for diverse interpretations of these terms.

*...all the things that go on [at secondary school] go on here... I think it's a controlling thing, like the uniforms keep us on campus. If we wore our own clothes we would be free to be ourselves and feel like we are on our way to being professional teachers... when you wear a uniform, you are not respected out there.*

(Moses, February 2015).

Student-teachers had expected that the college would be an environment in which they could 'kind of go from student to professional' (Robert, February 2015). Instead they felt that while the rules facilitated the form of reputational capability, they restricted the substance of it: they were learning to look like a teacher, but not feel like one.

*The kind of people rules like this produce are not what we need in school. They do as they are told, they don't ask the reasons, they don't challenge anything. They are like actors. They are given a script and they go by the script.*

(Muhammed, November 2014)

Finally, student-teachers felt that tutor-absenteeism also undermined their pursuit of reputational capability: *'they are not setting a good example with punctuality – we are supposed to copy them!'* (Eunice, February 2015). In turn, inability to influence the situation undermined their agentive capability, which we turn to now.

### ***Agentive capability***

The third learning capability to emerge from the data was the freedom to make a difference. Examples of functionings within this capability derived from the college curriculum, but mostly from student-teachers' narratives about their own experiences of school, and included: supporting shy children; encouraging families to send children more regularly; motivating teachers to use non-violent forms of discipline; inspiring children to aspire to a secondary education and; encouraging tolerance of difference to ensure inclusive learning environments. Collectively these functionings depended on having reputational capability and encompassed a desire to learn how to be confident and assertive in school and community settings. Ruth described a time when she was visiting a school and a teacher forced her to cane the children (she did not feel able to refuse). A tutor told a story about how a teacher had inspired a chief to promote girls' education. A key learning goal for the student-teachers was knowing how to handle – and positively influence – situations like these.

The student-teachers felt a key aspect of the college environment which contributed positively towards this capability was student diversity.

*...the more I have been here the more I understand that we are all different and we need to learn to live together... in school you will have different kinds of children and you need to understand these differences.*

(Eunice, June 2015)

Valuing diversity was scaffolded by the year-two Education Studies module which has a section on 'individual differences'. Second-year student-teachers regularly drew on the language of this module when narrating their own histories and articulating professional aspirations:

*...in college we have people from all over Ghana and different religions... I see difference as good. When I was at school I was different [from a very low-income family], my teacher did not see this as good. But now I know about individual differences if I saw a teacher discriminating against a pupil I would tell them about individual differences.*

(Robert, June 2015)

The student-teachers also saw opportunities for realising agentive capability in the small ways in which the college differed from their experiences of secondary school. Although it was not common, and some tutors used these techniques more than others, there were opportunities for standing in front of the class and talking and presenting group work. In November Eunice said she never dared raise her hand because public speaking terrified her. In June she volunteered to co-lead a study-group and present a piece of project work to the class.

However, again, some of the most significant learning experiences for developing agentive capability took place around the edges of formal lessons. Eunice explained that her increased confidence was due to the residential element; living closely with fellow student-teachers had *'broken down barriers between Christians and Muslims and ladies and gents... I have really changed my personality and can speak freely with them all'*. After a first-year Biology lesson the (female) tutor asked student-teachers to stay behind, and gave a speech on the need for women to be independent and not rely on men for money. In the final interview with Eunice I asked about things she had learned *that year* that had been especially important to her. She focused on this un-scheduled lecture:

*...it totally changed my attitude towards my studies. It made me think so much about my future and why I want to be a teacher... so I can support myself and the things I can do – as a woman – to encourage girls I teach.*

(Eunice, June 2015)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eunice was financially supported by her much older boyfriend.

Most participating student-teachers felt the college was supporting agentive capability development in relation to *identifying* injustice. However, there was a tension between their confidence in their predicted ability to stand up to injustice when working as professional teachers, and their observed and self-reported ability to stand up to injustice in their own learning environment. The main restriction was the widely-held belief that any challenge to authority would result in a penalty on their grade. In relation to the issue of tutor-lateness, for example:

*...it's bad but you can't do anything about it. Even prefects can't challenge it... because that tutor will give them a bad continuous-assessment score and their grade for the whole year will be at risk.*

(Ruth, March 2015)

And more generally:

*...the tutors have the power over you because the 40-marks you are awarded for continuous-assessment is with them – the least mistake you do, any trouble you cause, you don't get them. So you can't challenge anything.*

(Muhammed, March 2015)

While none of the student-teachers could recall a situation in which someone's continuous-assessment mark was reduced for speaking out (and tutors denied that it was a possibility) the threat dominated student-teachers' interaction with the Administration as well as with their peers.

*We know that no one is perfect but we can't comment on anything. The first day you come here, you interact with [the second-years], this is what they tell you. They say don't challenge anything because your 40-marks will be affected. So this is the college-mentality.*

(Muhammed, June 2015)

Officially the opportunity for making changes was through the prefect system, although it was widely accepted by student-teachers and (some) tutors that these positions were focused on enforcing Administration-rules, and reporting (rather than

championing) resistance to the status quo. During prefect-vetting a student-teacher outlined a plan to raise money for a gardener to free-up the student-teachers' time for revision prior to the exam period (several hours a week are devoted to gardening-related chores). The tutors' response was:

*You think you have the power to do that? You don't have the power!*

(Field-notes, June 2015)

The student was not approved as a prefect-candidate.

## **Discussion**

This section responds to the third research question: How can the exploration of capabilities for learning through a sociocultural lens help us to think differently about teacher education? First it takes a Wengerian view regarding structural and relational norms of the college environment and explores how the student-teachers' conceptualisation and pursuit of perceived capabilities for becoming a teacher is embedded in these norms. It then considers how a better understanding of the sociocultural context surrounding capabilities for learning can help us to understand and plan for teacher education which might more appropriately facilitate capabilities which support teacher preparation.

### ***Capability identification, prioritisation and deferment***

News coverage of the Ghanaian 2014-2015 academic year was dominated by the removal of the student-teacher allowance, and subsequent strike. Student-teachers reported receiving phone-calls from the Administration telling them to return or be disciplined (which they interpreted as losing their '40-marks'). It was the main conversation topic between student-teachers, but there are no recordings in the data of it being discussed between student-teachers and tutors. Once they had returned, their brief revolt was not publicly acknowledged.

I use this example, in which narratives around this hugely significant event differed between student-teachers, and between student-teachers and staff, to return to the

metaphor Muhammed introduced in the reputational capability section, which three student-teachers and a tutor independently used to describe college life: to succeed, everyone must learn the ‘script’. An example of how this plays out can be seen in the ‘on-campus teaching practice’. In their second-year, student-teachers had to prepare a ten-minute lesson for their classmates. This was a big event in the college calendar and a week was set aside for preparation and presentation of lessons. Student-teachers planned a lesson for 35 pupils because this was the policy target for class-size in Ghana (MoE 2010b) even though they would likely face much larger classes in the ‘out-programme’:<sup>11</sup>

*Yeah, if you want 40-marks, you need to put 35 [pupils]! You know there will be classes with 80 or 90 pupils but you can't plan for this because for the assessment you have to plan for the average – average number, average child. We can't veer off script! It's like everything at college – it's not real, it's a game we play to pass our exams and then we learn how to become a real teacher when we graduate.*

(Robert, June 2015)

The ‘game’ refers to becoming a teacher in the most literal sense (i.e. getting the Diploma) rather than developing the full-set of capabilities the student-teachers feel they need. Their primary learning focus is on the pursuit of examined functionings within intellectual capability, and the functionings within reputational capability which correspond with the college’s disciplinary codes (which are perceived to contribute towards the continuous-assessment).

Other studies suggest that the unpreparedness of teachers in Ghanaian schools is a result of tutors’ unfamiliarity with school contexts (Anamuah-Mensah et al. 2017) and a lack of skills to engage in relational pedagogy (Adu-Yeboah 2011). It is also tempting to imagine it to be a reasonable outcome of tutor-absenteeism. These are clearly important issues. However, adopting a socially-oriented lens on student-teacher learning involves an interpretation of pedagogy which includes contextual

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<sup>11</sup> One third-year student-teacher in this study had 62 pupils in their class, another had 105.

conditions which act on the ‘interactional, relational space’ (Walker 2006a:12) in which knowledge – and what is valued as knowledge is mediated.

First, from the perspective of the tutors, the process of ‘becoming’ a teacher in Ghana is shaped by their transmission of the syllabus.<sup>12</sup> A Science tutor exclaimed [during an interview] at the ridiculousness of the expectation on him to deliver a lesson on ‘Laboratory Safety’ when he did not know of a primary school with a science lab. Yet, in the lesson he stuck to the ‘script’ without referencing the unlikelihood of student-teachers being posted to schools with a laboratory. There was not time to cover the assigned information (which they would be tested on) *and* challenge it during the lesson. Student-teacher *and* tutor success is measured by Dip.Ed certification, as this excerpt from an Education Studies lesson suggests:

***Tutor:** We are short on time. Any questions?*

***Student-teacher:** Are there any more examples of learner-centred approaches?*

***Tutor:** I have given you three, you will only be asked for three in the exam, so that is all you need to know.*

(Field-notes, November 2015)

Secondly, not only does the densely-packed curriculum limit opportunities to debate, or democratically determine, non-examined functionings for teaching, the administrative context around tutors’ work, and the stigma of the sub-tertiary status appear to influence tutors’ perceived freedom to engage in these debates. As we have seen, some tutors subvert this norm. This tends to take place in classrooms, but before and after formal lessons; a liminal space between the structured and the social. For other tutors this is not possible because they are not present in these spaces.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the primary pursuit of subject-knowledge is only granted a fleeting mention in the national policy framework for teacher education (GES 2012). Page four of the framework states the ‘core values’ of teacher education in Ghana as ‘commitment, attitudes, ethics and morals’.

A key reason tutors are absent is because they have additional jobs. For most, this involved tutoring students from the university. There is a financial incentive, but tutors also talked about the academic freedom this role enabled:

*...there I turn up for my students, and off we go – we are free in what we discuss, we can go above. Here I turn up for the Administration... having to sign in, prove I have covered the syllabus – it's humiliating in a way.*

(Tutor, June 2015)

So, it is not necessarily that these tutors do not value relational pedagogies, that they are not a part of their professional identity, or that they lack the skills to engage in them. Rather they do not see them as appropriate within the norms and expectations of the cultural scripts which authorise and reproduce pedagogic choices at the college (Bruner 1996; Wolfenden et al 2017). Through mutual participation in the formal learning community both student-teachers and tutors down-play the importance of pursuing a range of functionings that will prepare them for classrooms. Student-teachers pragmatically defer the pursuit of learning to become the kind of teacher they want to be until they are working in a school – which they understand to be a more authentic context for developing professional capabilities - and tutors tacitly endorse this capability deferment.

But there is a further layer to understand; how the student-teachers' valued capabilities are shaped in the first place. The capability approach focuses on what people are able to do or be (Sen, 1999). The data suggests that the college experience offers few spaces for thinking about what a teacher should do or be, the focus is almost wholly on what they need to know (largely for examinations, rather than for teaching itself). The student-teachers' aspirational capabilities, therefore, stem mainly from their own experiences of primary school; ideas about the beings and doings of teachers which are at least one, and in some cases nearly two decades old. This is problematic because of the enormous changes to the primary education system in Ghana during this time: enrolment in primary schools doubled, and pupil-teacher-ratios have increased dramatically (UNDP 2015). The college-based programme facilitates few opportunities to align student-teachers' understandings of the beings and doings of teachers with contemporary school contexts. For example, Eunice

spoke fondly of her favourite teacher who sat with her for an hour every day to help her with her Maths. While Eunice aspires to support children in the same way it is not difficult to imagine the impact of this not being possible (in a class of 90 students) on her feelings of professional achievement and preparedness. So, the mutually reinforced act of capability deferment can not only prevent student-teachers from realising a wide range of functionings, but also prevent them from reflecting on why (and even if) related capabilities are important and relevant in today's schools.

### *Concluding thoughts*

This paper has explored how capabilities for learning to become a teacher interrelate with the sociocultural learning environment in which they are negotiated and pursued. The purpose was to move beyond the commonly relied upon deficit discourse which provides often inadequate explanations of teacher 'preparedness' which have proved to be unhelpful for policy (and teacher) development. The locus of blame for unpreparedness is often shifted to the teacher educator, without considering the structural and social forces which influence the value placed on different kinds of knowledge, and how valued knowledge is mediated within institutions.

The analysis moved the debate beyond the common assertion that what is taught is not relevant, or too theoretical. It showed that both student-teachers and tutors are engaged in the deferment of capabilities for teaching, and that this deferment is largely due to the collective positioning of tutors and the Administration as unchallengeable, and the student-teachers as un-agentive, but also to logistical and cultural restrictions tutors experience in terms of what, and how, they teach (see also Nyarkoh 2016). Crucially, both student-teachers and tutors recognise that the college programme is not supporting student-teachers to develop the professional capabilities they value (therefore inadequately preparing teachers for schools), but neither group feels able to admit this to each other, or to others within the system.

So, what implication do these insights have for teacher education in Ghana, and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa? The UK Government is currently investing £17m in teacher education in Ghana through the T-TEL project. T-TEL has eight goals which include more school exposure, an emphasis on pedagogy, and a shift from

exam-based to portfolio-based assessment. Importantly, T-TEL has published guides for tutors which encourage them to get student-teachers talking more in lessons. These are important foci, but unless the hierarchical relational norms in the college are acknowledged and addressed, these changes may not lead to kind of deep learning needed for capabilities for teaching to be authentically and realistically determined, debated and realised.

There are some practical suggestions from this study which could support an environment for the more democratic determination and realisation of capabilities for teacher learning. Student-teachers could be allowed to wear their own clothes, for example. There could still be expectations (and penalties) around neatness, but relaxing the uniform codes would help student-teachers to feel more aligned with the tertiary system and less with the school system. The process of staff pre-vetting prefect candidates could be removed so that being a prefect offers genuine opportunities for representing the student-voice rather than reinforcing that of the Administration. Both these shifts could enhance student-teachers' reputational and agentic capability.

Since the research took place, one of the RAs – who is responsible for on-campus teaching practice – revised the programme so it took place weekly instead of annually. His intention is to give student-teachers more opportunities to reflect on how they could respond to practical challenges in teaching different topics; to focus on the realisation of pedagogical elements of intellectual capability that were not captured by the formal examination process, and therefore often deferred. Crucially, much more thought needs to be given to the professionalisation, professional development, remuneration, autonomy and support of tutors – a hugely under-represented professional group in Sub-Saharan African policy and research - so that they are able to model the sort of pedagogy in the college that both they and the student-teachers said they valued for learning.

But all of these suggestions require more attention to aspects of the training programme which foster more democratic relationships between tutors and student-teachers. The analysis has shown how relationships can be challenged and nurtured in liminal spaces at the college, when the boundary between tutor and student-teacher is

temporarily relaxed, and that these spaces in particular support the realisation of professional capability. More spaces need to be created within the college programme for discussion around the kinds of people and knowledge the college is seeking to develop, and how the professional practice of both tutors and student-teachers support these purposes (Reeves 2010). The paper has shown how student-teachers' freedom to learn depends on the relations they have developed within the college environment (see also Raider-Roth 2017) but also that the social conditions and contexts within which these relations exist shape what are considered to be valued capabilities. If reforms in teacher education neglect the importance of pedagogical relationships, both the conceptualisation and realisation of student-teachers' professional capabilities may be capped.

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