Adult students in upper secondary education in Italy

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Abstract

Upper secondary education has been identified by different institutions as the minimum educational threshold in a knowledge society, a necessary requirement for citizens of all ages to respond to the social changes driven by global technological innovation. Figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) unfortunately show that a large share of adult population in OECD countries still lack upper secondary qualifications. Italy appears in these statistics as one among the lowest ranking countries and provisions currently in place to bring adult citizens back to school still yield quite low numbers. This research aims at exploring the challenges to adult students' participation in upper secondary education in Italy examining the actual experience of a group of grown-up learners attending a public vocational school. The results of the inquiry are based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews framed in a qualitative research design. The study is grounded in a theoretical frame derived both from participation theories and from the capability approach. The main conclusion of the research is that successful participation and persistence in adult education require students’ expectations to be appropriately met by an attentive customized institutional support. To this respect, the research suggests recommendations in order to improve public information about provisions for grown-up students, to separate adult education from second chance teenage schooling and to customize adult learning through appropriate learning management tools.

Keywords: adult education in Italy, capability approach, qualitative analysis, upper secondary education, personal conversion rate variability, customized learning, autonomous motivation, persistence in education, situational barriers.
To Laura, tenacious woman and adult student.
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1 Introduction

Global challenges increasingly require high educational standards to be provided to citizens of all ages. In this perspective, adult education plays a key role, especially as a tool to meet the requirements of the global competition generated by knowledge economy. The attention paid to adult education in Italy over the last decade has not been up to the necessary recognition of its value as a key productive asset. Figures show that upper secondary education has been particularly neglected and, as a result, in the last ten years only a very low and decreasing number of adult students attended it. The introductory chapter provides some background information framing the research field. It also introduces the research aim and questions and summarizes the contribution of knowledge offered by this study.

1.1 Background information

Ten years after the global economic crisis, while the rest of the world seems to be recovering, Italy is still facing serious challenges posed by the long recession it entered in 2008 (Bricco, 2017). According to the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT, 2018), the unemployment rate in February 2018 was still 10.9% (32.7% for young workers aged 15-24), while recent research by Fondazione Di Vittorio, a trade union think-tank, reveals that by the end of 2018 the Italian gross national product (GNP) will still be 5 points below the level it had reached in 2007 (Fondazione Di Vittorio, 2017). During the last decade the country has lost its industrial backbone under an increasing threat on the part of emerging economies (Della Santa, 2013). Important changes in the global distribution of power deriving from parallel shifts in worldwide distribution of knowledge (Lauder, 2010) urge the introduction of new lifelong learning policies to improve the country’s human capital and secure social inclusion, but unfortunately little is being done and figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reveal that Italy is one of the lowest performing EU countries in terms of literacy and numeracy skills (OECD, 2013b, p.7).

This weakness is dramatically highlighted by upper secondary education figures (OECD, 2013a): only 41% of Italian adults aged 25-64 have upper secondary education qualifications against a European average of 48%, while 20% of the 15-19 year-old population drop-out school without completing their upper secondary education. Not surprisingly, 23.2% of the age group between 15 and 29 is thus unemployed, not in education or in professional training, compared to an OECD average of 15.8% (OECD, 2013a).
While very few provisions offering substantial support to lifelong learning are currently in place, the adoption of new policies to help adult students to complete their upper secondary education must unfortunately reckon with relevant unresolved issues: on one hand Italian spending on education in general is not up to the effort displayed by other OECD countries, on the other the responsibility for the overall governance of educational policies is still scattered among too large a number of loosely coordinated authorities (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, CEDEFOP, 2012). Moreover, the peculiar fragmentation of the Italian productive system seriously hampers the development of adequate company learning cultures, also hindered by a persistent general failure, especially on the part of small and middle-sized companies, to understand the importance of human capital improvement (Acocella & Leoni, 2011).

1.2 Research aim and questions

As the above OECD data reveal, in Italy many experienced working adults still lack a higher secondary education certificate, either because they stopped studying immediately after compulsory education, or because they dropped out their subsequent school career and never resumed it. In addition to this, an increasing number of young people fail to complete their regular upper secondary education (OECD, 2013a).

In the 1990s the Swedish government, launching an initiative aimed at improving adult education, stated that a general education of at least three years at upper secondary level is the minimum requirement in order to be employable (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012): This statement has recently been confirmed by the OECD (Van Damme, 2015). From this point of view, the situation of many Italian adults is all quite unfortunate, as their limited educational background may cause them to miss out on many challenges posed by global knowledge economy and on the improvements of the standards of living it may offer. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) underline that inability to meet the requirements of these challenges is quite likely to increase risks of social exclusion and marginalization.

According to Marescotti (2014), in the school year 2007/2008, out of 12 million potential Italian adult students who only had lower secondary school qualifications, just 66,545 attended upper secondary education courses. The evident disproportion of these figures triggered the curiosity that first sparked the idea of this research. The aim of the research was to explore the experience of a small sample of Italian grown-up students in order to understand the reasons that brought them back to school. In addition to this, the research also purported to highlight the
different factors that either hindered or facilitated their actual participation in upper secondary adult education. The study was driven by the following research questions:

1) Why did the students decide to resume their upper secondary education?
2) What guided the choice of the specific course they enrolled in?
3) What challenges does their school attendance as adult learners imply?
4) What supports them in facing such challenges?

A theoretical framework based on participation theories and on the capability approach guided the investigation to focus the research attention on the participants own expectations, on what they themselves considered to be actually valuable in their learning experience from their own point of view rather than from the mere institutional perspective of obtaining their upper secondary education certificate.

1.3 Contribution of knowledge

Upper secondary education has become a necessary educational requirement for adult citizens of all ages in order to be able to understand global changes and respond to them. OECD statistics show that Italy is one of the countries who fare worst in terms of adult population with upper secondary qualifications (OECD, 2013a). Over the years provisions to offer adult learners second chance opportunities only returned very low numbers of participants and recent OECD data (OECD, 2017) confirm an overall poor participation in adult education. According to the Italian trade union FLC CGIL (G. Caramia, personal communication, June 3, 2016), figures show a dramatic decrease from the already meager number of 71,972 adult students attending upper secondary education in the school year 2008-2009 to just 54,846 enrolments in the school year 2011-12, the last year on record. In the same period of time, the number of schools providing adult upper secondary education dropped from 905 units to 682. Using a theoretical framework based both on participation theories and on the capability approach, this study focused on the actual experience of the students in the research sample to underline some unresolved practical issues that hinder access to adult education or jeopardize persistence in it. Through the analysis of the experience of the research participants, the study also highlighted the relevance of personalized learning strategies in enhancing students’ motivation and in encouraging their growth as independent and persistent learners.
2 Theoretical framework

This study analyses adult students participation in upper secondary education in a middle-sized town in the North East of Italy. Adults’ participation in education is here considered as a learning process by which adult citizens try to respond to a number of different issues facing them. But how is this process triggered? What sustains its development? What hinders it? In order to investigate the problems raised by these questions, this research combines concepts drawn both from participation theories and from the capability approach.

2.1 Presentation of participation theories

Out of the vast literature about partecipation in adult education, this presentation chose to focus on two central points, namely the companion issues of motivation for participation and of barriers that may hinder it. Available literature in fact describes these two issues as closely intertwined in the shaping of the actual learning experience of adult students. This presentation highlights the fact that motivation is not always born out of the free choice of individuals, but it may also be determined by extrinsic factors: nevertheless, it also shows that motivations based on autonomous choices produce better participation results. As a consequence, some of the listed authors point to the further implication that autonomous motivations deserve to be enhanced through the creation of stimulating learning environments. The presentation also suggests that motivation processes, however based on individual choices, need to be understood as situated in the wider contexts that generate and condition them. From this point of view, it instances issues connected with different forms of barriers that may exert a decisive influence on learners' perception and on their agency, hindering the full development of their motivations to participate in adult education.

2.1.1 Motivation for participation in adult education

Motivation for participation in adult education and the study of reasons that may induce adults to participate has long been one of the main issues examined by researchers. A common pattern is detected by Ahl (2006) in most motivation theories: this pattern is based on a shared scheme by which initial motivation finds itself hampered by different kinds of barriers and, if these barriers are removed, motivation can then be fruitfully restored. In Ahl's opinion, this pattern is based on three questionable assumptions, i.e. that there actually is such a thing as motivation, that it
originates in the individual and that it determines personal behaviour. Disagreeing with this pattern, Ahl (2006) quotes Siebert (Siebert, 1985, as cited in Ahl, 2006) to state that motivation is not a clearly given object but just a hypothetical construct.

Expressing a different point of view, Radovan (2012) describes participation in adult education as understood in terms of a voluntary decision on the part of individuals and he also underlines that the degree of participants' awareness about their educational expectations can significantly strengthen their willingness to participate. As he maintains adult education, unlike youth schooling, to be based not on compulsory attendance but on free individual choice, Radovan stresses the importance of learners' motivation and preparedness in order to overcome both subjective and objective barriers and gain a constant persistence.

Participation in adult education is not always a free choice based on personal motivation. This is especially the case with workfare provisions, whereby unemployment benefits and grants can only be obtained subject to compulsory attendance of training courses. Unlike learners choosing to attend classes out of their own personal interests, workers forced into attendance through workfare schemes often question the actual usefulness of training courses and this lack of genuine motivation eventually impairs the expected results (O'Grady & Atkin, 2006). Quite similarly, organized literacy provisions in the workplace can result in diverging outcomes depending on the original motivation of workers using them: while workers who decide to participate of their own free choice often feel encouraged to go on learning beyond their workplace experience, those who only attend to fulfil mandatory upskilling requirements on the part of their employers seldom decide to continue with further forms of education (Wolf & Evans, 2011).

These results confirm self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), that posits that motivation can either be autonomous or controlled. Autonomous motivation is described by these authors as the sort of motivation that derives from a freely undertaken individual commitment: this is for instance the case of adult students deciding to resume their secondary education out of their own sheer desire to become better educated. On the other hand controlled motivation is rather seen as a motivation determined by extrinsic factors: workfare schemes, in which unemployed people compulsorily have to attend training courses in order not to lose the welfare benefits they receive are an example of controlled motivation governed by such extrinsic determinants. According to self determination theory, autonomous motivation is proven to yield better results than controlled motivation. Ahl (2006) criticizes this dualistic view of motivation, that she maintains to be typical of Western culture, as largely misleading: she quotes Iyengar and Lepper (Iyengar & Lepper, 2002 as cited by Ahl, 2006) to explain that the self is differently constituted in different cultures. As a consequence, she finds support in the work of a number of other different authors (Dai, 2002,
Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002, Salili & Hoosain, 2003, as cited in Ahl, 2006), to uphold that motivation processes can only be studied through cultural contextualization. Ahl (2006) also questions the explanatory power of Western motivation theories in general, even when applied in the West itself, because, in her opinion, most of them fail to take into due consideration important cultural, social and institutional factor.

A seminal paradigm of participation, based on Vroom’s on expectancy value theory (Vroom, 1964), was developed by Rubenson (1977). The paradigm suggests that motivation is the result of a tension between learners expectancies on one hand and the value learners give to their learning activity on the other hand. According to this model, motivation only arises if learners perceive themselves as successful participants and it gets stronger if they estimate that their perceived needs are being satisfied through the learning process.

The attention paid to learners' interests and needs is also apparent in the ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction) model (Keller, 1987), which overtly builds on Rubenson (1977). Even here motivation is understood as dependant on the relation between the value students expect to find in their learning activities and the actual fulfilment of such expectations. More precisely, in the ARCS model motivation results from an active involvement on the part of learners based on their appreciation of the relevance of what is being learnt as to the needs they wish to satisfy: their involvement is also based on the confidence they will be able to complete successfully the learning experience they have undertaken and on their overall satisfaction with such experience.

Boeren, Holford, Nicaise & Herman (2012) remark that research on motivation has up to now almost exclusively laid its stress on the relations between educational institutions and individual learning results, while insufficient attention has been given to the influence that may be exerted by wider social and political contexts. Based on suggestions derived from the paradigm developed by Rubenson (1977), they also highlight the need to enhance personal motivation designing learning environments that may provide encouragement and support to learners' autonomy engaging their personal interests and satisfying their needs.

From this point of view, Blossfeld, Kilpi-Jakonen, de Vilhena & Buchholz (2014) show how weak motivation to participate in adult education among underprivileged social groups is subject to a cumulative effect over the years, leading to increasing difficulties in participation and to growing overall disadvantages. This unfortunate trend away from participation also has a consequent negative impact on individuals' self-esteem which, in turns, seriously impairs social participation, further undermining personal motivation (Courtney, 1992; Fenwick, 2008).

Radovan (2012) describes motivation as dependant either on internal psychological determinants, such as personal needs and expectations, or external sociological factors like, for
instance, employment requirements. As to the latter kind of motivations, Wolf and Evans (2009), in their inquiry on workplace learning, discovered that workers were far more interested in an in-depth improvement of their job-related knowledge rather than in a mere increase of their salaries through limited upskilling activities, thus showing a preference for the medium-term perspective of gaining a better professional profile rather than for the simple immediate outcome of a confined economic advantage. In a similar way, Roberts et al. (2005) point out that the desire to increase their knowledge in order to strengthen professional identity is a main motivation among workers who choose to join adult education courses. Motivations leading workers to participate in adult education based on the perspective of short-term salary gains are understood by Tobias (2000) to be proficuous to satisfy the contingent needs of workforce demand but inimical to a more comprehensive educational growth on the part of workers themselves, especially in terms of their education to active citizenship. O’Connor (1999) sees motivation theory as inspired by industry in order to meet productivity requirements. Martin (2003) considers it as an important ideological instrument of individual motivation for participation in adult education in a far-ranging welfare revision aiming at shifting responsibility for welfare provisions from society to individuals, especially in the field of employment policies. Ahl (2006), suggests that motivation should not be considered as an entity residing inside the individual, but should rather be thought of as a relational concept. From this perspective, she describes the construction of the inadequacy of adult learners as a means for the internalization of a new disciplinary power associated to economic and technological determinism.

2.1.2 From motivation to actual participation: a critical itinerary

The itinerary from initial motivation to actual participation in adult education is often a hard-won progress. In spite of the fact that the research analysing this critical progress began later than the investigation into motivation itself, it soon gathered a growing momentum, especially through the works of Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Rubenson (1977), Cross (1981), Darkenwald and Merriam (1982).

In particular, Johnstone and Rivera (1965), in the initial work of this new trend in research, significantly focused their attention on adults not participating in education, identifying a number of factors hindering participation and grouping them in two main categories: situational and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers included external obstacles to participation, for instance those deriving from lack of time, transportation problems and other environmental factors, while dispositional barriers classified internal hindrances: examples of such hindrances are fear of possible failures, lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Through the nationwide survey they
conducted in the USA, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) also highlighted how the relevance of barriers to participation applied to different social groups, showing for instance that women are more often restrained by situational barriers than men, while old learners suffer limitations imposed by dispositional barriers more than younger ones.

According to Beder (1990), dating from Johnstone and Rivera's survey in 1965, scientific research on participation in adult education did not produce any significant progress until the 1980s, when a new attention to the problems of barriers emerged.

To this respect, an influential conceptualization, the chain-of-response model, was suggested by Cross (1981). The model posits the starting point in the chain of response to reside in individual factors such as motivation, self evaluation and attitude to education, while extrinsic elements conditioning participation only appear as subsequent and subordinated links. The actual relevance of barriers in hampering adults participation in education is therefore maintained to be mainly dependant on such psychological aspects as personal motivation and interest in learning. As far as barriers categories are concerned, Cross's model adds a category to the classification suggested by Johnstone and Rivera (1965): besides situational and dispositional barriers, the model also includes institutional barriers. Like situational barriers, institutional barriers are also extrinsic in nature, but they are less individual specific and they may include hindrances such as those due to unclear admission procedures, inappropriate class scheduling and inadequate student support services. On the other hand, dispositional barriers are bound to each individual learner in an intrinsic way: they are therefore more difficult to document and generalize than situational or institutional barriers and their relevance in hampering participation often has an even greater impact on the careers and the lives of adult learners.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) also use the chain-of-response model described in Cross (1981), similarly stressing the prominence of psychological factors associated to participation in adult education. The model they built, the psycho-social interaction model, is premised on a categorisation of barriers to participation similar to the one used by Cross (1981), nevertheless a notable difference is made apparent by their renaming of the original category of dispositional barriers into psycho-social barriers. Drawing on the notion of socialization used by Rubenson (1977) to describe the influence exerted on learners' perception by their social contexts, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) highlight the connections between the social and economic background of each learner and their individual decisions to participate. In fact, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) suggest that the “learning press”, i.e. the influence of socio-economic status on individual attitudes towards education and socialisation, determine the value that grown-up learners assign to adult education, which, in turns, is a triggering factor for motivation to participate. According to their
model, a high socio-economic status is likely to produce an environment where education is valued and encouraged and the acknowledgement of the value and the advantages of education stimulates motivation to participate thereby reducing barriers.

Gibson and Graff (1992) use Rubenson's expectancy-valence theory of motivation (Rubenson, 1977) to supplement the barrier classification described by Cross (1981) with complementary remarks concerning varying perceptions of barriers on the part of different students.

In their research on distance learning, variations in barriers perception are ascribed to the distinctive and unique learning styles adopted by each individual learner: learning styles properly attuned to meet the demands of independent study are seen to have a positive influence on the perception of barriers, thereby facilitating their overcoming.

Radovan (2002) stresses the importance of unconscious hampering factors that often go undetected by research surveys. In his opinion participants are quite likely to give reasons for not participating that are socially acceptable and he therefore suggests that some restraints often mentioned, such as lack of time or money, should be considered with some caution. Referring the reader to the works of Beder (1990), Hayes (1988) and Quigley(1997), Radovan (2002) also suggests a shift from the study of external barriers to that of internal deterrents. The reason for this suggested shift is that an emphasis mainly focused on external hindrances implies an attention exclusively paid to factors hampering adult learners that are already motivated and willing to participate in education, while shifting to a careful consideration of internal deterrents can broaden research efforts also to include adults that have never thought of participating, possibly out of personal biases that may often be only partially conscious, if at all.

Elaborating their bounded agency model, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) question the prevailing approach in theories on barriers and participation, criticizing their exclusive focus on individual interpretations of the world. Commenting on the results of Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana (2006), a research comparing participation in different countries, they call attention to the fact that the research, besides detecting expected significant differences between countries with contrasting positions in the modernization process, also reveals important divergences even between similarly industrialized countries, ascribing these variations to country specific differences such as those connected to distinctive learning cultures, learning opportunities at work and adult education public policies. Moreover, building on data from OECD and Statistics Canada (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, as cited in Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) they also highlight that inequalities in adult learning are closely connected to structural social inequalities in income, education, and skills attainment. These remarks reinforce the findings in Rubenson (2006) where participation patterns in different countries were seen to mirror the peculiar welfare state regime in each country. The
implication deriving from this assumption is that welfare provisions, by determining and conditioning the actual circumstances in which individuals live, can strongly influence their perception and their agency.

Problems originating from barriers to participation are sometimes improperly understood as mainly connected to factors hindering initial access to adult learning, but research importantly underlines that barriers may also hamper learning activities when they are in progress. (MacKeracher, Stuart, & Potter, 2006).

2.2 The capability approach

The capability approach key concept that individuals are ends in themselves rather than means to an end was used as a main tenet throughout this study to ascertain, from their own actual point of view of participating students, what they expected from their learning experience. A companion concept, the notion that all individuals have the right to do and to be what they themselves have reason to value allowed to explore the interviewees' experience of participation in adult education, telling apart different kinds of motivations. Furthermore, the conceptual tool of personal conversion rate variability, showing the varying degree of ability to convert resources into functionings displayed by different people, was found to be useful to describe different factors that either favour or hinder individual agency. Finally, the category of ethical judgement, as understood in the capability approach, illuminated the importance assigned to education in enhancing free individual decisions as to the capabilities to be developed.

2.2.1 Functionings, capabilities and personal conversion rate variability

Human life is described by the capability approach as constituted by a number of functionings, designated as attainments that people can achieve, what they actually manage to do or to be. The notion of capability then defines the individual ability to achieve the different combinations of functionings that each person can attain. Capabilities thus reflect individuals' degree of freedom to build their identities selecting between different lifestyles (Drèze & Sen, 1995). Capabilities are classified in three different categories (Nussbaum, 2000):

- **basic capabilities**, defined as innate to every person: they are the basic necessary equipment out of which more sophisticated capabilities are formed;
- **internal capabilities**, different states, peculiar to each person, that constitute the sufficient conditions for the exercise of specific functions;
• combined capabilities, by which the actual exercise of specific functions comes into being, but that can only be created if internal capabilities meet a favourable environment: for instance, illiterate people that are not offered any schooling have the internal capability to read and write.

The notion of combined capabilities points to the associated concept of personal conversion rate variability, the acknowledgement that different individuals have different abilities to convert resources into functionings due to a number of possible obstacles in the context where they actually live (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000). As the foundational moral assumption of the approach is that human abilities should be developed, the acknowledgement of a personal conversion rate variability implies the need to offer full support to those that have to overcome important hindrances to reach their expected functionings (Nussbaum, 2000; Unterhalter et al., 2007).

2.2.2 A capability approach perspective on adult education

In the presentation of participation theories, motivation and barriers that may hinder it were described as decisive factors in students’ participation in adult education. From this point of view, the capability approach, through the theoretical tool of combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000), can be used for an analysis of adult students’ participation in education where both personal motivations lying behind individual agency and different factors affecting it are simultaneously taken into account. In this analysis the capability to participate can be conceptualized as a combined capability: as such, it can only come into being to produce the expected functionings if the internal capability of each individual student’s motivation combines with suitable material conditions and with an attentive and customized response from the institutional environment. This means that participation in adult education can not be thought of in the void of an aggregate form, separate, if not divorced, from the lives of participants and of their communities: on the contrary, it must always be considered in deep association with their actual experience, trying to grasp facilitating and hindering factors emerging from personal life contexts in order to be able to help every single learner’s internal capabilities to develop into the combined capabilities required to actually produce the desired functionings. In other words, learners’ participation in education, adult or otherwise, must not be confused with their mere attendance of educational initiatives. From a capability approach perspective, participation in education must be understood literally, in its etymological meaning of sharing in an experience: therefore education can not just be provided, it must be shared. According to Sen (2002) there are no preset lists of capabilities to be developed and this intentional incompleteness is a key point in his view of the capability approach. In fact he believes
that every member of whatever community should be free to bring his contribution to a shared definition of valuable capabilities deserving to be acquired. In this perspective, school activities should be based on the shared definition of open curricula in order to equalize people’s capabilities both in and through education (Walker, 2005).

The capability approach suggests that the preeminent concern in analyzing adult education must not be focused on the resources that are being allocated to schooling grown-up students because resources are only of instrumental importance. What is of intrinsical importance is what learners can actually do and be, how they can factually be enabled to convert resources into learner-centered capabilities and functionings (Unterhalter et al., 2007; Hick & Burchardt, 2016). This suggestion implies the need to design engaging customized learning environments that may strengthen motivation, as suggested by Boeren et al. (2012). In fact, from the point of view of the capability approach, failures in paying a customized attention to the actual, individual needs of different persons are seen to be inevitably bound to diminish them, to perpetuate inequalities and to produce life-long disadvantages (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005). This remark can usefully supplement Blossfeld et al. (2014) analysis of the negative cumulative effects induced by weak motivation to participate in adult education among underprivileged social groups. It can also provide hints to investigate the decreasing participation in adult education signalled by Courtney (1992) and Fenwick (2008).

The capability approach main tenet holds individuals to be ends in themselves, responsible persons that decide about their own lives guided by what they themselves have reason to value (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000). This tenet is also a crucial theoretical tool: through the acknowledgement of the foundational right for individuals to decide themselves what actually counts as most important to them, it makes the exercise of personal judgement a key determinant in the process of learning and in the enhancement of personal motivation to participate in such process (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005). According to Ilieva-Trichkova (2016), as the capability approach clearly underscores that adult students are the subjects of their own action, their participation in education can only be expected to be successful if it originates from their own personal decision. This observation illuminates the distinction made by Radovan (2012) between the different degree of awareness of students in adult education and the one of young students in traditional education and it is also a necessary prerequisite in order to understand persistence in adult education as grounded on autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Letting each individual decide what counts as most important to them makes the exercise of personal ethical judgement the key factor on which identity shaping processes hinge (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005). From this point of view, according to the capability approach, in these processes
identities are chosen rather than discovered (Comim, 2006). This notion of identity formation as based on choice reveals a critical aspect of the capability approach, namely the possibility for individuals to choose to forfeit their freedom just in favour of well-being (Unterhalter et al., 2007). Acknowledging the problems that may arise from this limitation to the full exercise of individual freedom, Sen stresses the importance of education as a tool to prevent it: "The ability to exercise freedom may, to a considerable extent, be directly dependent on the education we have received, and thus the development of the educational sector may have a foundational connection with the capability-based approach " (Sen, 1990, p. 55).

Education is similarly crucial to another problematic issue in the process of identity formation through personal judgements described by the capability approach, i.e. the possible abuse of capabilities. As capabilities are to be considered neutral in themselves but possibly bad in use (Saito, 2003), their actual agency may lead to undesirable or even thoroughly unacceptable outcomes. To this respect, Scheffler (1985) maintains that the capability for an action leaves the decision about its agency open to individual choice: in the process of identity formation, education is therefore to be considered a necessary tool to promote full awareness about the most appropriate exercise of individual autonomy and the values it implies (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005).
3 Methodology and methods

The choice of a qualitative research design was determined by the fact that this kind of design was thought to be particularly suited to the overall hermeneutic stance of a theoretical framework centered on the attention to the actual experience of each individual suggested by the capability approach.

3.1 Research Design

This research project analysed the participation practice of a small group of adult learners who decided to complete their upper secondary education attending evening classes in a school in a middle-sized town in the North East of Italy. The analysis tried to identify different factors that either facilitated or hindered students' participation.

In order to pursue the aim of the research, a qualitative research design was adopted. The design entailed interviewing the students through the use of semi-structured interviews to investigate the distinctive features of their learning trajectories. The choice of semi-structured interviews was made because the flexible quality of such interviews allowed to create a situation similar to a conversation, thus establishing a confidential relationship with the participants, getting closer to their actual experience.

All through the inquiry, the in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of the interviewees was constantly in focus through the use of a hermeneutic research orientation grounded in the capability approach theory. A special attention was paid to how the interviewees made sense of their condition facing the issues raised by their decision to resume their upper secondary education. The processes through which they constructed their meanings were scrutinized, not as much to explain their behaviour as to understand and interpret their life world.

3.2 Interviews

The interviews with the sampled students were the core of the research work. The following section describes the preparatory work that was requisite for their planning. A special attention was paid to all the details that could help the interviewees to feel at ease in order to facilitate the flow of the conversations and the gathering of the maximum amount of relevant information.
3.2.1 Interview guide

The semi-structured research interviews were conducted with the help of a pre-tested interview guide (Appendix 1), following Bryman (2012). A simple wording was chosen to secure an easy understanding on the part of all participants and to make sure they felt comfortable sharing their feelings and ideas during their interviews because a friendly atmosphere can encourage the occasional spontaneous contribution of unsolicited useful information. The guide was structured in a sequence of eighteen open ended, non leading interview questions aimed at creating a natural flow of the conversation, also allowing for off-script probing questioning. The questions were grouped into four main areas, each devoted to explore the issues connected to one of the four research questions: why did the students decide to resume their secondary education? What guided the choice of the course they enrolled in? What challenges does their school attendance as adult learners imply? What supported them in facing such challenges? The interview guide was pre-tested through a mock interview session involving a volunteer student who was not to take part in the actual session. This pilot test helped to decide which questions where actually most suited to gain in-depth information about the interviewees experience, discarding the ones that proved unsuitable to this purpose and adding some new ones to complete the original list.

3.2.2 Interview context

The adult learners chosen for the purpose of this research were a group of students attending an upper secondary school in a middle-sized town located in a former rural district in the North East of Italy. Over the last four decades the district has undergone a deep change and it has now become one of the most industrialized parts of the country. The selected school caters for vocational education serving the needs of local industries through both regular daytime courses for teenage students and evening classes for adult learners wishing to complete their upper secondary education.

Evening classes for adult students were first introduced in the school year 2000-2001 but in recent years courses have suffered dramatic cuts. Evening courses roughly follow the same curricula used for the correspondent regular daytime courses. These curricula guide a teaching activity that spans over five school years, leading students to the achievement of their upper secondary education diploma.

Most adult students attending the school live in the surrounding area, but some of them even come from places that are up to fifty kilometres away. Lessons usually start at 6,45, p.m. and finish at 11,35 p.m. from Monday to Friday, from mid September to mid June. In addition to adult
students proper, courses can also be attended by teenage students. Teenage students wishing to attend adult evening classes must be at least sixteen years old and they must be in a position that does not allow them to attend regular daytime classes.

3.2.3 Participants selection

After an exploratory telephone call to the school, a first contact with the deputy headmaster was scheduled. In the first meeting he was informed about the aim of the research work and about the collection of data through semi-structured interviews that the research work implied. A second meeting was scheduled in which the interview guide and the interviewee information sheet and consent form were presented to be approved.

After the approval, the deputy headmaster cooperated to a shared definition of the organisational details of the interviews. It was consequently agreed that, out of the 174 students attending its evening classes, the school was to select a list of students to be invited to an introductory meeting about the general purpose of the survey and the specific research interview requirements. As a result, twelve students were purposively sampled by school authorities using a previously agreed maximum variation criterion that could grant the highest variability in primary data. The sample was chosen in order to grant the participation to the research interview of adult learners of mixed ages, coming from different parts of the world, living in different towns and country villages, offering a variety of personal stories in terms of family background, previous educational and professional career, employment conditions and civic engagement.

A further guidance to choose the most appropriate candidates for the sample was provided by some of the criteria suggested by Morse (1991). In particular, candidates were chosen on the ground of their clear willingness to interact with the interviewer and their ability to elaborate on their experience, critically discussing its most relevant details and significant peculiarities.

All the students that took part in the introductory meeting confirmed their consent to be interviewed. In a new encounter with the deputy headmaster additional organizational details for the interviews were agreed upon. These details included aspects such as the days and the time in which the interviews were to be held, the school premises where they were to take place, the number of students to be assigned to each interview session.

All interview participants belonged to different classes of the Mechanical Maintenance course: their previous educational background is summarized in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Previous Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alvise</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Second grade in upper secondary education. He studied Mechanics in a technical school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruno</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Fourth grade in upper secondary education. He studied Chemistry in a technical school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Vocational proficiency certificate (third grade in upper secondary education). He studied Catering in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fausto</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Vocational proficiency certificate (third grade in upper secondary education). He studied Mechanics in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giorgio</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Compulsory education (lower secondary school certificatea).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Second grade in upper secondary education. He studied Mechanics in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luca</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Third grade in upper secondary education. He studied Mechanics in a technical school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Second grade in upper secondary education. He studied Mechanics in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Vocational proficiency certificate (third grade in upper secondary education). She studied Catering in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severino</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Third grade in upper secondary education. He studied Mechanical Design in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommaso</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Vocational proficiency certificate (third grade in upper secondary education). He studied Catering in a vocational school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.4 Interview process

All data analysed in this work were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the selected students. Thanks to the cooperation of school authorities an introductory meeting with the selected students was held about one week before the interviews began. During the meeting the general purpose of the research project was introduced and discussed. After the discussion all the students confirmed their intention to take part in the interview and were given a participant information sheet and a personal data processing consent form: a copy of both documents can be found in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 respectively. During the meeting, the interview dates were individually agreed with each participant according to their given preferences and following the guidelines provided by the school. The students’ preferences were arranged in a provisional calendar that was then confirmed in a subsequent meeting with the deputy headmaster.

The students were interviewed in the final part of their school year. The interviews were held in the school premises and all the participants were allowed sufficient time off ordinary lessons to answer all the questions at their ease. The interviews were about one hour long and they were conducted with the help of a guide containing a sequence of questions to be asked during the conversation. While every single participant was asked all the questions in the interview guide, the order in which the questions were actually asked occasionally deflected from the original sequence contained in the guide to suit the flow of the discussion. Besides audio-recording the conversations, written context notes, describing such details as, for instance, non-verbal cues, were also collected. Given the importance of self-reflexivity as a tool to detect the researcher's biases and limitations (Whiting, 2008), written remarks were also used at the end of each conversation to record mistakes made during the interview and to highlight the strong and weak points of its conduction. All these notes were taken into careful consideration to refine the interviews in order to try to eschew all possible biases and improve the confirmability standards of the research, as suggested by Merriam (1998).

To gain the confidence of the students, a careful attention was also paid to the setting of the conversations to secure both quietness and privacy: the overall comfort of the interview setting is maintained by Dearnley (2005) to be a relevant factor in helping interviewees to talk about situations as they actually experienced them. For the sample of students involved in this research, a quiet and comfortable room, in the familiar school building where they usually attended their lessons, provided the appropriate venue where the interviews took place.
3.3 Data analysis

In order to get an in-depth acquaintance with the data collected through the audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews to the adult students involved in the research, the audio files were first of all transcribed and the transcriptions were then repeatedly read and scrutinized in association with the field notes that accompanied the original interviews. All data were analysed through thematic analysis without the use of software tools. Mind maps based on the interview guide were created for every interviewee and, through careful scrutiny, they were used to single out and code all information that was deemed to be pertinent to the research questions. Individual mind maps were then used to highlight connections emerging between comparable traits appearing in different interviewees’ answers, reconsidering the initial codes to discover broader themes. This work, through which provisional classifications were repeatedly being revised and refined, allowed to organize the data corpus into well defined final research themes. The themes were finally analyzed to produce the research findings.

3.4 Quality aspects

To be able to grant the overall trustworthiness of the research work, this enquiry followed the four trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1982): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

To establish the credibility of the research, making sure that the findings describe adequately the actual data that were collected, a useful tool was provided by peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), by which a colleague, who was not a participant in the research, helped questioning the methods in use, detecting biases and exploring the full implications of the different steps of the inquiry. In addition to this, the inquiry was also subjected to member checking: the data gathered in the research and their interpretations were shared and discussed with participants to make sure that the research results gave an adequate description of their adult student experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As transferability is meant to measure to what extent the outcome of a specific qualitative research work may be used in contexts similar to the one that originally produced it, a detailed description of the research context was provided, together with a full account of data collection and analysis processes, in order to allow other researchers to judge about the possible use of the results of this work to explore their own inquiry fields.
To avoid possible threats to the dependability of the research and grant full consistency between the research findings and the data collected through field work, data were coded twice at an interval of two weeks. The comparison of the results, allowing to look for similarities and differences in these two distinct coding activities (Chilisa & Preece, 2005), revealed a substantial correspondence in the codes detected. The overall dependability of the research was furthermore enhanced by the constant peer scrutiny granted by a colleague, whose assistance helped to consider research data and findings with the necessary objective poise throughout the different steps of the inquiry.

The confirmability quality criterion, implying that research findings must not be born out the researcher's mind but be grounded in research data, was observed keeping under control personal biases: to this purpose, written notes were jotted down at the end of every interview and a research journal was regularly kept to enhance self-reflexivity about involuntary shortcomings and limitations, as per Merriam (1998) and Whiting (2008).

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical implications involved in the development of the research project were taken into careful consideration in compliance with the principles of research ethics adopted by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2011). School authorities were informed about the general purpose of the research and, more specifically, about the nature and aim of the interview requiring the cooperation of their students. They were also assured that the interviews were not to interfere with regular school activities and that they were to be conducted in full respect of all the requirements concerning the personal privacy of the students.

After the school agreed to cooperate to the research, I received an authorization to access the school premises and I was briefly introduced by the deputy headmaster to the school staff and to the students. Prior to the beginning of the actual fieldwork, participating students were asked to a meeting where they received full information about the purpose of the research and the aim and the modalities of the interviews. During the meeting it was also explained to them that, as their participation in the interview was voluntary, they were free to withdraw any time without consequences.

At the beginning of each individual interview, participants were reminded that all their data were to be processed pseudonymously not to allow any possible identification whatsoever. They were also informed that all data about their school attendance was similarly to be presented in the
research work in such a way not to make their identification possible. Interviewees were finally explicitly asked if they agreed to give their informed consent by signing the consent form.

In order to avoid reducing the research to a one-way process exploiting the interviewees without sharing with them the findings of the work in which they were involved (Bryman, 2012), the results of the research were returned to the students and discussed with them before the final writing up: it was also explained to them that the information collected for the research would not be used for any other purposes.
4 Themes and finding

This central section of the study shows the results of the analysis of the research data. Themes and findings emerging from research data are here introduced using excerpts from interview transcripts to allow the reader to get as close as possible to the actual experience of the adult students as described in their own words.

4.1 Research questions, themes and findings

The present inquiry tried to explore the experience of a group of Italian adult students who decided to complete their upper secondary education. In particular, it endeavoured to investigate the reasons that brought them back to school, the motivations that led them to choose the specific course they enrolled in, the challenges that their school attendance as adult learners implied and the support they received in facing them.

This section introduces the research findings and the themes detected through data analysis. The themes and the findings have been associated to the four research questions that guided the study as summarized in the table here below.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes and Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Why did the students decide to resume their secondary education?</td>
<td>Interest for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education completion as a tool for career improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  What guided the choice of the course they enrolled in?</td>
<td>Improvement of vocational skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to progress to further steps in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  What challenges does their school attendance as adult learners imply?</td>
<td>Issues in finding a suitable course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning at school and learning at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  What supports them in facing such challenges?</td>
<td>Attention to students’ individual needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing independence through cooperation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Deciding to resume upper secondary education

For adult learners with full time jobs, deciding to resume secondary education, often after a long break, is a very demanding challenge, hampering family life and leaving almost no time for leisure activities. This is the situation in which most students of the sample found themselves. Nevertheless, they were all ready to put up with the inconveniences deriving from their choice in order to be able to attend school and complete their upper secondary education. Most of them thought their new diploma would help them to improve their career: at the same time, they were not just interested in acquiring specific technical and vocational skills, but they were also ready to exploit the opportunities offered by their school attendance in order to broaden their cultural background and strengthen their social participation.

4.2.1 Interest for learning

The adult students in the research sample were between 20 and 50 years old, came from different backgrounds and had different life stories. They lived in small towns and villages within a radius of fifty kilometres of the town where the school is located, in the North-East of Italy. About half of them still lived with their parents, while the other half were either married or living on their own, away from their original families. Most of the students were regularly employed, covering various positions in companies working in a number of diverse economic activities. Just one of them was unemployed and two more lived on gig jobs. Being very busy both at work and at school, almost none of them had any time left for sports, hobbies or other forms of regular commitment. As to their education, most of them had no formal educational qualifications besides their Lower Secondary School Certificate. Only one student in the group regularly finished a three year vocational course, while two more almost succeeded in completing their five-year upper secondary education in a technical school, dropping out in their very last year. Inspite of their often fragmentary previous school careers, nearly all the adult students in the sample had developed, however for different reasons, a strong interest for learning: the next paragraphs will provide a few examples of such interest.

Dante went to work abroad when he was still very young and after a few years he came back to Italy and started his own successful business until in 2008 it fell a victim of the global economic crisis. Due to this unfortunate event, he was forced to start working as a junior employee in a completely new job that he did not like. In order to reposition himself with better career
perspectives, Dante decided to go back to school to study Mechanics, an old passion of his. At school he enthusiastically discovered the cooperative dimension of learning:

Learning is first of all sharing experiences with other people, coming to terms with problems by working together. This is what we do here. I really like being back to school: I have had the opportunity to work with fantastic people here, teachers and fellow students, learning lots of new things, not only Mechanics. I was even elected to represent adult students in the school board. I am now in my last year... it will be sad to stop coming here....I won't have the same opportunities to learn any more.

Paola left the daytime school she was previously attending because she was not satisfied with the training she was receiving there. She therefore decided to change school and to start following evening classes as an adult student. At the same time, she also decided to leave her family and she went to live in a flat with some friends. Paola’s interview pointed to an attitude to learning common to many informants: while mainly focused on technical and vocational skills, many of them were also quite interested in exploring a wider educational horizon:

I came here to learn everything I need about Mechanics, because I want to change job and I want to be fully trained and ready when I start working in my new position. But I also want to learn a number of other things I need to know for my everyday life, like using a computer alright. I’d also like to learn to speak English. And I want to be able to participate more, even here at school. The more you participate, the more you learn.

Quite a few interviewees considered their school attendance just as a necessary step in a longer educational career, as it was the case with Severino. He was one of the oldest students in the group and at the time of the interview he was covering a rather important position as a maintenance technician in a textile manufacturing company. He decided to complete his upper secondary education because he wanted to go on studying at Padua university:

To me an upper secondary education certificate is not enough, this is just a necessary step I must take to go on studying at university level. What we study here at school are just the basics of Mechanics and I would like to go further, really get into it, for good.
These excerpts from research interviews are representative of a common mood prevailing among participants: even if they were all very much into Mechanics, they were also quite interested in a number of other different topics witnessing the extent of their learning perspectives. Some students even positioned themselves in an educational perspective spanning beyond upper secondary education. In addition to this, Dante's and Paola's interviews revealed their strong involvement with school life and their passion for participation.

4.2.2 Education completion as a tool for career advancement

All the adult students who took part in the research interviews decided to complete there education in order to improve their work careers. In spite of the fact that nearly all of them already had a job, their degree of satisfaction with the positions they were covering varied greatly, mostly depending on the economic conditions of their occupation but quite often also due to a mismatch between their personal skills or passions and the position they covered. Some of the students also mentioned problems at work in terms of difficult relationships with management and fellow workers.

To most students career improvements implied being constantly ready to adjust to changes, both to suit new job requirements and to foresee new trends in the job market in order to profit on them. For this reason, some of them deliberately decided not to resume the same educational path from which they had originally dropped out, but they rather chose to complete their upper secondary education following a different trajectory that they deemed to be more suitable to grant them the degree of social mobility they aspired to.

The perception of the role that education can play in the social mobility process was more poignant in those adult students who never attended upper secondary education before. Because of his personal unemployment story, Giorgio was particularly aware of the need to possess the necessary educational tools to meet the requirements of a fast changing job market:

When I was fourteen years old and I finished my compulsory education it was very easy to find well paid jobs, so my parents found me one. I was very happy, I had grown up, I was helping my family and I also had my own money to buy me things, to go out with friends at the weekends, clubbing and so on. In 2007 the factory where I was working shut down. I found a job in another factory, but it also shut down, after a couple of years. Since that, I have only got small jobs. This isn't really anything you can live on. Good jobs now are only for qualified workers, that's why I enrolled here at school.
As Ivan’s story clearly shows, even students who already had a good job were quite interested in improving their education in order to secure for themselves stable occupational conditions and future perspectives of professional improvement. Ivan’s family came to Italy years ago and they had to work very hard to reach the social status they gained. Ivan was the eldest son and he had to drop-out his upper secondary education to help his parents raise his younger brothers and sisters. Two years before the interview his family encouraged him to resume his upper secondary education and he was very happy with his choice. He felt school had helped him to improve his on-the-job productivity and to broaden his professional perspectives:

Learning more about Mechanics I got a better insight into the procedures my job implies and I can now carry them out more efficiently. Studying my school subjects I am constantly training my mind. I feel I became smarter and quicker in everything I do, not only at school. I can now use a computer rather well, even CAD/CAM suites. My English also got better. They told me they may start sending me abroad for maintenance work on our machines.

Some of the adult students in the group had rather important technical positions inside their companies and they were the most positive supporters of education as a relevant instrument for career improvements. They particularly underlined the importance of education in providing soft skills as a necessary supplement to vocational proficiency: this was, for instance, Fausto’s case. Fausto was the deputy manager of an important car service and repair centre. He needed to complete his upper secondary vocational education as a necessary qualification to replace the manager who was to retire in two years time. But, as he explained, to him attending school was not only a matter of learning to solve mechanical problems: it also largely meant learning to be able to manage human relationships with a number of different people, above all customers and co-workers:

To me culture is whatever we may need to know in order to understand the problems we are facing, big or small, and to improve our jobs and our lives ...

….I need to have a mechanical culture to be able to repair my customers' cars, but I must also talk to them to understand what other problems are connected to their cars being repaired: how will they get to work or take their children to school while their car is being repaired? Is there anything I can do for them? …
… the discussions during our History and Italian lessons helped me quite a lot to have a better understanding of migration problems and this is important to me as many of our co-workers are immigrants.

The findings in this section give evidence as to the awareness, on the part of the students that were interviewed, of the importance of education for social mobility in different contexts: to Giorgio education was a tool to get out of a spiralling unemployment condition, Ivan found it useful to reach a finer degree of productivity that allowed him to consolidate his position at work with a promise of assignments abroad, Fausto knew that his upper secondary education certificate was a necessary qualification he had to possess to be promoted to manager of the car repair centre and he was fully exploiting the opportunities offered by his school attendance to improve both the mechanical proficiency and the soft skills he would need in his new capacity.

4.3 Choosing a course

A strong interest for learning, a desire to broaden their cultural horizon and the awareness that a qualified education was a necessary requirement for social mobility guided the interviewees’ decision to go back to school. After having considered these overall reasons for their general commitment to resume their school career, this chapter now tries to detail the choice of the specific course they decided to attend.

4.3.1 Matching vocational passion and skills development

Most students in the research group decided to study Mechanics in order to complete the educational path from which they had originally dropped out, but some of them, on the contrary, chose this specialization independently of their previous school career. In Italy it is now comparatively easy for second chance adult students to complete their upper secondary education following a new course, different from the one they had originally attended, thanks to a rather flexible system of educational credits. Some students in the research sample who took the opportunity offered by this credit system and started studying Mechanics for the first time, made this choice out of their strong personal passion for this subject. Their new choice offered them the chance to overcome the limitations of the original mismatch they suffered from in their previous experience.
Dante was one of these students. If he had chosen to complete his old school it would have taken him a much shorter time but he had an old passion for Mechanics which he decided to cultivate through an appropriate education even because he was fully convinced that working in the field of mechanical production could offer him a more solid stability and a better salary than his old job as a waiter:

Learning to work as a waiter is very easy, anybody can work as a waiter. As it is a low-skilled job, it is a very risky job, because anyone can substitute you any moment. In my opinion, what really matters in a job is the degree of expertise it requires. If you work doing something where your own passion combines with your high expertise, no one can substitute you. This is one of the reasons why I am studying here: I want to become a skilled mechanical engineer and work on something really new.

Ever since she was a young child, Paola had developed a real passion for Mechanics influenced by her family environment. Nevertheless, at the age of fourteen, when she started attending upper secondary school, her parents did not allow her to study Mechanics. Besides the fact she never liked her old school, to her the teaching standards there were completely unsatisfactory. She believed many students attended it just because it was undemanding. For this reason, Paola thought it wouldn't make any sense to complete it. On the contrary, she had great expectations about her new school. She felt confident she would develop sound vocational skills allowing her to find a job suiting her passion for Mechanics:

Schools like this one must prepare you to a real job. Once you leave this school you must be ready to start working straight away and you must have all necessary skills allowing you to take full responsibility of the tasks you will be entrusted.

The paragraphs above clearly describe how the desire to overcome an original educational mismatch often has a key role in guiding adult students' choice of the specific course they decide to attend. Dante's interview makes the importance to match personal passions with skills development quite clear through his sharp definition of the reasons why everyone should care about being as skilled as possible. Paola’s story also describes how to many adult learners the choice of their course stands as an opportunity to make up for an unsatisfactory choice they made when they were regular teenage students. In addition, Paola made the point about the importance of quality
schooling preferring a long and qualified educational itinerary to the shortcut of a merely formal completion of her studies.

4.3.2 Desire to progress to further steps in education

When deciding about the specific specialization they wanted to attend, quite a few students in the research sample considered their choice as a preparatory stage for further steps in their education. Older students, with a consolidated mechanical expertise gained through a long practice at work and holding important positions in their companies, resumed their education having clear in their mind the long term goal to get a university degree. On the other hand, younger students, still at the beginning of their professional career, had different goals to be pursued after school, more specifically connected to their need to strengthen their skills in different fields, both technical and otherwise.

Luca, 20, years old, worked in a car repair centre run by his father where he was covering a position as a junior employee. His father was planning to gradually involve him in managing the business, but this required a lot of expertise, both in terms of work practice and technical theory. Luca declared that his school attendance was just the first step of a long and demanding path that he needed to continue after completing his upper secondary education:

Of course I am learning a lot at work, day by day, under my father's guidance, but in order to be able to keep pace with manufacturers' updates I also need a sound theoretical background, so I decided to complete this school. Once I get my diploma I will enrol in a Further Education College catering for the sort of mechanics and electronics I need to learn about.

Ivan, a metalworker, studied Mechanics for two years when he was a teenager. He really liked his school but he had to quit it due to family problems. After a few years his family encouraged him to resume his education. When he finally decided to enrol, he went back to his old school as he knew ICT classes had been introduced to complement the traditional Mechanics course. In his interview Ivan explained that in order to meet the fast changing requirements of his job he wanted to continue studying after his upper secondary education certificate:

I saw massive changes in my work during the years, mostly due to the growing introduction of automation processes. When my parents offered to help me start studying again, I immediately thought about learning some new skills in connection with
automation. Thanks to the ICT lessons here at school, I gained a basic proficiency in the use of tools such as CAD/CAM. As it was in my original plan, I will go on attending a specialization course after I finish this school.

From the first moment he enrolled in adult education, Severino knew he was going to continue studying at university. Getting ready for university was the very reason why he decided to complete his upper secondary education, otherwise he would never have done it:

Years ago I attended an English course where I met another student who was my same age. Soon I got acquainted with him and he told me that, apart from attending the English course, he was also attending evening classes to get his upper secondary education certificate. He also explained that he was doing that because he meant to enrol at university to become a mechanical engineer, which he subsequently did. This unexpected encounter triggered my decision: while I had always discarded the idea to complete my secondary education just for its own sake, what he was doing was exactly what I needed for my professional development.

The above quotes show that the interviewees assigned to their completion of upper secondary education an important instrumental role: they did not only value it as a goal in itself but, on the contrary, they were able to see it as a tool to be used to pursue their own far reaching educational strategies. It is important to note how this instrumental value was clear to them from the very beginning, when they first decided to go back to school. In particular, in the situation described by Severino, it was only the instrumental value of upper secondary education that could determine his decision to resume it.

4.4 Adult learners' challenges

The most relevant challenges that faced the adult students in the research sample are described here in order to highlight some common unresolved issues that hindered their participation in education and threatened their persistence in the effort to complete their school career.
4.4.1 Issues in finding a suitable course

Nearly all the students reported being unable to find a clearly recognizable and easily accessible institution to help them when they first started considering going back to school. They got their very first information only by word of mouth, mostly by chance. Through this initial information, they were directed to the school they then chose to attend where they found full information about how to access the courses available there. Unfortunately they could not find a comprehensive guidance to overall adult education schemes or to the full offer of different courses organized by other schools: they only received general hints provided by some teachers. Besides complaining for this crucial information gap, the adult students also raised issues connected to the limited overall number of courses they could choose from, not only in terms of course contents, but also of geographical distribution and of mixed-age class composition. There were also some complaints about lesson timetables which were deemed to be lacking in flexibility, often making regular attendance difficult.

Alvise dropped out upper secondary education two years before the interview, due to irregular attendance problems. At that time he was attending the second grade, even if he had actually been in upper secondary education for four years. After leaving school, at the age of 18, he worked in a factory for about one year. When he was made redundant, he realized he needed to complete his upper secondary education to be in a better position to find a stable job, so he started looking for information. Alvise interview revealed that all too often adult students looking for information about how to resume their education can not find any directions if not through informal channels. It also revealed that for grown-up students who originally dropped out from technical schools it is often impossible to resume their original education as adult courses are seldom available in that kind of institutions. This fact witnesses as to the insufficient variety of adult education courses available. The remark is especially worrying when referred to the field of technical education preparing key profiles for a number of different industries.

I did not exactly know were I should go to look for information, then I met a friend who told me about this school. I didn't really mind changing from technical education, where I had originally started, to a vocational school, because I had dropped out in my second year and so I hadn't started the specialization stage as yet. Anyhow, talking to my teachers here at school, I discovered that in our area there aren't any technical schools offering adult education courses, so in the end I think I made the right choice.
Steve left his country because of a war that broke out there. As he quickly learnt to speak and write in Italian quite well, he thought to enrol in adult education to get a vocational qualification similar to the one he already had in his country. In his interview Steve regretted not having found a course allowing him to profit from the skills he already had. His difficult experience points to a serious lack of institutionally provided guidance to general adult education provisions and to the full offer of courses organized by different schools:

I came to know about this school by word of mouth but I felt I missed someone helping me to make the most suitable choice as to which course I should attend. In my country I worked as a freezing and cooling systems technician and I hoped to find a school around here where I could get a similar Italian qualification. I have been told there is no such school near here, but I didn't really get any proper, say, official information or help about it. When I tried googling around on the Internet I just found scattered pieces of information. I like Mechanics, but I wish I could have had a better choice.

At the time of the research Luca’s job was about twenty kilometres away from the school and every night he had to drive directly there immediately after work. He attended his lessons until 11.35 p.m. every night, from Monday to Friday. Luca lived in a village about fifty kilometres far from the school and when his lessons were over he had a long drive home. In the description of his experience as a grown-up student Luca lamented the fact that upper secondary schools situated quite near his village did not offer any course for adult students. This remark highlights an important problem for many grown-ups wishing to resume their education, i.e. the insufficient geographical distribution of courses to suit their needs.

I have a special permission to arrive late every night. I never have a regular dinner, just a couple of rolls in the school bar, during the break. After school I always get home well past midnight. Quite often I don't attend classes, it gets too late and I have to get up early in the morning. I try to be always there with lessons I really need. When I don't go to school I study things at home by myself. There are both vocational and technical schools closer to where I live, actually, but they have nothing for me, they only have regular daytime classes.

Bruno attended a technical school studying Chemistry. He dropped out after four years, when he had just one year left to get his upper secondary certificate. As he could not find any school
where to attend an adult Chemistry course allowing him to complete his specialization, he was quite sorry and he felt that all the specific technical knowledge he had gathered while attending school as a regular teenage student would be lost. To many students like Bruno, the impossibility to complete their original education means wasting the expertise they originally acquired and being exposed to a possible mismatch in their new educational career.

In the four years I spent studying Chemistry when I was a teenager I gained a good proficiency. When I started to study again, I originally meant to complete the course I had abandoned, but my old school had no adult education Chemistry courses and, apparently, there was no other school around to offer such courses. So, here I am, studying Mechanics.

Fausto, aged 43, had almost completed his upper secondary education and, all in all, he was satisfied with his experience as an adult learner, but he had a big complaint about class composition criteria. In his opinion adult education courses should not be used as second chance courses for teenage students who failed to attend regular daytime lessons as their presence heavily hampers the pace and the outcomes of adult evening classes. This remark actually points to a relevant structural weakness also signalled by other interviewees and jeopardizing the results of many upper secondary adult education classes.

Many students here do not come to school regularly. They are a real obstacle to regular school activities. Teaching is slowed down because of the remedial work teachers have to organize for them. Of course I am not talking about adult students who have occasional attendance difficulties due to problems that may arise at work, I mean young people who failed to complete their upper secondary school because of their poor marks. They just stay home because they are lazy and don't take school seriously. They have a different mindset. I used to help them, they asked me notes from lessons, to catch up after they had been away, but then they wouldn't give them back to me, so I stopped helping them. They are just hampering our work and they shouldn't be accepted here.

The previous paragraphs offer an overview of some important issues students have to face to find suitable courses. The most relevant challenge is posed by the problems they encounter in finding information about general adult education provisions and in obtaining a complete and reliable guidance as to the different upper secondary education courses to choose from.
The interviewees quotations also outline the difficulties that adult students meet due to the insufficient distribution of courses, both in terms of the subjects they cover and of the area they serve. The participants’ stories hint at the negative consequences that these difficulties may imply, such as a dispersion of students’ previous expertise and a possible mismatch risk in their new educational career. A final and crucial point highlighted above is the need to keep adult education proper separate from second chance education for upper secondary school teenage drop-outs.

4.4.2 Gateways and barriers to everyday learning at school and at home

While most students were quite satisfied with their work at school, many of them felt working at home on their own was their weak point. They especially worried about how to make their work on home assignments more productive. Many of them found it difficult to study alone without the support of their teachers and class mates. They considered both their school attendance and their work at home to be heavily conditioned by lack of time due to problems at work. To them, learning at school was far less problematic than learning at home. They greatly appreciated the attention paid by most teachers to the actual needs of the class as a whole and even to specific individual problems. They also enjoyed working with their class mates, cooperating on different tasks and sharing learning experiences. Nevertheless, even learning at school had some flaws as relevant problems often arose due to the irregular attendance and class commitment of a group of classmates.

The interviewees decision to resume their education was met with varying reactions on their workplaces. In Ivan’s case the decision was met with indifference. Ivan, who described himself as a committed student, regretted not being able to attend his lessons more regularly due to the fact he was often asked to work overtime. This was a big problem to him. Ivan missed his classroom cooperative environment where the support received from his teachers and the collaboration with classmates was decisive for his learning. Nevertheless, he felt this cooperative environment could partially be re-created through the use of ICT tools. From this point of view his experience hints at the importance that an organized use of such tools can have in facilitating students participation in adult education:

I am often asked to work extra hours and, for a number of reasons, it is difficult to refuse. On weekdays it implies I can’t go to school, if it is on Saturdays I have less time to study for my home assignments. Both ways, it is a real mess: working alone to catch up is really hard. Luckily some of our teachers upload lessons and resources on the Internet and I also get help from friends through our What's App group.
When Dante told his company management and his colleagues at work that he had decided to start attending evening classes, their reaction was not only indifferent but totally hostile. During the interview, while he was talking about the response he received on his job ever since he had decided to go back to school, Dante still got very angry. He repeatedly pointed out that his choice was met with an overt opposition in spite of the fact that he had not asked for any special provisions as his work and school timetables were fully compatible. Dante’s story is illuminating as to the problems that an inadequate company learning culture can create to students struggling to participate in adult education.

When I asked the company to give me the work certificate I needed to enrol at school, at first they even refused to issue it. Sometimes they make me work overtime in the evening even if I can do exactly the same things going to work earlier in the morning, as I often explained to them. If I miss some lessons at school, then I don't have enough time to catch up at home. I don't get any help from my colleagues. One of them even told me I'd better change job.

Severino worked for a big firm and his experience was quite different from Dante’s: the importance his company attached to staff education was the gateway through which he could attend school regularly and therefore take full advantage of the support he received from his teachers. In his interview Severino clearly pointed out that workers in big companies who decide to go back to school are more likely to find a work environment supporting their choice:

My working time is compatible with school attendance and I have the full support of my company. Big companies really care about having an educated workforce. Our teachers are very good at keeping the class together, juggling between ordinary teaching and remedial work for those who missed some lessons. Here at school we get quite a lot of individual guidance. Some teachers upload their lessons on the Internet to support the work we do at home, it is also useful in case you can't come to school.

According to the findings, studying at school is of great use in developing students' self-confidence, both through the personalized guidance offered by teachers and the close cooperation with fellow students. Unfortunately the research interviews reveal that many students can not attend their lessons as regularly as they wished to be able to do.
The contrasting situations at work of Ivan, Dante and Severino, highlight deep differences in the importance companies attribute to the education of their employees, partly explaining why many adult learners still have problems granting a regular school attendance. The findings also show that students who are unable to attend their classes due to issues at work are faced with the additional problem that the little time they have for their homework is further reduced due to the time they have to use to make up for the lesson they missed, as in Dante's case. Moreover, students find it difficult to work alone without guidance and peer cooperation, even if Ivan's and Severino's experience suggests that online tools can be of help to make up for actual classroom learning, especially for those students whose regular school attendance is most seriously impaired.

4.5 Support for adult students

The capability approach is grounded on the basic moral assumption that human abilities should be developed respecting the right of all individuals to do and to be what they themselves have reason to value (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000). In line with this tenet, an appropriate evaluation of learning outcomes should not just focus on what resources are assigned to an individual’s education but should rather consider what this individual can actually do and be thanks to these resources. This perspective hinges on the pivotal point of the acknowledgement that different individuals have different abilities to convert resources into capabilities and functionings and that they therefore need a customized support. The following chapter features the interviewees’ descriptions of the different degrees of individual support they received at school while trying to pursue their personal conversion of resources into actual capabilities and functionings.

4.5.1 Attention to students' individual needs

All the interviewees gave great relevance to the efforts made by the school to try to cater for their individual needs, both to facilitate their access to adult education and to enhance their learning activity at school and at home. But even if all the students acknowledged the relevance of these efforts, the judgements they expressed about their efficacy varied greatly, giving voice to different points of view.

Paola experienced her first time in her new school as a real welcome. She provides an effective account of the importance to help adult learners choose the courses that most suits them by
individually chaperoning each student through all bureaucratic procedures and by allowing them to gradually approach their new learning environment as visiting students:

… we had a long talk, the teacher explained me exactly what the course was about, then he told me everything about the credits system, the enrolment documents and all that stuff. I knew this was just my school, but I feared I wouldn't make it, with all those subjects. He (the teacher) suggested I could start by coming here as a visiting student, just to see how I managed things. Teachers and classmates, everybody helped me. They really made me feel at home.

When Bruno came to school for his enrolment, he was not completely sure he was making the right choice. Bruno was about to enrol in a course where people studied Mechanics whereas he had previously studied Chemistry for four years and he was afraid he would lose everything he had done before. His experience reveals the importance for students who resume their education after many years to have their previous school career endorsed:

I was really worried. I feared I would have to start loads of new things right from scratch! I was still unconvinced. I had a sort of very informal counselling session with the deputy headmaster where he patiently answered all my questions and neatly explained how the entire credit system worked. I felt totally reassured as I realized I would be credited most of the things I had done in my old school.

Luca lived quite far from school. To him distance to school was a very relevant issue and he was therefore quite doubtful before enrolling. As it was in Lucas’ case, an attentive flexibility of school timetables to suit students’ individual needs could greatly improve their participation:

I came here because I absolutely need the diploma. My big problem was, and still is, distance to school. Due to long hours at work, I knew I couldn't possibly get too school in time. I was told the school had a flexible attendance policy to help students like me. I was issued a permission that allows me to come to school late every night, so I finally enrolled, but it's hard, I am always on the run.

Many students appreciated the personal constant help and encouragement they received at school. Here is how one of them, Ivan, described the everyday support he got from his teachers:
They are very passionate, especially our vocational subjects teachers. They make us work together to find solutions to the assignments we are given and we are often asked to try to find possible connections between what we are learning here and our experience at work. They are ready to tell us more when they notice there are things we are particularly curious about. When we can't come to classes for some time they help us to catch up.

Severino also gave a positive evaluation of the assistance and the guidance offered by most teachers but, while expressing his appreciation for the support given to students who could not come to lessons, he also pointed at some possible drawbacks. In Severino’s opinion too much attention to individual students’ needs can paradoxically end up hampering regular class work:

During our classes, teachers try to involve everybody, but we have a number of people in this class who do not care at all about getting involved. I think helping people who weren't actually able to come to school is quite O.K. On the other hand, organizing remedial activities for people who stay intentionally home for weeks is just a waste of time. To me and other students it's a nuisance.

The above section reveals that while the attention to individual needs succeeded in facilitating the students' actual access to classes and in enhancing their learning, it also generated some undesired outcomes. In fact, while in Paola's case this attention resulted in her greater involvement in the life of the school, the situation described by Severino highlighted how even efforts originally conceived to suit students needs may unintentionally result in worsening rather than enhancing participation. In his interview, he seemed to suggest that the remedial activities organized at school for drop-out teenage students de facto encouraged them not to take part in school activities, thus hampering the shared learning of the entire class.

4.5.2 Developing independence through cooperation

Cooperation with teachers and with their classmates was mentioned by most interview participants as a key factor in their process to become independent learners. Students especially liked the common discussion of topics that were explored together, the shared evaluation of personal work experiences they were asked to bring to school and the mutual assistance between students. At the same time, interview participants also acknowledged some serious limitations. For instance, according to Fausto, the cooperative learning environment that many students appreciated
was just the result of personal initiatives on the part of some teachers rather than of an official general strategy adopted by school authorities:

Two of our teachers really did great things, they didn't just talk to us, they actually organized their work to suit our needs. The work we were asked to do was adjusted to our different levels of proficiency, they supported us using the Internet, they actually followed our work giving us advice, each of us. Most other teachers were also stimulating, always prompting our participation, encouraging us to work together. Some of them were just normal teachers.

Severino further detailed the portrayal of those teachers that were less active in trying to involve students in their lessons. In this ironic excerpt from his interview, he seems to suggest that while good quality traditional schooling may not necessarily require a meaningful cooperation between teachers and students, a failure in establishing such a cooperation is unlikely to produce independent learners:

Some of them did not care about students involvement, they were very traditional teachers, you know, you come to school, you teach your lesson and then you go back home again. I mean, very good teachers, very technical. They are simply not interested in establishing relationships with students or getting them involved into their lessons.

Many interviewees also identified another serious limitation of the cooperative atmosphere at school in a quite limited participation on the part of many students. Ivan seemed to ascribe it, however only half consciously, to an insufficient educational action specifically aimed at capturing and conciliating the great number of different sensibilities in his class:

Different ages, different cultures, different schools we attended in the past, different employment situations … it is no surprise if not everyone feels equally committed to learning.

Steve enjoyed the cooperative work they did at school and he wished the entire class could have been fruitfully involved. To him, his classmates not coming to school were not as much hampering the work of more regular students as missing out on relevant opportunities they could exploit and he regretted it. Most importantly, Steve thought that this failure was a serious limitation
even to the overall result of those who were successfully involved in the shared learning activities at school. In fact, in his opinion, learning cooperation can not be content with some participants crossing the finish line while some others’ educational needs remain unattended:

Yes, we worked together alright, we helped each other, we learned from each other and everything, but in the end this wasn't class cooperation, it was just a group of us, many others were not involved and they did not benefit from it.

When Giorgio decided to go back to school, he had been out of education for twenty-two years. As the language he had nearly always used in his everyday communication was a local dialect, he felt unsure when he had to speak or write in Italian. He was grateful to his teacher for the work she did trying to meet students' individual needs. Through a close cooperation with his teacher, Giorgio reached important results in mastering the use of the Italian language, a fundamental tool to gain his independence as a learner:

The Italian and History teacher was aware we had very different levels of proficiency. She even gave each of us customized tasks to work on. After the revision of our tests, she gave us directions, individually, to help us improve our results. She encouraged us to use our own resources in addition to the textbook, she uploaded her lessons on the Internet to help us revise them at home. I worked a lot, but now I feel more confident when I use my Italian.

In Dante's opinion, discussions at school were very useful, not only to discover more about the different topics being debated, but also to learn what a positive participation to a discussion necessarily implies. Dante clearly understood the instrumental value of discussions not only as a tool to find solutions to the problems that were being investigated but, more importantly, as a cooperative tool to refine logical thinking:

Asking a question in front of the class during a discussion is not like asking the teacher the same question privately. Your question must be useful for you and for everybody, so everybody, not only the teacher, must understand what you mean. You must have a precise idea of what you want to know and you must explain it clearly. You must also control your emotions.
The findings in this section showed that most students in the research group appreciated the cooperative choice of their teachers. At the same time, they also showed that this choice did not quite amount to a shared concerted strategy, as Fausto clearly described. The absence of such strategy is further confirmed by Severino, who pointed overtly out that some teachers did not seem to be interested in getting the students actively involved in their lessons. In spite of these important shortcomings, most students acknowledged the relevance of cooperative experiences at school in strengthening them as independent learners. For instance, through a close cooperation with his teacher, Giorgio was able to gain full confidence in using a very basic tool for learning such as his national language. In a similar way, Dante, through his practice in the cooperative environment of class discussions, could develop both analytical and communication skills; in the interview, he proved to be fully aware of the instrumental relevance of such skills in widening the scope of his learning independence. Through Ivan's and Steve's interview, the research regretfully found out that, for a number of reasons, only part of the students were actually able to take part in the shared experiences described above, limiting the overall result of the entire cooperative experience.
5 Discussion

The discussion of the research findings brings to the forefront interpretations of the experience described by the students involved in the interviews allowing to sketch generalization patterns that can be usefully studied to improve future adult education provisions.

5.1 Interest for learning and participation enhancement

This research analysed the experience of a group of Italian adult students completing their upper secondary education. It investigated the reasons that brought them back to school, the motivations for the choice of the course they enrolled in, the challenges that their school attendance as adult students implied and the support they received in facing them. The analysis of research data led to findings showing that the adult students of the sample had a prevailing interest for vocational improvement accompanied by a more far-ranging learning passion. This strong interest for learning allowed them not to be discouraged by the information problems they met at the beginning of their careers and to attend their school establishing cooperative relationships with their teachers and their classmates that strengthened their learning independence. The following sections describe how this process enhanced the students’ motivation and consequently even their participation in learning activities. The discussion is supported by concepts derived from both the presentation of participation theories and of the capability approach.

5.2 Short-term and long-term expectations

The experience of the adult students who took part in this research was explored through concepts partially derived from the capability approach. In particular, based on the central notion of the capability approach that *individuals are ends in themselves* rather than *means to an end* (Sen, 1990), the main concern that guided the research effort was the attempt to tap into the students’ own individual experience, ascertaining what each of them actually expected from their choice to go back to school as an adult learner and how such expectations were met.

Findings from the interviews aligned with Roberts et al. (2005) confirming that short-term vocational improvement and social mobility were the prevailing goals even among the research participants, but at the same time the research results also expounded that many students in the
sample also cultivated long-term expectations about the possibility to continue their education after their upper secondary school certificate. Additionally, research results also revealed that while all the students with long-term educational expectations had enrolled in adult education out of their own free choice, students attending it because of mandatory job requirements were only partially interested in further forms of schooling. This evidence confirmed the findings in Wolf and Evans (2011), that pointed out how students who freely joined adult education were more likely to feel encouraged to go on studying than students who enrolled out of any form of obligation whatsoever.

The experience of many interviewees, where short-term vocational improvement and social mobility goals coexisted on equal footing with long-term expectations to continue their education, reconciled the contradiction highlighted by Tobias (2000), who saw workers participation in adult education for short-term vocational purposes to be useful for the needs of industry but dangerous to a comprehensive educational growth of workers themselves.

The research findings underscored that all students wishing to continue their studies, while exploiting the short-term upskilling opportunities offered by their school attendance, had also well defined expectations about the long-term instrumental value of their participation in upper secondary education, so much so that one of them, Severino, decided to enrol as an adult student precisely to get the school leaving certificate he needed to go to university. This clear acknowledgement of the importance of participation in adult upper secondary education as a tool to access further educational opportunities represented a witness as to autonomous motivations spanning beyond the controlled forms of motivations determined by mere workplace skills improvement requirements.

5.3 Expectations, motivations and persistence in education

Personal expectations are primary factors in determining motivation to participate in adult learning (Radovan, 2012). It is therefore important that adult students may be granted the right to do and be what they themselves have reason to value (Sen, 1990) so that their expectations may generate genuinely autonomous motivations. According to self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), autonomous motivation can grant good performances and long-term persistence in a number of different fields and behaviours. The theory maintains that people can be said to be acting out of autonomous motivations not only when their actions are based on explicitly intrinsic motivations, but also when they are moved by extrinsic motivations that were successfully integrated in their sense of self.
The research findings showed that the successful persistence in adult education on the part of all the students interviewed was granted by the autonomous motivations born out of their expectations. The intrinsic nature of the motivations of most interviewees was made clear by a number of factors, such as, for instance, their strong personal interest for learning and for professional improvement in particular. Some of them also cultivated special interests spanning beyond the scope of vocational topics. Moreover, their cooperative experiences, both with teachers and classmates, gave evidence of a genuine involvement in the learning process.

The autonomous motivation of two of the students, Fausto and Luca, could be ascribed to a slightly different genesis, as both of them declared to be attending upper secondary education because they needed a school leaving certificate that was mandatory for their future jobs. Nevertheless they did not consider their work to get the diploma as a burden, in spite of the demanding commitment it required. They rather saw it as an opportunity to further cultivate their passion for Mechanics and other school subjects and they could therefore be said to have integrated the extrinsic need to get their certificate in their sense of self.

All the interview participants were actively involved in the learning process but their interviews incidentally brought to the forefront even issues connected to other students, not directly involved in the research work, who failed to participate regularly in class activities. Interview participants described the frequent absences of these students as mostly intentional and also said their absences would often last for long periods of time. According to some interviewees, many of the students with irregular attendance were young teenagers who abandoned their upper secondary schooling because they had no real interest in learning. In the interviewees words, these students, rather than being actually interested in what they were studying, were taking advantage of the possibility to enrol in adult education just chancing a second opportunity to get their school leaving certificate. Following the interviewees descriptions, the behaviour of these young people seemed to be subject to an external contingency that they had internalized rather than being grounded in personal intrinsic motivations. In the words of the self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), they could be said to be acting out of a controlled motivation, weaker than autonomous motivation and therefore granting less persistent behaviours. Blossfeld et al. (2014) detail the spiralling cumulative effects of a weak motivation to participate in adult education, showing how they expand over the years, well beyond the educational environment, to lead to various degrees of social exclusion, as confirmed by Courtney (1992) and Fenwick (2008). As a matter of fact, the portrayal that the interview participants offered of the behaviour of many of their teenage class mates, featuring their progressively diminishing commitment and their decreasing class attendance...
throughout the school year, is strongly reminiscent of the spiralling pattern of cumulative effects described by Blossfeld et al. (2014) and, indeed, it may sometimes represent its initial stage.

From the point of view of the capability approach principle that all individuals have the right to do and to be what they themselves have reason to value, the behaviour of the irregular students not attending their lessons poses a relevant problem, highlighted in Unterhalter et al. (2007), i.e. the possibility for individuals to renounce to strengthen their freedom of choice through the full development of their capabilities just in favour of an immediate form of well-being. To this respect, Sen (1990) remarks that this possibility can only be prevented improving people's education through a development of the educational system. In his opinion the educational system has a foundational importance for the development of individual capabilities. In fact, as Saito (2003) and Walker (2005) underscore, education is the main instrument to gain awareness about the most appropriate exercise of individual autonomy and the values it implies. Paradoxically then, the only way to grant the persistence in education of recalcitrant students is to enhance their capability for autonomous motivations just through education. For this reason, as MacKeracher, Stuart, & Potter (2006) suggest, the problem of barriers hampering motivations must not be understood just as confined to the initial access stage of adult education, but it must also imply a constant attention to whatever issues may threaten the full development of motivations that support learning when it is in progress.

5.4 Accessing adult education

The foundational assumption of the capability approach theory that human beings are ends in themselves implies that every individual is also necessarily entitled to the autonomous and complete development of personal capabilities (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000). This basic moral claim is nevertheless confronted in fact with obstacles impeding it due to either distinct personal situations or common collective constraints (Nussbaum, 2000; Unterhalter et al., 2007).

The key role that the capability approach assigns to education as a tool to grant the autonomous development of individual motivations underlines the need to provide full support and information to all grown-up learners wishing to complete their schooling. Unfortunately, nearly all the interviewees reported serious deficiencies in access procedures to the adult education system. When they first started to gather information about going back to school, the students in the group were unable to find reliable and accessible information sources about adult education schemes and enrolment procedures. Most research participants reported that they were only fortuitously referred
to the school where they enrolled just by word of mouth. Once at school they found full information about access to courses available there, but no comprehensive information or guidance to overall adult education schemes.

Reading these research results through the lenses of the chain-of-response model suggested by Cross (1981), most students of the sample could be said to possess the sort of dispositional requirements, like interest in learning and personal motivation, that the theory posits as the necessary starting point in the chain of response leading to participation in adult learning. Nevertheless, their interest in learning and their personal motivation were then hampered by what the chain-of-response theory describes as institutional barriers. As these barriers all pertained basic student support services, it was no surprise they affected most students. From the central point of view of the capability approach, aiming at granting to all individuals the right to do and to be what they themselves have reason to value, a serious institutional barrier for the students in the research sample was in particular constituted by lack of information about all the courses available in the entire adult upper secondary education network. Bruno and Steve for instance decided to study Mechanics mainly because they could not find the different courses they actually wished to attend due to lack of information and therefore their motivations were at least partially thwarted.

The problem of individual motivation being thwarted by different kinds of barriers is conceptualized by the capability approach through the notions of internal capabilities and combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000). These concepts can be applied to Bruno's experience as it emerged from his interview. When he was a teenager he successfully studied Chemistry for four years, therefore he had the internal capability to be a Chemist. Unfortunately he did not have the combined capability actually allowing him to become one because of his deficient environment: the school he found did not offer any Chemistry courses and further institutional barriers denied him access to the information he needed in order to know if there were any Chemistry courses in other schools in the nearby area.

5.5 Supporting persistence in adult education.

The research findings ascertained that all the interviewees shared a strong passion for learning and a high degree of satisfaction with their learning experience at school. They particularly appreciated the fact they had some very passionate teachers that constantly tried to involve the class in shared learning activities. As described in the ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction) model (Keller,1987), the students' strong involvement resulted in an autonomous
motivation grounded in the appreciation of the relevance of the school pledge to satisfy their learning needs. The guidance and the assistance offered by most of their teachers and the active cooperation with many of their classmates also enhanced the students' confidence in dealing with some barriers hindering the progress of their learning experience, such as distance to school, a general lack of time and the partial disruption of learning activities due to inconstant attendance of a part of the class.

The different degrees of success that each student could obtain facing these barriers could be described through the theoretical framework of the capability approach using the concept of personal conversion rate variability, i.e. the different ability that different individuals have to develop their capabilities converting resources into functionings (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000). As the fundamental moral assumption of the approach is that human abilities should be developed, the acknowledgement of individual difficulties in developing them implies the need to support those who have to overcome obstacles to reach their expected functionings (Nussbaum, 2000; Unterhalter et al., 2007). This was what actually happened with the interview participants: most of their teachers devoted a constant attention to the needs of the class and even of individual students, so much so that some of them even tried to customise their work in order to suite the individual learning needs of their students. Quite significantly, these same teachers also understood the importance to provide their students with instruments to help and guide them when they had to work alone at home: they regularly uploaded their lessons on the Internet and encouraged the independent use of other online tools.

The research findings highlighted the positive results of the customization work organized by some of the school teachers both in terms of a growing learning independence and of an improved autonomy of students' motivations. The findings thus confirmed the assumption made by Boeren et al. (2012) that learning environments specifically designed to boost learners' independence by stimulating their individual interests and satisfying their personal needs promote the enhancement of autonomous motivations. These results also align with the general hermeneutic stance of the capability approach that compels a careful attention to the specific needs of every single person based on the awareness that failures in paying such attention could cause individuals to be seriously weakened, thus subjecting them to life-long disadvantages (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005).

A failure of this kind could be found in the experience of the young adult students playing truant described in some of the research interviews. This failure was particularly interesting for its paradoxical nature: educational facilitations originally introduced to help drop-out teenage students to complete their school career allowing them to attend adult upper secondary education classes
eventually resulted in encouraging their widespread truancy. What was originally meant as a tool against barriers, became a barrier of a new kind. As Steve regretted in his interview, staying away from school, these students missed on the opportunity to be involved in the cooperative environment of the class and thereby lost an important tool to strengthen their autonomous motivation and increase their persistence in education.

The paradoxical results of this provision originally introduced to grant second chance educational opportunities to young teenage students dropping out of school could be conceptualized through the work of Radovan (2012). In his opinion, focussing on external barriers to participation in adult education is a symptom of an attention mainly paid to students who already have a motivation to participate, but it falls short of understanding the reasons of those unwilling to participate. In addition to this, the same author underscores that adult education attendance must imply a free individual choice supporting a strong preparedness to overcome barriers and to gain a constant persistence. Based on these remarks and on inferences from the interview findings, school authorities can be said to have overlooked the fact that many of the young teenage students attending adult classes, quite unlike their older classmates, are still conditioned by their recent experience in regular upper secondary education, hinged on a model of compulsory attendance rather than on responsible individual choices. Following the conceptualization suggested by Radovan (2012), it can be argued that an analysis of the experience of young drop-out students should probably focus more on their individual internal deterrents rather than on situational barriers.

5.6 Open issues

This study tried to capture the experience of the adult students in the research sample from their own point of view and to read it in the light of relevant literature dealing with two main issues traditionally connected to participation in adult learning: students' motivations and barriers to participation.

Nearly all the interviewees had a strong motivation to participate in adult education but their motivation was initially hampered by relevant institutional barriers. For instance, they lamented a serious lack of information and guidance that led some of them to enrol in adult education just settling for seconds best as they could not get the full information they needed to find courses that could have been more suitable for them.

As to situational barriers, during the interviews the students often emphasized quite strongly that the truancy of many of their classmates partially disrupted regular class activities. Lack of time
was also a problem to some of them, especially because of issues in finding a compatibility between work and school timetables. The interviews revealed that quite often finding this compatibility was not as much a problem in itself, but it was rather a matter related to unsympathetic or even overtly hostile work environments. At the same time, due to stiff school timetables, the adult students’ possibility to attend lessons was exclusively confined to evening classes. An interviewee who asked to be allowed to attend daytime lessons was denied this opportunity, while the only measure introduced to meet the students’ need for more flexible timetables was issuing individual permissions to arrive late to classes.

Interview participants reported using, out of their own initiative, online tools such as What's app and Facebook groups for mutual support in their work at home. When prompted with questions about the Learning Management System used by the school, the students explained it consisted in a Moodle platform where teachers could upload their resources, but only two of their teachers were actually using it. They also explained that they mainly used these ICT tools and resources to be able to catch up with the rest of the class when they could not attend their lessons in person.

In spite of the issues listed above, the entire research sample declared they were satisfied with the school they were attending. Even if not all the teachers were equally interested in establishing cooperative relationships, all the interviewees declared they really appreciated the constant effort on the part of most of them to involve the students in their learning activities in a number of different ways. In line with Boeren et al. (2012), the teachers paid great attention to the actual individual needs of their students, strengthening thereby their motivation to learn and their permanence in education. Besides being satisfied with the improvement of their vocational skills, the interview participants acknowledged they had also improved their general cultural background and increased their learning independence and passion. In fact, a few of them said they wished to go on studying after their upper secondary school diploma.
6 Conclusions

The last part of this study tries to put forward some provisional conclusions that can be drawn from the findings emerging from the research work. Besides offering a main conclusion summarizing the results of the inquiry, the chapter also attempts to articulate some possible suggestions to be derived from the investigation described in this paper.

6.1 Main conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the experience of a small sample of Italian adult students attending upper secondary education in order to understand the reasons that brought them back to school and to highlight the different factors that either hindered or facilitated their participation in adult education. To this purpose, the inquiry examined the students' personal histories, their expectations, their enrolment itineraries, their learning environment, the challenges they met and the support they received. The theoretical framework based on both participation theories and the capability approach helped the research to bring into focus the careful attention to be paid to students' individual expectations and actual learning needs in order to grant their successful participation in adult education.

The main conclusion of this work is that participation in upper secondary adult education does not only imply gaining access to it but also being persistent in it. Successful persistence requires autonomous motivations on the part of adult students and attentive customized support on the part of adult learning institutions. All the students in the research sample had a strong interest for vocational improvement and some of them also had a learning passion spanning beyond the scope of merely vocational topics. This interest for learning was the main intrinsic factor on which their autonomous motivation was grounded and allowed them to go through the initial difficulties due to insufficient information about available adult education provisions. Once they enrolled at school, their motivation enabled them to establish a positive relationships with their teachers and their classmates. In their new cooperative environment their autonomous motivation was further enhanced by the support they received from their teachers and by the discussions and activities they shared with the class. Their experience confirmed that autonomous motivation is triggered by the satisfaction of personal expectations through an active involvement in the learning process. Furthermore, it also undelineed the importance of the attention paid by school teachers to the
individual learning needs of the students in order to provide a constant support to their persistence in education and to their growth as independent learners.

6.2 Possible suggestions from the research work

The suggestions listed here below are only confined to hints that could be derived from this research work but, as a matter of fact, the unfortunate situation of provisions for adult education in Italy is likely to offer quite an abundant scope for researchers wishing to investigate the reasons of a long-lasting impressive lack of consistent adult education policies.

6.2.1 Enhancing participation through attention to individual needs

Besides using theoretical tools derived from participation theories, this research work also relied on the central concepts of the capability approach that all individuals are ends in themselves and that they have the right to do and to be what they themselves have reason to value. These concepts were used in the research interviews to ascertain, from the actual point of view of the students, what they themselves expected from their learning experience and how their expectations were actually met through their participation in adult education. The research findings, in spite of the small research sample from which they were obtained, could point to some useful suggestions. These suggestions are all centred on the attention to be paid to students' actual needs in order to enhance overall participation in adult education.

6.2.2 Filling the information gap

The research findings reveal that nearly all the interviewees experienced significant difficulties when they first tried to gather information about how to resume their education. These problems were so relevant that, before enrolling at school, the students could not find any institutional information at all and they could only manage to get some guidance through informal help from acquaintances. These research findings can be read side by side with data about the disproportion between the number of potential Italian upper secondary education students and the corresponding figures of adult students who actually managed to attend different forms of adult education (Marescotti, 2014). This parallel reading could be useful to draw policy makers' attention to the urgent need for schemes catering for the decisive information gap highlighted by the research results.
6.2.3 Avoiding confusion in class composition

In their interviews many students lamented problems due to the composition of their class. In their opinion the presence of teenage students was not compatible with the organization of learning activities in a class of adult students. The poor commitment to school work on the part of young students and their frequent truancy were thought to be disruptive for regular class activities. These findings could be used by educationists in charge to design second chance provisions for young teenage students dropping out their upper secondary education before actually completing it to reconsider the rule currently allowing early school leavers from the age of sixteen to join adult education classes, mostly attended by adult workers with completely different educational needs.

6.2.4 Customizing learning through appropriate learning management tools

Evidence from the research interviews pointed at the remarkable success of customization strategies introduced by some teachers to suit the actual individual learning needs of their students. As adult students classes are often composed by students showing a wide difference of proficiency levels in nearly all subjects, the research findings can suggest a viable way to deal with this problem. To this respect, it must be noted that the results of the research revealed that the two teachers who customized their class activities were also the only ones to provide online support for their students. The use of digital tools and resources is paramount to create customized learning activities and this hint from the research findings underlines the importance of efficient Learning Management Systems to support adult learners both in the class and at home and to make adult education available to a much wider audience.

6.3 Limitations of this study

In spite of some possible suggestions that may be usefully derived from its findings, this research also suffers from some limitations that deserve to be taken into consideration. These limitations mainly refer to the size and the composition of the research sample. As to the size, the sample was a very small one, counting only 12 interview participants. Originally it was intended to be double as big, also including adult students from another school, but this plan had to be abandoned due to time reasons.

As to the composition, the sample was only made up by rather dutiful students and all the students attended the same school. The fact that the sample was entirely composed by dutiful students was determined by some of the criteria that were adopted for the selection. Following
Morse (1991), interviewees were selected based on their willingness to interact with the interviewer and their ability to describe the most significant details of their experience: as a result, these requirements cut unintentionally off from the sample an important, if problematic, component of the school population. Finally, all the students in the sample attended the same school because, as previously explained, due to time reasons the research was intentionally confined to a single school.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

This research was originally intended to conduct a parallel investigation in two similar vocational adult schools, a public school and a private one, but this plan had to be abandoned. It could be interesting to resume the original cross-sectional research hypothesis that was meant to compare participation in adult education in public and private schools in terms of students satisfaction.

Further recommendations are connected to the totally uneven gender composition of the research sample. As this was due to the fact that out of 174 adult students attending the school only one of them was a woman, this limitation must be taken as a signal for the need of research work aimed at investigating gender distribution in upper secondary adult education in general and in different kinds of secondary schools in particular.

The unintentional exclusion from the sample of students who were less regular in their school commitment was a serious limitation to the overall purpose of the research. The important issue of the coexistence between adult students proper and teenage students in adult education classes in Italy was under-represented just due to this limitation: the experience of teenage students could not be recorded if not by inferences taken from the interviews to their older classmates. This shortcoming offers the opportunity to conduct new research aimed at filling this gap, exploring the lifeworld of teenage students to understand how they experience their participation in adult education and what barriers and deterrents hamper it.
References:


Appendix 1

Interview guide

Researcher: Elia Cortinovis

Research title: ADULT STUDENTS IN UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ITALY

A

1 Could you introduce yourself and tell me how it came to that you are here in this course?
2 What do you find most valuable in education?
3 Could you think of any possible connections between these things and your expectations about attending upper secondary education?

B

4 Could you describe what sorts of considerations first triggered your decision to enroll in the course you are attending?
5 What aspects of your current learning experience do you think can be useful to you outside school?
6 Will you continue your education after you finish this course?
7 If a friend asked you for advice to enrol in adult education what would you suggest as a main guiding line for the choice?

C

8 Could you talk a bit about the different steps that led you from the first moment you conceived the idea about the possibility to enrol in adult education to your present situation as a regular attendant?
9 What support did you receive to go back to education as an adult learner and to carry on your choice? Who gave you this support?
10 What do you think are your strong points as a learner and what are the weak ones?
11 What do you think could have made your attendance easier?

D

12 Could you talk about the organization of learning activities in your school and about your degree of involvement in it?
13 To what degree has your independence as a learner grown through the attendance of the course? And to what extent were you in a position to influence your learning situation?
14 How often have you been learning through project and group work as compared to traditional classroom activities?
15 In what ways have you been involved in the evaluation of your learning progress?
16 How does the attendance of this upper secondary education course relate to your identity as an adult learner?
17 What dimensions of this identity does it encourage?
18 What dimensions does it overlook?
Appendix 2

Interviewee information sheet

Researcher: Elia Cortinovis

Research title: **ADULT STUDENTS IN UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ITALY**

I am a researcher attending the master programme Adult Learning and Global Change at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning of the University of Linköping, Sweden. As a part of this programme, I am conducting this research for my final thesis. The aim of the research is to identify factors that facilitate and hinder participation of Italian adult students attending upper secondary education.

You are one among the students that were singled out as possible participants in this research and your participation would be highly appreciated. You were chosen because your experience attending an upper secondary education course as an adult student is particularly relevant to the purpose of the research. If you accept to participate, you will be interviewed about your personal experience as an adult student.

The interview will last approximately one hour and will take place on school premises. The interview will be recorded only in order to grant the precise registration of your statements and their subsequent transcription for the purposes of the research. All information gathered through the interview will be processed and reported in an anonymous form and your name or personal details will never appear in any part of the research to be published, nor will they ever be known to anyone apart from the researcher. The safety of all research data will be granted by storing them in an anonymous form in a computer protected by password.

Upon completion of the research, you will receive full account of its findings. The findings and the materials of the research may also be used to be published in academic and scientific papers.

The choice to participate in the research is completely free and you may therefore even decide not to give you consent. For the same reason, you are also free to withdraw all the information you provided and all materials you may have contributed up to one month after the interview.

For any further information you may need, I will be glad to answer you at the following email address:

eliacortinovis@zoho.com

Thank you for your attention.
Appendix 3

Interviewee consent form

Researcher: Elia Cortinovis

Research title: ADULT STUDENTS IN UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ITALY

Interviewee’s consent

I hereby declare I have received complete information about the purpose of this research and the way in which it is conducted. In particular, I have been fully informed about the confidential use of all information gathered though the interview in which I am participating and about the protection of my personal data granted by their storage in a password protected computer and by their use in a totally anonymous form whereby my identity will never be disclosed to anyone.

I have also been informed that I am entitled to ask whatever other question about the research as I may deem necessary in any moment of its further steps where I will be involved. Having received all the above information, I declare I accept to participate in the research and I also give my consent to use the findings and the materials of the research to be published in academic and scientific papers.

I understand that the choice to participate in the research is completely free and if I do not wish to answer any particular question, I am free to decline. I also understand that I am equally free to withdraw all the information I provided and all materials I may have contributed up to one month after the interview without suffering any consequences whatsoever.

(Please fill in the part below using block letters).

Place .............................................................. Date ..............................................................
Surname ...................................................... Name ..............................................................
Signature...........................................................

Researcher’s responsibility statement

I have personally given the interviewee above full information about the purpose and the procedures of my research, with a particular attention to procedures concerning the interview. The interview and the entire research have been conducted in full compliance with the Principles of Research Ethics for the Social Sciences as defined by the Swedish Research Council.

Place .............................................................. Date ..............................................................
Surname ...................................................... Name ..............................................................
Signature..............................................................