Challenges of the capability paradigm in a local adult education system.

A case study of the Provincia Autonoma di Trento (Italy)

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Abstract: In Italy the supply of Lifelong Learning (LLL) is shaped as a system of local services addressed to an unspecified educational demand that is acknowledged by public institutions only in quantitative terms. Thus, the Italian system of Lifelong Learning also lacks legitimation in the public opinion. The present paper presents the case of the Provincia Autonoma of Trento whose particular system of LLL is based on a long tradition of supply and a high degree of internal differentiation; moreover it is highly fragmented and very bureaucratized. The paper draws upon an empirical study[2], conducted in 2008, which highlights the main challenges that a modern LLL system would have to face if it aims to develop from an assistance-ritualized approach to an active and personal capability-oriented one.

*Keywords***:** sociology of education, local welfare, match demand/supply of Lifelong Learning, capability for education, stratification of educational organisations, Provincia Autonoma of Trento.

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[2] This essay presents a set of reflections based on the research report *Education for adults in the Provincia Autonoma of Trento: A general frame of reference,* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica di Milano, Milan, November 2008*,* where I took part as editor and consultant of field research. The scientific co-ordinator was professor Michele Colasanto; the research group was made up by: Maddalena Colombo, Licia Allegretta, Bruno Bortoli.

1.The Italian system of education for adults: fragmentation and a negative social reputation

As several European documents point out, Italy is not among the best performing countries in Europe in terms of the provision of adult education; the current Italian rates of adult participation in Lifelong Learning activities (6,3%) are significantly lower than the benchmark figure established by the Lisbon strategy (12,5%) and are also lower than the Eu27 mean (9,6%). In Italy – although rates are increasing in recent years - Lifelong learning cannot be considered a "reality" (EU Comm., 2008). Before discussing the reasons for this poor performance, a brief historical review is useful.

In Italy the system of services for adult education was established at the end of the XIX century with the emergence of the *Università popolari* [literally, "popular universities"] (Rosada, 1975), as a result of the concern of a progressive minority that believed in education as a political, moral and civic duty that should be exercised throughout one's life. The adult education system was formally acknowledged across the whole of Italy in 1947, when "popular schools for illiterate people" (still operating until 1982) were founded. The economic changes of the post-war period and the social need for wider primary education and professional training for the whole population led to the conquest, in 1973, of the right to "150 hours" of schooling, an amount of time that every citizen could spend in a given year in order to improve one's level of education. The subsequent development of the Adult education system took place in 1997 with the O. M. (Ministry Ordinance) n. 455, which sought to set up new public services for adults, the *Centri territoriali permanenti* (CTPs; "Permanent Local Centres") located mainly within lower secondary schools[3]. This legislation offered a significant impulse to the whole Lifelong education system, facilitating a re-entry in education via daytime and evening courses for both younger and older individuals who had left school at an earlier time.

CTP centres are defined by law as "*places where people's needs are intercepted, where all adult education and training initiatives can be developed, negotiated and managed, and where information about adult*

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[3] This type of courses are aimed at the completion of compulsory education (First level Secundary education Licence).

education is collected and advertised". In order to fulfil these objectives, the law established some priorities among the actions of CTPs (reception and guidance, primary and secondary literacy, development and consolidation of basic and specialist skills, recovery of basic competencies for an active participation in social life, professional qualifications, and the re-entry in education of marginal persons and/or the mentally ill) and clear requirements for the access to CTPs (limited to adults without compulsory school qualifications or, if qualified, to adults who intend to go back to education after a long period in employment).

The D.M. (Ministerial Decree) n. 112, passed in 1998, regulated the normative competence of CTP centres. The new legislation established that local authorities (city councils, provinces, regions) should organize adult education activities as follows: regions would be responsible for the creation of an integrated program of education and training for adults; whereas provinces, city councils and mountain communities would be responsible for the provision of actual services and initiatives concerning adult education, for the prevention of school dropout and for ensuring equal opportunities.

During the 1990s, adult education in Italy has also developed thanks to the support of the ESF (*European Social Fund*), in particular via specific measures addressing Lifelong Learning (Axis 3 – Human resources, Policy field C of the PON – *Operative National Program*). Another fundamental tool for developing Lifelong learning initiatives in Italy has been the *Social Pact for Development and Occupation*, subscribed in 1997 by Government, Enterprises and Trade Unions, which established the constitution of the *Interprofessional Fund for Continuous Training*. This fund has supported a large variety of initiatives for workers and the unemployed, in accordance with both industry and local training requirements, such as modularization, interdisciplinarity, flexibility, and the experimentation of different types of work-time reduction (even under the "150 hours" regulation).

In order to overcome the risk of overlap and fragmentation between the supply of "continuous" and that of "permanent" vocational training (the former being more specialized, the latter more general), in 2000 the main providers of Lifelong Learning initiatives (Government, Regions, and Local authorities) signed a Common Agreement for Adult Education (*Accordo Unificato, 2nd march 2000)*. This document assigns CTPs and other adult education services the main task of offering every citizen a

second chance in terms of education and occupation, and clearly locates the education of adults within the wider field of citizens' rights and the battle against social exclusion – according to the EU Memorandum on Education and Occupation (EU Comm., 2000).

In the last decade (2000-2010) the rise of a new social demand for adult education, not aptly received by CPTs and private agents, has further complicated the Italian context. New pressures, on the one hand, and the lack of a unified frame of reference at a normative level, on the other, have led the Italian adult education system to a sort of incapacity (or "optical distortion"; see Farinelli, 2008; Miur, 2006) to interpret the current needs of Lifelong Learning, which include a variety of social situations and learner profiles.

The strengthening of CTP centres postulated in 2000 by the Common Agreement has often caused an increase of heterogeneity among local agents in adult education planning and practice. A recent study by Isfol (2007) argues that local initiatives are spread out across the national territory without an organic rationale. Given this fact, they are suffering from the following weakness points :

1)   precariousness and high turnover of teachers/trainers;
2)   lack of effective activation of regional/local committees, as stipulated in the Common Agreement (2000), for the deliberation of adult education initiatives;
3)   separation of political and administrative competencies among local authorities between education/vocational training and work-employment sector of services;
4)   reduced budget of CTPs, which prevents them from applying for EU funds and programmes.

All these factors are related to a structural and cultural divide between declarations of principle and concrete political practices. On the one hand, because the normative tools are primitive and confusing, several activities are not carried out effectively. On the other hand, the real difficulty in understanding and interpreting the social needs of adult education means that the quality of services decreases and the historical representation of this sector a as purveyor of "weak services" is reinforced. As argued in the EU Memorandum (EU Comm., 2000), without motivation to learn people don't have access to Lifelong Learning; and even where the access might be free and easy, people won't persist in Lifelong Learning activities if they

perceive this experience as negative. In sum, a better understanding of the social demand of Lifelong education is needed.

A national study (Istat, 2008) confirms all of the above: participation of 18-64 years olds to Lifelong Learning activities is motivated primarily by the desire to increase and widen one's knowledge, skills and competence base with reference to specific areas of interest (44%); only 21,4% of Lifelong Learning users demands an improvement to their daily lives, 15,4% are looking to meet new friends, 15% aim for a certificate, 13,4% are motivated by prospects of a new job. Those who are obliged to attend a Lifelong Learning course are 13% and report less motivation and commitment.

With respect to the main reasons that keep adults out of permanent education, Isfol (2003) and Spagnuolo (2008) both report the same finding: lack of time outside of one's working hours, lack of available disposable income to support course attendance, difficulties in balancing work-family duties. Despite the new opportunities offered by the Law n. 53/2000 on parental leave, few workers as yet have benefitted from the adult education offer.

The adult education system in Italy, therefore, is not at the beginning but its progresses are slow and negligible. In the present paper my aim will be to highlight some of the main factors that have contributed to this lack of progress, which I argue are embedded in the cultural and organisational framework of the adult education system. My argument is that the Italian system suffers from a "culture of literacy" that has affected the provision of adult education since its origins and which has promoted a negative social representation of Lifelong Learning services as poor and weak, targeted only to a vulnerable minority of the population. Nowadays, the importance of Lifelong Learning as tool of active citizenship for all is a principle acknowledged worldwide, and the debate is beginning to emerge also in Italy, but the consequences of the practical application of the new paradigm (what we are defining as the "active social welfare paradigm", which also includes education) are less acknowledged. The following study aims to contribute to this debate, focusing on the local dimension of the "welfare of education" (Colombo, 2001) and on the central role played by teachers as activators of capability.

2.The case of the Provincia Autonoma di Trento (PAT): study design and general profile of the adult education system

The case study presented here is based on a survey carried out in 2008 by the Department of Sociology of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milano and commissioned by IPRASE Trento (Istituto provinciale per la ricerca, l'aggiornamento e la sperimentazione in educazione). The aims of the study were to analyse the supply and social demand of adult education in Trentino in the light of investments made on this area by public institutions[4]. Although the state of adult education services in Trentino is more advanced compared to the rest of the nation (PAT, 2006), nonetheless a systematic review of the efficacy of these initiatives and on the system of governance is needed.

The main objectives of the survey are:

1)   to provide an overview of the offer of adult education initiatives, including a mapping of all types of providers and contexts (formal, non-formal, informal): school establishments and CTPs[5] (daytime and evening courses), courses for the elderly and organized by charities (free time courses) or employers' organizations (vocational training courses); private agents of training (ESF courses).

2)   to provide an analysis of both the subjective and objective features of the new social demand for adult education, in order to understand the relationship between demand and supply;

3)   to provide recommendations on how to qualify the current supply, both in terms of qualifications of trainers/teachers and of governance at a local level.

The state of the supply is investigated through a set of interviews to key informants employed in all institutions which activate and manage adult education initiatives. The interviews enabled us to collect both *quantitative*

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[4] It is worth mentioning that the Provincia di Trento has statute of autonomy which regulates all taxation and public expenses at the local level, outside of ordinary Italian State law. This affects the main cultural characteristics of public governance of institutions in the Provincia di Trento, less familistic and more focused on stateness if compared with the rest of Italy (Saraceno, 1994; Ferrera, 1996).
[5] CTPs in the Provincia Autonoma di Trento are called "EDA centres" (Adult Education Centres).

data[6] (number, type and length of courses; number and socio-demographic features of beneficiaries; human, material and financial resources devolved; etc.) and *qualitative* data[7] (how providers inform users about initiatives, how they verify outcomes, critical elements, areas for improvement, future developments). The local scenario of adult education initiatives is wide and fragmented: the mapping exercise counted 405 modules of adult education provided by 43 organizations (both public and private) in two academic years (2006/07 – 2007/08). This is a significant educational offer which benefits a population that seems to be overeducated if compared with national rates of education/literacy.

The progress made by the Lifelong Learning system in the PAT is also confirmed by Table 1.

Data from the interviews suggests positive outcomes have been reached by diverse means:

- the offer of Lifelong education is not restricted strictly to opportunities based in schools, but includes initiatives promoted by cultural associations and third sector organizations addressed to older and/or retired people;
- the offer responds to needs at different levels: the retrieval of basic skills, acquisition of higher level skills, access to formal credentials, cultural improvement, entertainment and socialization, development of new interests;
- positive impact as a result of the introduction of individual education "vouchers", provided to under 45-year-olds at risk of unemployment;
- a wide supply of courses funded by the ESF, which has generated an increase in demand for on the job qualifications (with a surplus of requests up to 33% of available places).

Table 1: Lifelong Learning Index* in the Provincia Autonoma di Trento; compared with local, national and European rates, 1999-2006**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006

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[6] A structured questionnaire has been submitted to 43 institutions/centres which operated locally in that period.

[7] A half structured interview has been submitted to 13 significant witnesses, representing the whole set of institutions/centres promoting Lifelong learning at a local level in that period.

European Union (27 countries)				6,9	8,2	8,2	9,2	9,1
European Union (25 countries)				7,3	8,6	8,7	9,7	9,6
European Union (15 countries)				7,8	9,3	9,3	10,6	10,4
Italy	1,4	3,6	4,5	4,4	4,5	6,2	5,8	6,1
North- East of Italy	1,8	4,3	5,4	5,3	5,4	6,7	6,1	6,6
Provincia Autonoma di Trento	1,6	3,9	4,9	4,2	4,2	8,2	7,9	8,6

* Individuals aged 25 to 64 who stated that they received education or training in the last 4 weeks preceding the survey
** Series 2002-2006 for European means
Source: Eurostat – Labour Force survey

Despite the significant results achieved, the local system of Lifelong Learning is affected by the following weaknesses:
- the amount of initiatives doesn't guarantee organic coherence to adult education policy, but rather increases fragmentation and the "atomisation" of users resulting in the lack of integration among institutions and agents;
- dropout rates in adult courses are quite significant (i.e., 31% out of the ESF-courses attendants);
- all providers are facing the lack of an organic regulative framework as expected according to the Provincial Law n. 5/2006; in practice, within the local system the roles of each agent are not well defined, nor are the ways of operating or the availability of resources.
- given the scarcity of co-ordination and supervision on diverse providers by the superior authority (the Provincia), those who manage activities demand greater standardization in terms of: a) balance of users' skills (input-output of the education treatment), b) assessment of how vouchers support the real needs of users, c) criteria for recruitment and evaluation teachers/trainers, d) ways to cope with users' mobility constraints (particularly those of women and the elderly).
In conclusion, the overview of the local case study outlines a well developed system of services (supported by abundant resources) which

might run the risk of dissipation in terms of final outcomes and social legitimation. In other words, this kind of welfare structure seems to be a far cry from the so-called "active welfare" (Van Berkel, Moller 2002), because services are regulated more by the principle of availability of resources rather than by the desire to mobilize and activate adult citizens, for their own wellbeing, through Lifelong education.

What is still obscure to local authorities are the mechanisms of functioning and the relationship between demand and supply of Lifelong Learning activities. Both providers and local management ignore how they are perceived by the adult population and how learners evaluate training experiences upon termination; in other words, given that the adult Learning system is scarcely visible, its outcomes remain unknown. For this reason, a series of focus group interviews with teachers and learners[8] were carried out in the final phase of the study, in order to collect disparate opinions from all types of users.

3.A reading of the adult learning process in the PAT system using the capability paradigm

The final part of the study thus aims to analyze the main critical points emerging from the local scenario of Lll in order to recommend further advancements for the supply and organisation of local services.

More in general, there's a key question that guides this inquiry, concerning the teaching profile and the learning approach they use in all types of services. Particularly, our aim is to verify to what extent teachers of PAT are meeting the objectives set out by the capability approach to social welfare. Recalling the theoretical frame, "capability paradigm" refers to the well known theory of wellbeing and social welfare developed by Amartya Sen (1992, 1997) which re-elaborates the utilitarian roots of the conventional approach to development. In Sen's terms, capability means the *capacity to reach satisfying levels of wellbeing, that depend not only upon the individual subject, but which are also necessarily imbricated within the set of opportunities and tools that society offer or denies*

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[8] In autumn 2007 have been carried out two focus groups with ten participants each. In the first group have been recruited adults 18-65 years attending various types of Lll activities; in the second, teachers and trainers of adult classes in such a variety of activities.

individuals (Leonardi, 2009, p. 32). Declining this theoretical background into more concrete actions (Van Berkel – Moller 2002; Bonvin – Farvaque 2003) to be carried out during the teaching-learning process, one can assess if Lll activities in PAT are able to:

- improve co-ordination of agency and wellbeing, increasing the capacity of functioning of each beneficiary (Nussbaum – Sen 1993; Sen 1997);

- promote self-awareness in learners/users as citizens with capacity;
- promote individuals' autonomy with respect to all needs related to knowledge, information, communication, social and civic action;
- oppose institutionalisation and dependence from the offer of interventions/services;
- offer the same possibility of benefiting from learning services/experiences to all, in particular the most vulnerable people in the welfare-to-work (Lodigiani 2008);
- improving the daily life of disadvantaged people, supporting greater activeness and independent.

I assume these statements as hypothesis to verify by the outcomes from the focus group interviews.

One of the views that emerged from the collection of participants' opinions was that this area of services appears characterized by a *scarce ability to transmit a sense of continuity*, which is a basic value of Lifelong Learning as a tool for developing capability and opposing vulnerability (EC Comm., 2000, p.8).

Despite the fact that so many energies are employed to meet the needs of new beneficiaries (adults and younger people in precarious points of their life; immigrants; women who decide to enter the job market, etc.), few efforts seem to be spent in order to maintain their commitment as participants, with the result that most of the learners leave the service after their first experience. Leaving occurs for several reasons, personal as well as systemic, which can, at times, be quite trivial and concrete, and include:

- the turn-over of teachers;
- the lack of novelty in the layout of courses;
- the low cost of courses (which decreases the image of learning as a valuable experience),
- difficulties in the use of tutoring devices/facilities (vouchers and so on), non- userfriendliness of ICTs within the learning approach.

If *fragmentation* and a *poor social reputation* are embedded within these learning practices and structures, then the organisation of modules and courses for adults must be structured taking well into account their difficulties and disagreements.

Considering the heterogeneity of users in terms of social status (Lifelong learning involves both young, adult, and elderly people, those in employment and the unemployed, locals and foreigners, etc.), many reasons seem to be at the root of the weak sense of belonging experienced by learners with respect to adult education proposals. Learners interviewed report having gone though a "crisis" phase during their learning experience, due to a sort of rise-and-fall tendency in their motivation and personal energies. The risk of early dropout is reduced by an enhancement of the teacher-learner relationship, which operates to bolster learner's self-esteem levels.

Indeed, the fact of attending adult learning courses implies that learners easily perceive themselves in negative terms: as ignorant and/or inadequate, with a high degree of embarrassment or shame when subjects appear difficult, strange, or unintelligible. As the course progresses, users gradually develop greater maturity, but often only at an unconscious level because their sense of confusion is so strong that it obscures their effective progresses. One of the main difficulties in adult education is the assessment of outcomes: the older the learner, the more s/he needs external evaluation by teachers or tutors. Only through the development of a meaningful *teacher-learner relationship* do learners become aware of their own advancements and skills development, despite the fact that a sense of inadequacy may still persist.

Other elements of the learning process, on the other hand, are less appreciated by users, such as:

- the relationships with classmates and the use of *cooperative learning* strategies in the classroom, which are perceived by adult users as factors of distress;
- the use of a *laboratory approach* based on the "situational application of knowledge" might appear useless and dispersive compared with a more frontal and directive approach.

Thus, dealing with an heterogeneous multitude of adult learners means coping with the ambivalent impact (which often includes both negative and positive factors) of their attendance: on the one hand, a strong motivation to

learn, high degree of independence in thinking processes, and enthusiastic participation; on the other hand, the "volatility" of skills and cultural notions, elements of conservationism, a fear of novelty, and greater tutoring needs.

Given this fact, the role played by teachers, not only in the initial phase of reception and involvement of learners, but also later, during the critical moments of crisis and decision-making requires great sensibility. The art of teaching in these cases consists in guiding and supporting learners in working though their own difficulties and ambivalences, helping them to overcome their sense of confusion and inferiority, being careful to avoid creating relationships that are too asymmetrical (i.e., the "transfer performance mechanism"; see Catarsi, 2001, p. 114). The role of adult trainers is more akin to that of a coach[9] than that of a knowledge expert; it is vital therefore that the trainer feel not as a weak professional but, on the contrary, that s/her be able to transmit and communicate a deep-felt sense of pride and a strong motivation in relation to his/her own work.

In terms of *teachers' attitudes and performance*, the results of the PAT study are *positive*. The majority of teachers employed in CTPs and ESF courses are motivated, have a high degree of consideration for and sensitivity towards learners' difficulties, and are open to the development of a one-to-one approach. Motivations for teaching to adults are related to:
-    a sense of challenge (a drive to reach ambitious purposes),
-    the desire to extend the "normal" teaching experience to non-usual targets,
-    feeling more at ease with older people than with children or younger people.

Despite the great amount of energies they devote to their job, some teachers regret the fact that outcomes often are not satisfying in terms of increasing capacities on the learner side and empowering teachers on the other side. The *negative* aspects of working in adult education include:
-    a huge dissipation of energies in face-to-face interaction,

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[9] Coaching can represent a new vision of the teacher-learner relationship which doesn't neglect the functionality of teachers' knowledge, but evaluates the feed-back coming from participants in the educational context; it is a personal centered model (Gardner, 2005, p. 98). Clearly it makes use of relational skills which are not always available in the ordinary context of lessons, such as active listening, dialogue techniques, and the critique of prejudice.

- negative consideration by colleagues employed in formal education,
- impossibility of building a "stable professionalism" because of courses changing day by day and year after year, making it difficult to structure any type of professional routine.

According to the teachers/trainers interviewed, adult trainers must have a *strong vocation* for this job and must be motivated to choose it over and above another alternative; if this condition is not met serious consequences arise in terms of scarce results and frustration[10].

The relevance of evaluation is underscored by A. Sen and all scholars of the "capability approach", in terms of offering a general identification of what has value for functioning and the capacity of functioning (Sen, 1992, p. 68). In the PAT case, teachers measure the quality of their performance though self-evaluation, using subjective indicators, at the end of each course: i.e. positive feedback is generated if learners return after leaving or if they ask the teacher for assistance in external learning tasks. Focus group participants firmly disagree with the concept of external evaluations on the basis that the adult trainer is a "special" job category, which cannot be assessed by the same criteria adopted in standard teacher evaluation. For them, the professional profile criteria of success in their job are difficult to pinpoint, to report, or to communicate externally; nevertheless, all experienced trainers become sensitive to the results of their efforts when learners provide feedback on what they have really learned.

This learning circle between trainer and learner can be seen as a sort of "peer-reflective" relationship (Clarke et al, 2007), which enables both to construct autonomous capacities. As a matter of fact, the main element of gratification reported by the trainers interviewed is achieved at the end of a teaching session, when teachers feel that themselves have learned something from learners. This is particularly frequent in the interaction with immigrants (who are purveyors of great knowledge and experience, even if often they cannot express it in a foreign language) or older people (who are bearers of long histories, traditions, and forgotten professions). To

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[10] A case in point is that of many EDA teachers who have approached adults classes for accidental and unplanned reasons (availability of job places, preference for evening work, proximity to residence, etc..). Looking for more gratification, those teachers have changed their initial motivation into a more deliberate "vocation", as suggested by the relationship with learners (Miur, 2006, p. 244).

activate this "transfer" of knowledge and capacities teachers need to have certain characteristics such as: *continuity*, *transparency*, and *openness* to the student's critique and two-way evaluation. Here are some of the main interesting interview quotes collected during the focus group enquiry:

> "If you have this continuity, you learn from them, and then you have something to give them."   (Int. number 9, EDA teacher).
> "My experience as an adult trainer is absolutely satisfying, we all have this complex evaluation system according to which we assess learning achievements, capacities, skills (of students) but also teachers have tough evaluations, every time you feel you're being evaluated more and more... you tend to receive from student's assessment indications for your own job, and I must say that results are really good." (Int. 11, ESF teacher).
> "I don't care about my personal or professional reputation, my biggest gratification comes from students not from colleagues…it's an evaluation that takes place over time …doing evening classes requires a great psychological stability on the part of teachers because when you stand facing twenty adults, who are listening to you ready to criticize everything or make claims for personal attention, you can feel a huge distress if you're not self-confident or transparent" (Int. 14, evening course teacher).

In conclusion, the professional profile of teachers emerges as the main critical point when interpreting adult education in the light of the capability paradigm. Teachers must be fairly empowered in order to be "capacity managers" or "capacity promoters" within the one-to-one relation with adult learners, especially if the latter belong to weaker social categories.

The main factors of weakness, which prevent teachers from meeting the objectives of empowering and developing the capacities of adult learners are: the variety of professional backgrounds of PAT teachers and the fact that teachers are employed in a variety of activities for adult learners beyond the duty of teaching. In several PAT centres/schools teachers are employed also for a wide range of collateral tasks, including: information, career guidance, laboratory organization, administrative management of courses, workbook design, etc. The result is a widespread sense of confusion among teachers as to what their role and its functions are (eg., management, education, social care, tutoring, etc.), which operates as an obstacle to their specialization. Another critical point concerns the recruitment of teacher: none of the centres/schools involved in the survey used the obtainment of specific credits and skills for adult education as

criteria of selection. Finally, the activation of apprenticeships and the updating of professional skills for teachers/trainers are occurring in a situated, as opposed to a planned fashion, due to the scarcity of resources and lack of tools/courses for improving the profession (this true not only in Trento but for the whole of Italy).

Thus, in spite of their openness and reflexivity concerning their job experiences with adult learners, trainers and teachers of PAT adult education organizations are not facilitated in becoming "creative" professionals, as would be required by the capability approach. Even if they act as capacity-managers at the interactive level, at the systemic level they do not meet adequate acknowledgements (nor incentives) as such.

4.Conclusions: challenges of the capability approach concerning local Lifelong Learning policy

Lifelong education is located at the very core of the general reform of social welfare in western countries. In the light of current individualization processes and the decrease of stability affecting normative and fiscal regimes, Lifelong Learning ensures stability, continuity, and protection. Lifelong Learning represents a defence against social vulnerability and distress and a chance to promote individual empowerment and social cohesion.

In spite of all these significant social tasks, the system of adult education services is often organised in contingent and ill-defined ways, at the crossroads between a bureaucratic and a market-oriented spirit; encompassing rational and irrational ways of functioning, formal and informal activities. When national Lifelong Learning policies are lacking or of poor quality (Meghnaghi, 2006) researchers must focus their attention on local agents and the local system of services. At this level it is easier to assess to what extent the adult Lifelong Learning offer fits the principles of the capability approach, not specifically in terms of increasing employability (sociology of work – sociology of occupation)[11] but rather in the sense of producing self-improvement of adult learners, developing the

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[11] The issue of employability is not so crucial in Provincia Autonoma of Trento, where occupation rates are higher than in the rest of Italy (Istat, 2008).

capacities to learn, promoting active citizenship, increasing personal initiatives and supporting the freedom to choose one's desired life course through education (sociology of education). My primary aim, therefore, is to outline the contribution of adult education to personal and collective wellbeing; secondly, I want to highlight the consequences of adopting this approach in the planning and evaluation of local policy in the field of adult education.

The wide set of adult learning experiences undertaken in the PAT, both formal and informal, is of great interest in order to develop the potential prototype of a local system of Lifelong Learning in the light of the capability paradigm. Long term classes for achieving certificates (ISCED 2-3-4) are located in the same establishments (or in very proximate establishments) as short courses for language and ICT improvement; professional modules are connected with cultural itineraries; public and private trainers are often working with the same users and invited to collaborate each other. In this way, it is more likely that all types of learners can improve different capacities at the same time, ranging from basic skills (linguistic, social and cultural) to transversal or specialised skills (professional advancement, local knowledge, and so on).

The condition necessary for the obtainment of this result is the development of a greater level of systemic integration among services in order to develop "a universalistic public policy addressed to the generality of citizens to boost and support personal investments in self-education" (Farinelli, 2006, p. 173). Such a governance strategy implies (4 recommendations):

-      abandoning a market-oriented approach to Lifelong Learning, which legitimates only funded initiatives (either by users or via public funds), and "cultivating" new potential fields of interest and learning approaches; in order to achieve this aim, the presence of voluntary organizations targeted to all types of potential adult learners (such as the University "della terza età" (University of the Third Age), University Popolare trentina, Centro servizi volontariato, Associazione genitori, Associazione oratori, etc.) are of great value;

-      balancing the autonomy of adult education centres/schools with the needs of other stakeholders, for example in terms of sharing the set of evaluation criteria among services. In such a networked system of assessment students' mobility is not only enabled but also supported,

leading to a greater freedom of choice for everyone. Moreover, it would also reduce the risk of human capital dissipation in the passage from one experience to another;

-       recognizing and resolving the main weaknesses of the current system (mentioned above):

a) Lifelong Learning services cannot be in line with the capability approach if they do not meet the need for orientation and guidance that characterizes adult targets. None of beneficiaries of Lifelong Learning represents a social category in him/herself, but every potential student is a personal agent who asks for information, freedom of participation, and equity in evaluation. A network of services should provide a wide range of guidance devices (vouchers, reception classes, orientation desks, on line consultants, etc.) coordinated and not overlapping, that follow the student in his/her itinerary in education and social inclusion/participation;

b) another weakness point to overcome is the relative lack of ICT and e-learning devices for adult and elderly learners: as mentioned elsewhere (Colombo – Landri, 2009), e-learning facilitates the "disruption" of the repetitiveness of one's daily routine and the materialization of a new type of sociality, both of which are motivations connected to adult participation in learning activity (as ways to avoid isolation and tediousness). No reasons subsist for neglecting ICT as a fundamental tool for learning and self-empowerment among older and more experienced people;

-       upgrading teachers' and adult trainers' professional profiles. There is a need for serious alignment of the cultural and professional backgrounds of adult teachers/trainers (who, nowadays, are the most various and disparate) by specifying what are the required skills and attitudes necessary to become "capacity-promoters and managers". There is also a need to develop guidelines for adult learning teachers, given that no one, specific vocational in-service training is currently provided. The PAT key informants interviewed suggest connecting teams of professionals with academic experts from the various disciplines, in order to foster the creation of workbooks, exercises, and learning objects addressed to different target users (young, adult, elderly, foreign). Other suggestions are related to the creation of compulsory internship training with adults, the inspection of trainers during the conduction of their daily activities, and professional mentoring and/or tutoring.

In conclusion, the capability approach doesn't suggests any quick-fix remedies for adult education and Lifelong Learning; rather, it indicates a general philosophy of intervention. At the centre of the renewal of the Lifelong Learning system stands the universal right to participate, granted to all types of citizens and expressed in terms of the *right to freely choose that which supports one's wellbeing in every phase of one's life*. Currently, adult trainees and trainers in Lifelong Learning activities are parts of the same "space of evalutation" (A. Sen) within which capability and functioning are cultivated and interact at both the micro and the macro level. In this interplay, given the crucial position assumed by trainers, a clear priority emerges in terms of best practice for local Lifelong Learning organisation and policy: a certain cultural background, professional motivation, incentives to be creative, peer-reflection methods, and shared evaluation criteria are points to be examined by local institutions, at least until a wider national (normative as well as pragmatic) policy will be passed in Italy according to EU recommendations.

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