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Education as a Capability for Young Adults' Life Trajectories: Some Evidence from an Italian Case Study

Valeria Pandolfini¹, Stefano Poli²

Abstract: Education still represents a main determinant in social stratification, particularly when hybridizing itself with other generative factors (like gender, ethnicity, age, access to rights), thus reflecting a transversal 'classless' dimension of contemporary inequality (Pakulsky, 2007), as well as contributing to the resistance of typical 'class' factors by reproducing social differences in occupational conditions and wealth (Wright, 1985; 2007). Indeed, the post-Fordist transition has led to significant changes, not only in generative factors of social differentiation, but also in how the individual educational investment is rewarded with effective consequences especially in life trajectories for young adults (Gosetti, 2004; Lo Verde, 2005; Poli, 2008). From this perspective, the essay adopts the Senian Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1973; 1999) in an educational perspective, evaluating how nowadays education affects young adults' life trajectories, leading to a different conception of education as a value in itself, as well as a means, or conversion factor, meaning heterogeneous results in terms of individual wellbeing and doing. Analyzing a quantitative case study realized in Genoa, Italy, this paper aims to observe the effects of educational path on achievement of individual wellbeing for a sample of young adults in a typical context of a flexible labour market (Poli, Benasso, Capozzi, & Vergani, 2013).

Keywords: Capability Approach, life trajectories, educational inequalities, young adults

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Education and the achievement of personal wellbeing in the capability perspective

Education is still a major instrument for personal, social, and institutional development. However, the different social allocation of educational opportunities may also reproduce, or even worsen, social inequalities. Indeed, the differences in educational chances produce effects in social stratification, particularly because educational credentialism is a main determinant in accessing higher status positions. Thus, educational opportunities, especially when combined with gender issues, ethnic perspectives, and effective chances of democratic participation, represent one of the main generative factors of contemporary hybrid 'classless' inequality (Pakulsky, 2007) leading to direct consequences on the general socioeconomic distribution of social resources and positions.

The largely debated question is about whether educational systems can effectively overcome social inequalities, or merely reflect or even intensify them. Consequently, due to the multidimensional nature of contemporary inequality, the crucial questions remain as to whether, how, and to what extent society, institutions, and organizations determine advantages and disadvantages in individual educational opportunities, reproducing social inequalities. This implies analyzing how societal conditions (such as overall levels of inequality, welfare type, labour market features, and demographics) represent incentives and opportunities or, limit educational attainment and, more generally, individual wellbeing and life satisfaction (considering, for example, educational career, entry into the labour market, occupational attainment, working conditions, and family formation). Although structural constraints could play an important role in determining individual achievement (in education, in the labour market, in a person's life), it is also important to consider the exercise of an individual's agency to overcome barriers and difficulties that influence opportunities to achieve his/her purposes.

The aforesaid themes are here investigated in the context of Sen's Capability Approach (1984), a theoretical perspective based on the core idea that society should aim to enlarge individual opportunities, i.e., the freedom to promote and obtain from each member of society the highest expression in terms of 'wellbeing and doing', namely, in terms of quality of life and freedom of choice (Poli, 2008). On an analytical level, the Capability Approach highlights the personal, social, economic, cultural,

and institutional factors giving individuals the opportunity to do and to be (or not to do and not to be) what they consider valuable (or invaluable) for their fulfilment (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). In other words, it focuses on the question whether a person is placed in the conditions in which she/he can pursue her/his ultimate ends (Robeyns, 2011). In order to explore how education could be analyzed from a capability perspective and what role it could play in individual biographical and professional trajectories towards the achievements of personal purposes and wellbeing, we will briefly recall the key concepts of the Senian Capability Approach.

For Sen, 'functionings' are "the various things a person may value being or doing" (1999, p.75), which may include being healthy, safe, happy, educated, and participating in the community. According to Dean, Bonvin, Vielle, and Farvaque (2004, p. 4), they can be differentiated by "actually achieved functionings (that is, the full range of activities – including productive, re-productive, caring, expressive and deliberative kinds of functioning that human beings may achieve) and subjective end states (that is, the happiness or sense of wellbeing that are the final outcome)".

Capabilities, on the other hand, are an alternative combination of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve; they are "the substantive freedom a person has to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value" (Sen, 1999, p. 87). Thus, the distinction between functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible, in other words, between achievements, on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable opportunities from which one can choose, on the other (Robeyns, 2011). It is important to note that the Capability Approach focuses on the promotion of capabilities, not functioning: it aims to promote freedoms and choices for people, so that they can have the capabilities to experience a higher quality of life (Nussbaum, 2011).

According to such a definition of capabilities, the focus is set "on the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that thing that he or she may value doing or being" (Sen, 2009, p. 232). It is conceptualized as the scope and scale in which it is feasible for a person to decide what she or he might actually be and do and thus "the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead" (Drèze & Sen, 1995, p. 10). On this point, the Capability Approach highlights capability sets: what individuals are *actually* free to be and do, i.e., the set of real options from which people have to choose. This is strictly related to the concept of agency, defined by Sen (1985) as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of

whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (p. 203). Therefore, the focus is on actual capabilities and substantive freedoms, in accordance with the true sense of ‘entitlements’: the freedom to achieve within the agency space.

However, the point is that people differ in their ability to convert means (resources or endowments that are instrumental to the achievement of other ends) into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings) (Sen, 1992, pp. 26-28, 36-38). In the theoretical framework of the Capability Approach, these inter-individual differences are captured by the notion of ‘conversion factors’, i.e., the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning. More specifically, conversion factors could be distinguished as: personal or individual characteristics (e.g., gender, education, social status); external or socio-structural and cultural conversion factors (such as social or religious norms, gender roles, power relations and hierarchies, discriminatory practices); and institutional conversion factors (such as welfare policies, educational arrangements, labour market conditions, or collective provisions) (Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Otto & Ziegler, 2006). All conversion factors influence whether, how, and to what degree a person can or is free to convert the characteristics of the resources into a functioning. Thus, Sen uses ‘capability’ not to refer exclusively to a person’s abilities or other internal powers, but to refer to an opportunity made feasible, but constrained by, both personal and external conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99).

Since functionings, refer to the activities and situations that people spontaneously recognize to be important, and that could be conceived as a collection of the observable achievements of each person (e.g., their health, knowledge, or having a meaningful job), thus, the wellbeing of a person is a summary index of the person’s functionings (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009, p. 151). In other words, functionings are constitutive of a person’s being and an evaluation of wellbeing has to take the form of an assessment of these constituent elements (Sen, 1992, p. 39). Thus, as Tao notes (2010, p. 2), one can make evaluations of human development based on relevant dimensions such as wellbeing freedom (the opportunity to achieve wellbeing), wellbeing achievement (the extent to which wellbeing has been achieved), agency freedom (the opportunity to pursue and bring about the goals one values), and agency achievement (the extent to which these goals have been achieved).

To summarize, referring to Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash (2014, p. 215), the wellbeing generation process could be defined as a mechanism that transforms the overall endowment of public and private resources and services (i.e., means to achieve) into a set of functionings (or achievements), through the mediation of the 'capability set' (related to the freedom to achieve). At this point, it may be useful to analyze how educational issues can be reinterpreted within a capability perspective.

Education as an end, a means, or a conversion factor? The different roles of education in individual capabilities

Following the well-known distinction between intrinsic and instrumental roles of education (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014; Unterhalter, 2009), in adopting the Capability Approach education could be conceived in three ways.

Firstly, education could be conceived as an end in itself, as the 2002 UNESCO Report "Education for all" states: "The human capabilities approach to education [...] recognizes that education is intrinsically valuable as an end in itself" (UNESCO, 2002, p. 33). This recalls the intrinsic value of education and knowledge that can be defined as "being able to be educated and to use and produce knowledge" (Robeyns, 2003) or, according to Nussbaum's more complex definition of one of the ten 'central' capabilities, i.e., senses, imagination and thought:

Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason – and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid non-necessary pain (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33).

The capability set, therefore, represents the individual's real freedom and opportunities to achieve through the competencies, knowledge, and level of education that each person has reason to value for her/himself (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014). There is hardly any doubt that

being literate, knowledgeable and “having access to an education that allows a person to flourish is generally argued to be a valuable capability” (Robeyns, 2006).

Secondly, education could be conceived as a means, appearing “in a causal or influential relationship with individual freedom or functionings” (Unterhalter, 2003, p. 10). Here, the instrumental value of education is clear: it is a means for achieving wellbeing in other relevant dimensions, namely, in terms of work status (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014). It could be defined as “being able to work or to undertake projects” (Robeyns, 2003) or, in a more articulated definition proposed by Nussbaum, as:

Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationship of mutual recognition with other workers (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 34).

In this sense, education is part of what constitutes a person’s wellbeing: i.e., being well-educated is instrumental to an expansion of other capabilities or dimensions of a person’s wellbeing, including participation in the labour market. Sen’s view on education (1999) is that it is an overarching capability that should expand other capabilities; whether it be acquiring skills, taking opportunities that these skills afford, or gaining other intrinsically important capabilities such as critical thought, respect and empathy (Tao, 2010). Nussbaum too agrees, when highlighting how education is central to developing other capabilities and suggesting education itself is a “fertile functioning” (2011, p. 152). It is often looked upon, together with health, as a kind of ‘fundamental’ capability because it is internally instrumental within the realm of wellbeing, i.e., of a person’s capability set, and is key to expanding our own and other people’s opportunity sets (Nussbaum, 2011).

Thirdly, in discussions of the relationship between education and capabilities, Otto and Ziegler (2006) pick up on Robeyns’ (2006) and Unterhalter’s (2003) work, suggesting that “education might not only be interpreted as a capability, but also as a...personal conversion factor” (p. 279). It can be thought of as “conditions of possibilities for individuals to...develop and realize their capabilities” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 278).

From this point of view, education becomes an internal, personal characteristic that determines one's ability to convert input (means) into output (wellbeing)³. Moreover, education is also related to 'external factors' such as social characteristics (public policies, institutions, legal rules, social norms, and so on). Thus, if personal conversion factors involve "physical condition, literacy, competences etc. that influence how a person is able to convert the characteristics, commodities, infrastructures, and arrangements into a functioning" (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 279), education is more convincingly thought of as an institutional conversion factor. This confirms how the Capability Approach underlines the importance of the social environments in which persons are embedded since they, together with the institutions that surround them, set the conditions for individual freedoms, as these can hamper efforts to convert resources into capabilities (Bonvin & Orton, 2009). Thus, by acknowledging conversion factors, the Capability Approach takes into account the broader social and institutional context that affect a person's capability set and recognizes that our "opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function" (Sen, 1999, p. 142).

What people value in education. The Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory

Applying the Capability Approach to education allows us to go well beyond the narrow notion of material wellbeing in acknowledging not only the instrumental value of education in promoting productivity, economic growth and individual incomes, but also its importance for individual wellbeing, freedom, and social development (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014).

³ As noted by Otto & Ziegler (2006), with respect to education this perspective may imply that the total value of resources –what Pierre Bourdieu used to call 'cultural capital' - made available in the course of educational processes, should be related to actors' different abilities to transform them into baskets of assets that potentially they are then free to make use of. Such stocks of (educational) assets have in turn to be related to the conditionality of what Sen (1985) calls 'functions of utilization' capturing a whole range of personally bonded characteristics (most obviously sex, age, but also physical or mental dispositions and handicaps) as well social characteristics (such as the status or position a group or person holds in the social order).

It is on this point that the added value of the Capability Approach emerges when compared with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1975; Schultz, 1993) that has largely dominated educational theoretical debate and empirical analysis. As is well known, Human Capital Theory is based on the idea that education, and the subsequent improvement of skills, increases economic productivity, thus benefiting a person's economic value. Such a theory, therefore, concentrates primarily on the instrumental value of education and on its returns in terms of economic growth (individual and collective).

However, such a vision of what people value from education has been criticized as 'too narrow', disregarding other important and related aspects (Unterhalter, 2009). As Sen (1999) argued, "income may be the most prominent means of a good life without deprivation, but it is not the only influence in the lives we can lead" (p. 3). Applying this to the educational sphere, individuals may be not only interested in education because it will earn them more money, but other dimensions related to the wellbeing-generation process have to be taken into account.

In addition to the economic and instrumental role it assigns to education, Human Capital Theory has been criticized for two other aspects: a) it is often based on rather strong assumptions (e.g. markets work rationally, perfectly, and efficiently, and the only element of distinction among people is the different amount of human capital they have)⁴; b) it lacks attention to human diversity and unequal opportunities, so that it does not reflect adequately the multiplicity of personal and contextual factors that can generate different sets of individuals' opportunities or affect their educational choices and wellbeing (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014).

According to Sen, however, the Capability Approach should not be seen as an alternative to Human Capital Theory, more that the two approaches complement each other, since they emphasize different elements of what is valued. While the latter concentrates on the indirect value of education as a 'capital' to be invested in the production process, the former offers a more inclusive perspective, able to encompass both the direct and indirect values

⁴ On the contrary, there are several empirical evidences to suggest that higher investments in education do not directly and automatically translate into more opportunities in the labour market or higher salaries. The persistence of over-education in OECD countries is clearly explicative (OECD, 2014).

of human abilities (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014). It is, in principle, multidimensional and comprehensive, and can, therefore, account for the intrinsic and non-economic roles that education plays (Robeyns, 2006, p. 69). Quoting Sen (1999), “the notion of capability implies a larger scope of benefits from education, which include enhancing wellbeing and freedom of individuals and peoples, improving economic production and influencing social change” (pp. 293-296). Thus, the Capability Approach considers development through education not only as increasing income or better access to resources, but as the enhancement of people’s freedoms to do and be what they have reason to value (McCowan, 2011, p. 285).

Based on such assumptions, the Capability Approach provides an interesting framework to connect individual biographies and social arrangements by focusing on equality in the capability to convert resources into functionings. More specifically, for the purpose of this essay, Sen’s (1992) question ‘equality of what?’ leads us to consider equality of capabilities through education and to wonder whether we need to think about equality of access, inputs, treatment, achievement, or outcome. In other words, it shows how different evaluative spaces (resources, opportunities, outcomes), as well as a plurality of factors (internal and external) affecting the wellbeing-generating process, must be contemplated. Likewise, it recognizes that individual educational achievements have to be more specifically defined, since they could be evaluated in the realm of a capability perspective “in terms of completion rates, or exam performance, or productivity”, or focused on “wider outcomes such as empowerment, confidence, and citizen participation” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). Of course, beyond the aforesaid definitions of individual educational achievements, these are determined not only by the availability of personal, family, and social resources, but also by an individual’s ability to access and exploit these resources, which are not equal for everybody.

Therefore, the Capability Approach provides many insights to match individual educational paths and biographical/life trajectories, paying much attention “to the links between material, mental and social wellbeing, or to the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94).

Education and life trajectories in a capability perspective: some evidence from an Italian case study

Empirical evidence of the aforesaid theoretical aspects is found in a recent case study by a research team in Genoa, Italy. The research setting explores conditions of young adults in a metropolitan context of Northern Italy, where the local labour market reflects, quite paradigmatically, the problematic shift to a post-Fordist model from a traditional industrial economy, made even more complex by the contemporary financial crisis, where job precariousness and salary instability reproduce harder occupational and living conditions especially for younger generations (Palumbo, Poli, & Torrigiani, 2007).

Following the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1973; 1999), the research examines the individual conditions of a sample of young adults, by reconstructing their biographical paths and exploring relationships between education, work experiences, and life trajectories, in order to observe the effects of the education on realization and achievement of individual wellbeing and doing.

Following prior work by the research team (Poli et al., 2013), the sampling procedure for this study started from a list of employment movements registered in the Centri per l'Impiego of the Provincia di Genova, i.e., the territorial labour bureaus for the local metropolitan area. Considering an overall base of about 65,000 hiring movements recorded in the first half of 2010, around 40,000 relate to subjects under 40 years of age, who are considered the target age population to properly explore the relationship between education and life opportunities for young adults. From such a population it has been possible to obtain a statistical sample of 381 cases, with a confidence level of 95%. The survey, conducted in 2013, returned a final sample of 400 cases.

Adopting a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) the questionnaire used in the survey was designed as a structured biographical interview, and consequently, it has been possible to reconstruct and observe the life stories of respondents from a capability perspective, deepening the different settings of life trajectories, particularly in education, training, employment, and family dimensions⁵.

⁵ It has been necessary to develop a sort of quantitative-qualitative tool, that is a questionnaire sufficiently standardized and structured, through the frequent use of open-

The aim of the study was to verify the effective incidence of education and the effective achievement of several life functionings, in order to realize an explicative model of relationships between education and life outcomes for contemporary young adults.

Nevertheless, the choice of the capability perspective, considering the complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent nature of this approach, and the absence of rigorous formalization, requires the adoption of a very flexible approach, without referring to a fixed or comprehensive list of educational capabilities (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014; Otto & Ziegler, 2006)⁶. Instead it follows an operationalization approach, linked as far as possible to the aims of the research.

To such purpose it has been necessary to select some main variables for the analytical model, regarding the evaluation of education and various biographic dimensions. Some are core or basic capabilities, like the level of education; others are more complex, enabling the exploration of links between education and different life functionings.

In this sense, *level of education*, essentially obtained by recoding in ISCED levels the study title respondents, represents the main variable to be explored in this analysis, evaluating its effects in different possible dimensions of life functionings. A second indicator evaluates *overall life satisfaction*, realized as a function of different levels of gratification in biographical dimensions (economic conditions, career, occupational stability, spending opportunities, achievement of dreams and objectives) conceived as a proxy of perceived general wellbeing. Related to the previous indicator, another measure evaluates the perception of an *effective positive incidence of the educational path* on the achievement of such

ended answer items, permitting as much as possible the autonomous expression of respondents. In this way, once the individual gave her/his positioning on scaling items in closed form, it has been possible to collect open specifications (later recoded), useful to better understand the real meaning of the answers given before. This is particularly effective when reconstructing life events in a structured grid, as it still collects real and personal significance of every mentioned fact. In a way, the tool reflects the effort of a 'quantitative life history' attempt (Bertaux, 1999; Bichi, 2002), following the combination in a concurrent transformative way of collecting data and information (Creswell, 2003; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

⁶ Indeed, there is a remarkable homogeneity in the way Sen discusses education, a homogeneity that is problematic and leads to difficulties, particularly when passages are read as operationalized examples of the capabilities approach (Unterhalter, 2003, p. 8).

aforesaid dimensions of overall wellbeing⁷.

Following the operationalization model for education in the Capability Approach as proposed by Chiappero-Martinetti, Egdell, Hollywood, and McQuaid (2015), the analysis has been performed adopting three different sets of indicators, conceiving education a) as a means, b) an end, and c) as a conversion factor, considering the various possible functionings for individuals.

a) *Education as a means* is intended as a capability to work or to undertake work projects, measured in terms of opportunities in the labour market and reflecting adequate functionings in terms of occupational status, working conditions and wages, particularly observing type of employment (permanent, temporary, full/part time) and security.

First of all, individuals' actual condition in the job market has been recoded using class and status scales (recoding the professional status level with the SIOPS scale, proposed by Ganzeboom and Treiman in 2003, and the class positioning level with the classic *EGP* scale, proposed by Erikson and Goldthorpe in 1992), combined with the actual *income level*.

Nevertheless, with the Capability Approach it is very important to focus on the quality of employment, gathering data on usually disregarded aspects, such as informal work, occupational hazard, under- and over-employment (Lugo, 2007), as well as perceived job satisfaction (Leßmann & Bonvin, 2011). Therefore, the questionnaire includes several items dedicated to the different dimensions of occupational position (wage, working hours, type of contract, sector, etc.) as well as satisfaction with actual job conditions, thereby permitting a reconstruction of the different functioning outcomes in employment. To obtain a synthesis of the multiple dimensions, factor analysis was performed on actual occupational experiences of respondents (mainly observing contract stability, working conditions, and job satisfaction), leading to four main factors representing possible outcomes in terms of occupational functionings. The first factor (explaining 31% of variance) has returned the profile of strong occupational dissatisfaction mostly derived from *forced precariousness*, reflecting overall sadness, frequent hostility and isolation, sense of injustice and absence of meritocracy, stress, fatigue, perceived hostility and vagueness of tasks in

⁷ Such indicators have been obtained as the means of two Likert-scale batteries to evaluate perceived satisfaction on different life dimensions and perceived positive incidence of educational path in such dimensions.

workplace, along with the sense of being on an unknown path, without effective career opportunities. In particular, when higher education combines with occupational instability, it emerges as a form of impatience and intolerance, reflecting a lack of trust in the value of educational investment.

A second factor explains 13% of the variance and is related to *job stability and better career chances*, expressing sense of choice and investment in the path taken, often characterized by a relatively acquisitive attitude toward career achievement in a dynamic background permitting an adequate variety of tasks. In a more stable occupational profile, this factor combines a sense of stability, both in a progressive dynamism in the case of higher educational levels, as well as a more 'affluent' attitude, particularly in individuals with average educational levels, substantially satisfied with their job situation and lacking a marked attitude toward career progression⁸.

A *conscious flexibility* factor explains 9% of the variance and expresses those working conditions where non-standard contracts are accepted as part of a professional development process, particularly in situations where the few disposable permanent jobs are perceived as difficult to obtain. Often related to higher educational levels, this factor shows the feeling of a conscious path toward the fulfilment of personal objectives as well as the perceived proximity of the achievement, where the trade-off with temporary instability is accepted and compensated by a wider variety of tasks and opportunities.

Finally, a sense of *affluent/disembedded routine* permeates the last residual factor (6% of variance), involving younger people, just starting out in the job market, not yet fully emancipated, and still living with parents. They are often short-term workers expressing a sense of transient, liquid, and non-sticking routine in daily job tasks, even if performed in a perceived as friendly working climate. A disembedded attitude emerges from the absence of choice and investment, where working experiences happen by chance. Often, this is related to situations of lower levels of education combined with stable occupation, of lower prestige, or where the educational path is still ongoing and respondents are still living with

⁸ It has to be remembered that this factor is more significant for male respondents, and less intense among females, confirming the hypothesis of a gender discrimination, particularly related in terms of functioning to the difficult trade-off between family and work (Crespi & Rossi, 2013; Pandolfini, 2012; Riva, 2009).

parents (according to a familistic welfare model). In each case, individuals have sufficient resources to cover their 'less acquisitive' attitudes (Lo Verde, 2005).

b) *Education as an end* is intended as a capability for ability to be educated and to use and produce knowledge, measured in terms of educational opportunities and reflecting adequate functionings in terms of skills and knowledge, particularly observing the educational attainment and correspondence between obtained degrees and required qualification for actual job situations.

Three main indicators have been adopted: *educational success*, aimed at analyzing the learning path (evaluating failures, drop outs, interruptions or negative events in studying), access to *higher and qualified training* (regarding qualified educational opportunities, stages, learning abroad experiences, lifelong learning, and professional updating) and, lastly, *early access to job market*, evaluating the individual path in terms of untimely entry into continuous occupational conditions, with a negative trade-off in terms of investment in personal human capital.

c) Finally, *education as a conversion factor* is intended as a capability to participate effectively in society, measured in terms of opportunities to take part in social and political life, with adequate health conditions and relational networks, observed in levels of health, satisfaction at work and employment wellbeing, participation in groups and social capital.

In this dimension, the reconstruction of biographical paths presents different indicators regarding *health* conditions, particularly overall physical wellbeing; *trade union participation*, evaluating the level of involvement with worker organizations and possible protection; the different levels of *lower, middle, and upper social capital*, realized through standardized scales (Cesareo, 2007) addressing the usual socio-relational network of respondents (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014).

Young adults in a flexible labour market: different rewards from educational investment

The analysis was planned on two levels. On the one hand, from an explicative perspective, through correlation analysis it is possible to understand the potential effects and relationships of education on the different life dimensions expressed by the indicators. On the other hand,

adopting a wider interpretative perspective, has allowed for a regression model, foreseeing overall life satisfaction (expressed by respondents as a proxy of general good functioning) and examining the effective incidence of education and other dimensions as positive or negative determinants of individual fulfilment.

The data in Table 1, observing Pearson's correlation values, provide some preliminary considerations regarding the relationship between education and different life dimensions.

Exploring the ties between the investment in human capital and the general conceptual dimension of life functionings, education level is clearly independent of the proxy indicator measuring overall satisfaction, confirming that an individual's whole functioning level extends to several dimensions beyond those strictly related to education. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that the perceived positive effect of education on the quality of life is positively related to study levels (+0.267, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed), as a sort of achieved consciousness probably derived from higher education itself.

Approaching education as a means or as a capability for labour market opportunities and class positioning, other expected direct relationships with education are naturally observable in the proxies of social stratification, expressed in terms of class on the EGP scale (+0.536, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) and of occupational status and prestige on the SIOPS scale (+0.569, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). This reflects positively on individual income level (+0.206, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed), despite the less intense relationship, probably due to the unequal conditions experienced in the job market by several respondents with higher education but more precarious employment.

Such substantial inequality is confirmed when exploring the relationship between education and the factorial scores expressing different functionings in terms of occupational condition. For instance, education is partially negatively related with stable employment (-0.167, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed), essentially for two reasons. First, because the flexibility characterizing entry into the job market for younger people postpones occupational stability to later life stages (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009), particularly if the first occupational experience is delayed by a major investment in personal human capital. Second, because stable employment among young adults is more closely related to average levels of education (and earlier access to the job market), typically leading to ordinary

occupations in service industries (different to individual investment in higher education, that can realize higher status employment, but at the cost of a later stabilization).

Table 1. Correlation values between education level and other variables

<i>Theoretical dimensions</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Correlation with Education level</i>	
Overall life functioning	Overall satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	0.003
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.958
	Perceived positive effect of education on overall quality of life	Pearson Correlation	0.267**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
Education as a means	SIOPS	Pearson Correlation	0.569**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	EGP	Pearson Correlation	0.536**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	Income	Pearson Correlation	0.206**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	Stability and career	Pearson Correlation	-0.167**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	Forced precariousness	Pearson Correlation	-0.010
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.835
Conscious precariousness	Pearson Correlation	0.240**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
Affluent/disembedded routine	Pearson Correlation	-0.250**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
Educational success	Pearson Correlation	0.294**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
Education as an end	Higher and qualified training	Pearson Correlation	0.332**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	Early access in job market	Pearson Correlation	-0.443**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	Negative health conditions	Pearson Correlation	-0.079
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.115	
Lower social capital	Pearson Correlation	-0.238**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
Education as a conversion factor	Middle social capital	Pearson Correlation	0.182**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	Upper social capital	Pearson Correlation	0.353**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
Trade union participation	Pearson Correlation	-0.148**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

N=400 **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Similarly, education is negatively correlated with those situations where the job experience is perceived with a disembedded attitude or as a humdrum routine (-0.250, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). Indeed,

such attitudes toward the job experience are often less closely related to higher education (Gosetti, 2004), and more frequent among younger respondents (for instance, under-24s still involved in university education and experiencing occasional part time employment) or among young adults having experienced earlier access to the job market without investment in studying (thus, experiencing less satisfactory or stimulating job conditions derived from their lesser qualification).

Otherwise, higher education levels are positively related to conscious precariousness (+0.240, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). Being higher status positions that are scarce in the labour market, particularly for the youth, many respondents with a higher level of study and working with non-standard contracts seem to be aware of the longer time required to stabilize in employment, particularly in order to obtain a job position adequate to the individual's investment in education.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a substantial independence of education from the factor related to forced precariousness, therefore, adequate results from investment in personal human capital are not assured for those who have earned higher degrees.

Approaching education as an end, the level of education shows clear relationships with educational success (+0.294, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) and occasions of higher and qualified training experiences (+0.332, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). In this sense, higher levels of education implicitly relate to better school results as well as major access to qualified training opportunities, however, these do not necessarily relate to better opportunities in the job market, especially in terms of occupational stability.

Similarly, education is negatively related to early access in the job market (-0.443, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). In this case, the opportunity of being occupied from a younger age means less investment in human capital, but also earlier access to occupational stability, with positive consequences for other life dimensions, such as opportunities of emancipation or starting one's own family (Balbo, Billari, & Mills, 2013; Fahlén, 2013).

Essentially, the data analysis returns the complex trade-off between personal investment in human capital to obtain better employment opportunities and the evident risk of over-education and frequent precarious job positions deriving from job market complexity.

Otherwise, some interesting considerations emerge when education is viewed as a possible conversion factor.

The analysis shows a relative independence between education and negative health conditions. Of course, this can also be related to the young age of those observed, but nevertheless, the partial negative relationship (-0.079) could suggest the start of health differences derived from social inequalities, where (especially at older ages) having a higher education level also means better general life conditions, more healthy lifestyles, and easier access to medical care (Brandolini & Saraceno, 2007).

Conceiving of education as a conversion factor for wider social participation, higher education levels are negatively related, for instance, with trade union participation (-0.148, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). Nevertheless, it should be remembered that diffuse and precarious job conditions, together with a shift in terms of attitudes and orientations, have brought a progressive de-unionizing of employment relationships especially among young adults.

Instead, higher education has clear consequences for respondents' relational networks. Indeed, higher education levels show a negative correlation with lower social capital (-0.238, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) and positive correlations with middle (+0.182, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) and upper social capital (+0.353, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). This confirms the Weberian principles of *connubium* and *convivium*, showing how social relationships, even among young adults, can still be related to status factors and social positioning. In this sense, higher education levels can be reflected in upper class relational opportunities that are useful for accessing higher status positions or professional chances, while less education can imply possible social closure, thereby confirming the importance of educational credentialism as a generative factor of contemporary inequality.

The next step in the analysis was to observe the possible interaction of education with the different indicators previously described and related to education as a means, an end, and as a conversion factor. Combined with the level of education, these different factors can be entered in a regression model to help interpret overall life satisfaction as a general expression of different good functionings. The previous indicators can be combined in a linear multiple regression model to observe their effects as predictors of overall life satisfaction (the dependent variable), thus exploring whether investment in human capital and its consequent results affect individual

fulfilment. Naturally, the model encounters some implicit limitations. First of all, from a wider conceptual perspective, it should be remembered that the provided indicators are only partial proxies of a limited set of possible factors of life gratification. Nonetheless, some technical restrictions occur in fitting the linear model to the observed data.

In the model summary in Table 2.1, the multiple correlation coefficient R shows a relatively high correlation value (0.629) between the observed and predicted values of the dependent value (overall satisfaction). Nevertheless, a small proportion of variation in the dependent variable itself is explained by the regression model (R Square equal to 0.396 and Adjusted R Square equal to 0.363), indicating that the model only partially fits the data as well as the population. This is also predictable, considering that the model can only approximate some of the countless factors determining overall life satisfaction of individuals.

For similar reasons, observing the analysis of variance in Table 2.2, the Regression Sum of Squares is less than the Residual Sum of Squares, indicating that the model accounts for only part of the variation. Nevertheless, the small significance value of the F statistic shows independent variables do a good job of explaining the variation in the dependent variable. Consequently, the final estimated regression model is as follows:

$$Y_i = -0.345 + 0.006X_1 + 0.266X_2 + 0.066X_3 + 0.257X_4 + 0.041X_5 - 0.423X_6 - 0.208X_7 - 0.028X_8 + 0.059X_9 - 0.020X_{10} + 0.094X_{11} - 0.103X_{12} + 0.209X_{13} - 0.053X_{14} - 0.041X_{15} - 0.109X_{16} + 0.107X_{17}$$

Where:

Y_i = Overall satisfaction for life	X_1 = Education level
X_2 = SIOPS	X_3 = EGP
X_4 = Income	X_5 = Stability and career
X_6 = Forced precariousness	X_7 = Conscious precariousness
X_8 = Affluent/dis-embedded routine	X_9 = Educational success
X_{10} = Higher qualified training	X_{11} = Early access in job market
X_{12} = Negative health conditions	X_{13} = Lower social capital
X_{14} = Middle social capital	X_{15} = Upper social capital
X_{16} = Trade union participation	X_{17} = Perceived positive effect of education on life quality

The observation of the t statistic in Table 2.3, describing the relative importance of the different variables in the model, suggests how different dimensions can be interpreted in the model.

First of all, the reduced intensity in t value for education level confirms that the level of study on its own is neither a positive nor negative predictor of overall life satisfaction. In such a perspective, most indicators related to education as an end result in a slight relative importance for the dependent variable. Even early access to job market shows a higher t value than educational success; also, access to high and qualified training opportunity shows a negative t value. Such results do not mean a defeat for education in itself, more that probably the system is not able to give a value to education as an end. At the same time, this shows the negative effects of over-education on individual fulfilment and underlines the importance of avoiding a late entrance job market for younger generations (thus, encouraging the systemic improvement of school-work experiences). Otherwise, more intense t values are observable in the dimensions related to education as a means. Indeed, overall satisfaction is related to class and status positioning, as well as income levels, reflecting both the importance of perceived personal prestige in social stratification combined with general opportunities. In this sense, education works more effectively as a means (rather than an end), defining itself as a resource for social capabilities in the job market and, consequently, in individual conditions in social stratification. Once again, the difficult stabilization in the job market and the risk of over-education can have negative effects on individual fulfilment. The model provides significantly intense negative t values both for conditions of forced precariousness and for those situations where flexibility is perceived as an unavoidable price for gaining better job conditions. Considering the capabilities to participate effectively in society, the t values reflects negative predictors of global satisfaction poor health conditions (quite predictable) and trade union participation (probably because, as seen before, this is more closely related to lower social conditions). By contrast, a significant positive predictor is lower social capital. This aspect can reflect the fact that ordinary conditions (rather than higher status positioning) are more common among youngsters. Consequently, this reflects better peer-proximity and more satisfying relationships experienced by those with lower social capital rather than in socialization with an upper class network. Finally, a significant positive predictor of overall life functioning is the perceived positive effect of

education on life quality, suggesting the importance of experiencing a conscious path in education.

Table 2.1. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	R Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.629(a)	.396	.363	.79922979

a Predictors: (Constant), Perceived positive effect of education on overall quality of life, Negative health conditions, Trade union participation, Educational success, Middle social capital, Income, Affluent/disembedded routine, Stability and career, Early access to job market, Conscious precariousness, Forced precariousness, Higher and qualified training, Upper social capital, Lower social capital, EGP, Education level, SIOPS.

Table 2.2. ANOVA(b)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	129.062	17	7.592	11.885	.000(a)
	Residual	196.741	308	.639		
	Total	325.802	325			

a Predictors: (Constant), Perceived positive effect of education on overall quality of life, Negative health conditions, Trade union participation, Educational success, Middle social capital, Income, Affluent/disembedded routine, Stability and career, Early access in job market, Conscious precariousness, Forced precariousness, Higher and qualified training, Upper social capital, Lower social capital, EGP, Education level, SIOPS; b Dependent Variable: Overall satisfaction.

Table 2.3. Coefficients(a)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-.345	.357		-.968	.334
Education level (X1)	.006	.020	.020	.284	.777
SIOPS (X2)	.266	.074	.271	3.587	.000
EGP (X3)	.066	.028	.179	2.371	.018
Income (X4)	.257	.049	.249	5.221	.000
Stability and career (X5)	.041	.047	.042	.874	.383
Forced precariousness (X6)	-.423	.049	-.414	-8.686	.000
Conscious precariousness (X7)	-.208	.046	-.217	-4.542	.000
Affluent/disembedded routine (X8)	-.028	.049	-.028	-.575	.566
Educational success (X9)	.059	.047	.061	1.255	.210
Higher and qualified training (X10)	-.020	.048	-.020	-.417	.677
Early access in job market (X11)	.094	.050	.095	1.860	.064
Negative health conditions (X12)	-.103	.045	-.113	-2.280	.023
Lower social capital (X13)	.209	.056	.217	3.709	.000
Middle social capital X14)	-.053	.054	-.053	-.978	.329
Upper social capital (X15)	-.041	.056	-.042	-.732	.465
Trade union participation (X16)	-.109	.061	-.089	-1.793	.074
Perceived positive effect of education on life quality (X17)	.107	.048	.111	2.219	.027

a Dependent Variable: Overall satisfaction.

Conclusions: suggestions and future perspectives on applying the Capability Approach to education

Conclusions of the research reflect on the methodological use of the Capability Approach in studying education; on the interpretation of empirical results concerning the relationship between education and the different life functionings; and suggest possible policy recommendations.

Starting with the methodology, as noted by Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash (2014), the application of the Capability Approach to the realm of educational studies is less consolidated compared to other research areas, and further analytical and empirical examination are needed. However, social scientists should be aware that the Capability Approach is not an explanatory theory (Carpenter, 2009; Robeyns, 2011), therefore, it does not explain the causes of educational inequality, but provides a tool with which conceptualize and evaluate it. In this sense, a main challenge refers to the operationalization of the Capability Approach, posing several conceptual, methodological, and empirical challenges that are not easy to resolve and that have been only roughly sketched out in this essay.

Considering the research results, it emerges that matters mainly derive from systemic conditions and are even emphasized by socioeconomic recession. Indeed, the empirical evidence highlights the effects of educational credentialism in accessing higher occupational status and, thus, acts as a factor of social stratification. Nevertheless, the main problems reflect the extreme difficulties of the contemporary job market, particularly for youngsters suffering unemployment and precarious job conditions. This has to be combined with the fact that education faces social closure factors, differently determining opportunities and reproducing inequalities among individuals, not only among the lesser or highly educated, but also on equal terms of education.

This explains how, even at equal higher educational levels, an individual can encounter long lasting job precariousness or access to higher occupational status. For some respondents, early access to the job market can represent a loss and for others an opportunity, permitting them to invest in other life dimensions thanks to an earlier occupational stability.

In terms of policy recommendations, the empirical results suggest once more the importance of a better combination of study and job experiences while still in schooling. Similarly, this reflects the importance of larger investment to make the Italian national educational system more

vocationally specific, in order to reduce the long-standing gap between education system and labour market. This leads, necessarily, to a focus on the analysis of school-to-work transitions, since nowadays the prolongation of educational processes and the increasing flexibility of labour markets in western societies have led to higher complexity of what used to be referred to as 'school-to-work transition' (Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). Further studies related to what extent cyclical, structural and institutional factors explain cross-national variation in such transition and in youth labour market integration are required.

Further enlarging the Capability Approach in education, it will be crucial to deepen the different aspects. The first concerns the role and meaning of education in present society. As Tikly and Barrett (2010) state, "a focus on capabilities can assist in thinking through what it might mean to be educated in the global era and how this relates to notions of development. This redefines looking at quality education as developing capabilities which society and individuals have reason to value" (p. 12).

The second question suggested by the application of the Capability Approach to education is how to evaluate the roles of education towards human wellbeing. This implies considering the plurality of dimensions characterizing personal wellbeing as well as its subjective nature, since the definition of what people value (and consider important for his/her wellbeing) should be open to diverse conceptions of good, justice, and advantage (Sen, 2009)⁹. It shows, therefore, how different evaluative spaces (resources, opportunities, outcomes) as well as a plurality of factors (internal and external) affecting the wellbeing-generation process have to be contemplated. Thus, according to the Capability Approach, 'human wellbeing', as a major concern of education, primarily depends not on the scopes and scales of use of material, social and cultural commodities (which may be mediated by educational attempts), nor on the doings and beings that persons might have actually realized, but rather on the scopes and scales of the freedoms human beings have reason to choose and value (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). To conclude, referring to the Europe 2020 strategy, the policy goal of *social inclusion* necessarily includes the Capability Approach in recognizing the task of society to find ways of removing

⁹ It has to be reminded that the Capability Approach sees human progress, ultimately, as "the progress of human freedom and capability to lead the kind of lives that people have reason to value" (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 43).

obstacles to capability in education, welfare, and economic systems. All individuals and groups should have not only the opportunity to realize their full potential, but the level of functioning they aspire to achieve. In this scenario, clearly education and training are core instruments for generating capability; the emphasis, however, needs to move away from the narrow concept of capability related exclusively to labour market functioning, to functioning in the wider set of personal and social domains, through which full wellbeing is ultimately achieved (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy, & Bynner, 2004). Considering the current global financial crisis and the shaping of new forms of social inequalities, it is ever more important to re-elaborate the relationships between education and social inequalities, improving education as an opportunity for individuals to overcome social inequalities, thereby enhancing their personal capabilities for employability and overall wellbeing.

While the article derives from several discussions between the authors, Valeria Pandolfini has written the sections *Education and the achievement of personal wellbeing in the capability perspective*, *Education as an end, a means, or a conversion factor? The different roles of education in individual capabilities*, *What people value in education. The Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory and Conclusions: suggestions and future perspectives on applying the Capability Approach to education*; Stefano Poli has written the sections *Education and life trajectories in a capability perspective: some evidence from an Italian case study* and *Young adults in a flexible labor market: different rewards from educational investment*.

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