

Expectations and Young Hopes: a research with graduate students in Education

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Abstract

In the last few years, most of Italian literature on adult education reported a change in the widespread conception of adulthood. In the recent past adults were associated with features of stability, certainty, security and the current generation of forties has grown up with many illusions: the permanent position at work and the stability of family relationships. The reality is very different and today's adults are managing situations that profoundly differ from the past, characterized by flexibility and insecurity, whether at work, both in human relations. On the other hand today's twenties seem more prepared to live in an uncertain world, and their vision on future and on hope is changing. They accept more consciously to essay with the unforeseen and they feel better in temporariness. This paper reflects on the nature of hope as experienced by young adults living in the North East of Italy. The aim of this article is understand how the concept of hope is connected to the personal and professional idea of future of the "new adults". This qualitative study analyses the data from 18 interviews with students three years university graduated in Education in three Italian Universities (Ferrara, Padua, Trieste), discussing the orientation towards hope is perceived: as a condition required for the individual wellbeing or as a competence to learn for the future. Research questions of this exploratory study are: How young adults with a degree in Education think about their future? Is their representation hopeless? What kind of hope? Which is the idea of hope derived from their university courses? Is this idea in contrast to their current job in education? The initial results of this research – to be followed by further investigation and deep analysis – demonstrate that our respondents, belonging to the current generation of "young adults", testify how in the contemporary age we are experiencing a paradigm shift regarding the identity of adult. In fact, although the characterizations and expectations consistent with the traditional connotations of certainty, solidity and stability of adult status and its role in society still persist, the connotations of flexibility, dynamism and, also, uncertainty and insecurity are beginning to spread; they are not perceived as exceptional situations, but as a "new normality" of being adult today and in the foreseeable future. New challenges are now facing Adult Education: on the one hand to reflect on emerging models of adulthood; on the other hand, to realize projects and actions to manage multiple transitions towards adulthood.

Keywords

Hope, Transition, Young Adult, Adult Education, Adulthood

1. Introduction

Down into the well of the abyss sank Attar-Tammuz as evening star; but as morning star it was certain he would rise up out of it. This we call hope and hope is a precious gift. Yet after all it has something forbidden about it, because it contracts the value of the hallowed present and anticipates the festal hours of the cycle, which are not yet at hand. Each hour has its honor, and he does not live aright who cannot despair. Joseph held this view. His hope, indeed, was the most certain knowledge; yet as a child of the moment he wept.
(T. Mann (1943), *Joseph und seine Brüder*; tr. *Joseph and His Brothers*, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1944, Vol. 4, p. 16)

Explaining an overall framework – which be, at the same time, concise but not vague and not banal – on characteristics and particular dynamics of contemporary era is very difficult, in particular if this explanation is referring to those elements and factors that contribute to cause the young people approach towards their future and their adulthood.

However, several concepts – they are actual keywords that interpret the current period – are useful to understand some structures and widespread trends: some of these keywords are very extensive (like *complexity* and *crisis* of the post-modern society), whereas other concepts are more detailed and focused, like *liquidity*, *uncertainty*, *fear*¹ and *risk*². Moreover, there are a few powerful expressions, like *hurried culture*, *nowist culture*³ and *homo instabilis*⁴ that indicate a common existential attitude inclined to a never-ending immaturity and *light-hearted-ness*; the latter expression, furthermore, hides *weakness* and *anguish*⁵.

There are no existential fields excluded from the transformations arising from all that, both on the individual and community level: in effect, new adulthood conditions are increasingly spreading, in comparison with consolidated models of adulthood and their status and roles in the past (linearity/predictability of transitions; job security; solidity of interpersonal relationships such as love-live, parenting style, intergenerational relationship etc. etc.); these new conditions are more varied, complex and contradictory in relation to the traditional criteria on adult identity definition and its specific developmental tasks⁶.

¹ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000; ID., *Liquid Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006; ID., *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006; ID., *Liquid times. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.

² U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986; ID., *World Risk Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999.

³ S. Bertman, *Hyperculture. The Human Cost of Speed*, Westport, Praeger, 1998.

⁴ M. A. Toscano (Ed.), *Homo instabilis. Sociologia della precarietà*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2007

⁵ P. Yonnet, *Le recul de la mort. L'avènement de l'individu contemporain*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.

⁶ E. H. Erikson, *Adulthood*, Cambridge, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976; ID.,

In this regard, some connotations are in continuity with problematic aspects noticed in the *Peter Pan Syndrome*⁷, but now they are also coming to light in an unprecedented way, just as the current affirmation of a new terminology is showing: in particular, the neologisms *kidult* and *adulescent*⁸ lead us into an adult profile in which the dialectic between *maturity* and *immaturity*⁹ determines major implications, not least on the educational side¹⁰.

Starting from this framework – which induces us to consider, in particular, the young adults as *prisoners of the present time*¹¹, and to ask ourselves about the real meaning and existence of *opportunity* to rise to an adult role¹² – this research on the perception and on the role of “hope” is crucial to understand the actual educational needs of younger generations and their paths towards adulthood.

2. *The meaning of hope*

Firstly, it is essential to define the meaning of hope and, therefore, its role in human life and in its vision: obviously, from an educational point of view, conceiving it in terms of passive expectation or fideistic approach to life is no appropriate; hope would can be a resource, and people would can learn it as a skill.

The concept of hope is very difficult to define, because it calls into question countless ideological and philosophical implications, in terms of worldviews and/or of common sense; many philosophers, from ancient times to today, have addressed this issue for the purpose of delineating its meaning. Among them, Josef Pieper proposed six fundamental characteristics, in order to understand the essence of the concept of hope: 1. hope is accompanied by a *minimum of certitude and assurance* with respect to the possible possession of the thing hoped for, the thing for which the subject aims; if this minimum is lacking, we are no longer speaking of hope, but of simple desire; 2. the object hoped for is a *good*, understood not in the moral but in the ontological sense; 3. the object hoped for must be difficult to obtain; we do not hope for so-

The Life Cycle Completed, New York, Norton, 1982.

⁷ D. Kiley, *The Peter Pan Syndrome. Men Who Have Never Grown*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1983.

⁸ OED, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁹ D. Demetrio, *Elogio dell'immaturità. Poetica dell'età irraggiungibile*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1998.

¹⁰ R. Bly, *The Sibling Society*, New York, Addison-Wesley, 1997; t. anarella, *Les 'adulescents'*, in «Études», 7, 2003, pp. 37-47; M. G. Ruo, M. B. Toro (Ed.), *Adolescenza e adulescenza. Riflessioni su nuove patologie e nuove normalità nel ciclo di vita e nelle relazioni familiari*, Roma, CISU, 2012; E. Marescotti, *Adulescenza: quid est? Identità personale, aspettative sociali ed educazione degli adulti*, in «Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica», 9, 2, 2014, pp. 159-179.

¹¹ J. M. Silva, *Coming Up Short. Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹² R. D. Putnam, *Our Kids. The American Dream in Crisis*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015.

something that demands no effort on the part of the individual; 4. an object of hope *is not something that is necessarily realized*; 5. the object of hope *lies beyond the control of the one who hopes*; 6. the final feature of hope consists in the attitude of *expectant waiting*, which can be directed either to a good or an evil; in any event, hope is always ordered to something that represents a good for the hoping subject (*sub ratione boni*), and its contrary is the object of fear¹³.

Other scholars, in a different perspective, highlight that it is necessary the distinguishing of hope from other constructs, like *expectations* and *involvement*, because: hope is an emotion, whereas expectations are beliefs; hope reflects situations described as goal congruent, whereas expectations and perceived probabilities encompass situations that are goal congruent, goal incongruent, or goal irrelevant; feelings of hope are based on appraisals of possibility, not of probability; whereas involvement reflects arousal or energy, hope is more: it is a positive emotion, and an emotion attached not to an advertisement, a message, a brand, a medium, or a decision but to a goal; hope is linked to outcomes from a decision, not the decision itself; importance is an antecedent to involvement, though it is a critical component of the yearning dimension of hope; hope can vary even when involvement is high¹⁴.

Finally, starting from the etymological meaning of the word *hope* in Italian (*speranza*, that derived from the Latin word *spes*, in its turn derived from Sanskrit word *spa-*, with the meaning of *to move towards a goal*), it is possible to highlight some of its salient characteristics. In this perspective, hope is not only the passive waiting for something who a person desires, but it is also the active tendency towards a good in the future. Therefore, in this sense, it is possible to affirm that hope does not complete its scope in waiting that a wish comes true, but that the hope could mobilise resources and emotional, intellectual and material energies in view of a future project. It is no coincidence that the idea of hope – together with trust, positivity and optimism – is increasingly being included among the most effective ingredients for vocational guidance and career counseling¹⁵.

In fact, every life transition is a challenge, which needs to be addressed not only competently but also with energy and courage: “We must set ourselves challenges which are (at the moment of their setting, at any rate) difficult to confront point-blank; we must choose targets that are (at the moment of their choosing, at any rate) well beyond our reach, and standards of excellence that vexingly seem to stay stubbornly for above our ability (as already achieved, at any rate) to match whatever we do or may be doing. We need to attempt the impossible. And we can only hope, with no support from a trustworthy

¹³ B. M. Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2003, pp. 65-66.

¹⁴ D. J. Macinnis, G. E. de Mello, *The Concept of Hope and Its Relevance to Product Evaluation and Choice*, in «Journal of Marketing», 69, 1, 2005, pp. 2-3.

¹⁵ L. Nota, S. Soresi (Ed.), *Il counselling del futuro*, Padova, Cleup, 2015.

favourable prognosis (let alone from certainty) that with a long and grinding effort we may sometime manage to match those standards and reach those targets and so rise to the challenge. Uncertainty is the natural habitat of human life – though the hope of escaping uncertainty is the engine of human life pursuits. Escaping uncertainty is a paramount ingredient, even if only tacitly presumed, of all and any composites images of happiness”¹⁶.

3. *The condition of Italian graduates: statistic data*

Secondly – in order to denote the action that this concept of *hope* could play in real life of young adults – it is necessary to introduce some helpful statistics data which contextualize the existential situation of Italian graduates, in general, and, in particular, of Italian graduates in Education, as regards the academic career satisfaction and their approach to the world of work. The satisfaction regarding University experience as a whole is generally good (86% of all Italian graduates). If they could go back, 67 graduates out of 100 would choose the same course that they have concluded, and in the same University. The most positive outcome for the Italian University system as a whole is that only 4% of graduates do not would enroll at University¹⁷. For what it regards motivations and expectations in the transition from University to the world of work, and continuing at the macro level of analysis, it is evident that the most important aspects in finding a job are acquisition of professional skills (76%), stability of the workplace (66%), career (62%) and earnings perspectives (57%)¹⁸.

Finally, one last relevant element (although it is general and no related to the specific condition of graduates) is about the composition of Italian families: in 2012 there were 6,964,000 people aged 18-34 years old and unmarried who lived at least with one parent (61.2% of the total reference population). This figure has increased if we compare it to previous surveys (58.6% in 2010; 59.2% in 2011)¹⁹.

Coming to the specific reference population of our research, it is possible to stress that, at national level, graduates in Education have (one year after degree) an employment rate of 57.7 %; among those who do not work, 12.5% say

¹⁶ D. Dato, *The Guidance. Guiding in the “Society Without Guidance”. The Difficult Challenge of Pedagogy*, in «Pedagogia Oggi», 1, 2015, p. 421.

¹⁷ Almalaurea, *Condizione occupazionale dei laureati. XVII indagine 2014*, 2015a, pp. 111, 115, 117, in <http://www2.almalaurea.it> (selected frame: Classe di Laurea in Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione (L-19, 18), retrieved March, 3, 2016).

¹⁸ Almalaurea, *Profilo dei laureati 2014. Rapporto 2015*, 2015b, p.153, in <http://www.almalau-rea.it> (ultima consultazione 3 marzo 2016).

¹⁹ Ministero Del Lavoro E Delle Politiche Sociali, *Rapporto sulla Coesione Sociale*, Vol. I, 2011, p. 7, in <http://www.istat.it> (retrieved March, 5, 2016); ID., *Rapporto sulla Coesione Sociale*, Vol. I, 2012, p. 5, in <http://www.istat.it> (retrieved March, 5, 2016); ID., *Rapporto sulla Coesione Sociale*, Vol. I, 2013, p. 5, in <http://www.istat.it> (retrieved March, 5, 2016).

that they are not looking for a job (of these, 72.3% because they are engaged in training course or in study activities), while 29.8% are looking for a job²⁰.

In this regard, it is essential to reflect on the sort of work done by the graduates in Education, because this information permits to formulate some assumptions about their level of economic autonomy. One year after graduation, 33.6% of employees are involved in a *stable job* (*self-employment* 3.5% and *open-ended contract* 30.1%); 33% say to have a *non-standard employment contract*, while the 12.1% work *without an employment contract* (namely, in a situation of *undeclared work*). The *part-time employment contract* has spread to the extent of 59.8%²¹.

In order to better focusing the specificities of our research shown below, two very important aspects concern, respectively, the congruence between University studies and employment, first, and then, the perception of “effectiveness” of achieved graduation. The congruence between University studies and professional opportunities can be determined considering, among other things, the branch of economic activity of the company where the graduate is employed. Obviously, this is not an accurate measurement since it is not certain that the lacking affinity between economic branch and thematic field of University course is necessarily a symptom of incoherence between the two aspects, having to consider the tasks actually performed by the worker. Despite of this, in the early years after graduation, it is more difficult finding jobs in an economic sector perfectly pertinent to subject area of University course. And, above all, this is often related to the sort of University course.

As for the graduates in Education, they claim, in large part, to work in the services sector (96.5%) (very low, however, jobs in industry field, 2.2% and in agriculture 0.3%); however, the services sector is extremely heterogeneous, and its most relevant sub-sectors are generic: “other services” (43.3%), “education and research” (29.2%) and “trade” (11.9%)²².

Moreover – in order to verify the level of economic self-sufficiency – it is necessary to consider the graduates’ salary that, one year after graduation, corresponds on average to a monthly net gain of 765 EUR. Evidently, this average value is not satisfactory for a complete economic autonomy, and it is also decreased in comparison with the surveys carried out in 2006 (namely before the global economic crisis) on the whole Italian graduate population²³.

In regard to the perception of effectiveness of degree in graduates’ work context, one year after graduation it is generally passable: graduates evaluate it as *very effective* or *effective* (56.9%), *rather effective* (21.4%) and *not very effective* or *ineffective* (21.7%)²⁴. More specifically, it is interesting to evaluate sepa-

²⁰ Almalaurea, *Condizione occupazionale dei laureati. XVII indagine 2014*, cit.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

rately the two components of the level of effectiveness, namely the use of skills learned at the University, and the formal and substantial request of the degree certification. In this regard, it is possible to infer indicative information from these data: 32.7% of graduates affirm that the degree certification is required by law; 16% affirm that it is not required, but it is necessary; 33% affirm that it is not required but it is useful, and 18.1% affirm that it is neither required nor useful. Finally, regarding the use of the skills learned during university studies, 45.7% of graduates affirm an *high use*, 35.4% a *reduced use* and 18.1% confirms the *non-use* of such skills²⁵.

In this perspective, the specificity of the local reality investigated is particularly useful and important, because it allows to highlight, in the transition from the University to work or to further training courses, how the graduates can evaluate, re-elaborate and re-invest their knowledge, skills and competences; all this is important in view of its relevance not only in the strict sense of pragmatic implementation but, above all, to achieve a professional role, and with it, also social and existential roles. These are issues that only a qualitative research can highlight, entering into the merits of the meaning and typologies of skills really acquired by graduates.

This general framework, together with the specific qualitative research that will follow it below, allows to reflect both on the strengths and shortcomings of university course and, above all, on the processes of “development of hope” in the university educational context, concerned as a situation where it is possible to develop knowledge in different levels: cultural, vocational, personal and relational. Furthermore, this research allows to signify the “relevance” that the 81,4% of Italian university students attribute to the study activity; in fact, they declare that, among other activities, it is considered the most important²⁶: such importance needs to be interpreted in relation to expectations and, therefore, also in relation to hopes.

4. *The exploratory study*

Starting from these premises, we have carried out a research among 18 young adults (16 females and 2 males), between the ages of 23 and 26, who have graduated in Education between 2013 and 2015 in three different Italian universities: Padua, Ferrara and Trieste. Survey does not have a statistical goal but, through a qualitative approach, it aims at understanding how young graduates view their future and what “hope” means to them in this specific historical moment. For this reason, we have provided a structured interview divided in four sections: the first one collects information about the current condition of our respondents (if they are still studying or working, if they live

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Fondazione Rui, *Settima Indagine Eurostudent. Le condizioni di vita e di studio degli studenti universitari 2012-2015*, Roma, AsRui, 2015, p. 62.

with their original family, how their purchasing power is); the second one is dedicated to their academic education and asks them a sort of skills self-evaluation (What's your level of satisfaction at the end of the university course? What competencies you feel you have acquired?); then, the third section aims to inquire what hope means for them and for their future (What's hope is for you? What wishes do you have for the future? How do you imagine your situation over the next five years?); finally the last section concern their purposes, for the professional and for life as well (How competencies you have acquired in your education feed your hopes? What other competencies you need to achieve your hopes?).

There are two main reasons why we focused our research on Education graduates: first of all, this is our own teaching field; secondly, in Italy a degree in Education leads not only to teaching, but also to a complex professional figure, precisely "educator" who is involved in the social sector, yet he is neither a social worker nor a teacher. What is more, there are two separate academic curricula for "educators": one belongs to the Department of Medicine and the other one to the Department of Education. All of this complicates and adds to a feeling of uncertainty about this profession.

The majority of our participants still live with their parents, have temporary jobs or work under apprenticeship contracts: they are not financially independent, therefore they cannot change their living arrangements. Only three of them have gone on to study for a Master's degree. These outcomes are consistent with the national results which were illustrated earlier.

Despite a general situation of insecurity, the graduates seem to accept their current condition and consider it a necessary stage at the beginning of their professional life; even though the issue of financial independence is a recurrent topic, the respondents were not openly frustrated. Illustrative quotes, selected for the significant meaning to the answers, were presented from the qualitative survey; to ensure the privacy of participants, they are named by letters and questions are labelled by numbers. The excerpts are translated from Italian.

I think I can be satisfied with what I have achieved in my life so far, yet to be honest. I would like to have something more. What I am missing is a job which could make me financially independent. If I could ask for something and had a choice, I would certainly want to work as an educator in some institution, because this is what I have studied for and what I would like to do. However, given the current situation, I cannot hope to get so lucky, so I would be happy if I could find a job as a shop assistant, which could give me some financial security and some ground to build my life on. [A5]

Even though I am happy in my personal life, I have some needs which I would like to see satisfied: one of these is most certainly having a job that would enable me to look after myself, without having to ask for support from my parents. [C5]

Regardless of the immense joy I get from doing something I love. I work too few hours and therefore I cannot be independent. [E5]

I'm pleased with myself, because I love what I am doing, that is studying and working in the education sector. I believe that studying and working are closely connected, integrated in a continuous education process, especially in the profession of a social educator. These professionals need to have an excellent education, extensive experience and a strong inner motivation. Event though I suffer the problem of not being financially independent. I accept my current condition because I believe that by continuing my studies I am investing in my future and in my personal development. [F5]

Our survey provided the opportunity to ask the graduates more general questions about the condition of their generation. There is a widely shared opinion that the transition from university to the labor market is a very difficult one, but there are two different lines of thought when it comes to the reason behind the hardship their generation has to face and these refer to the relations between the generations. Some of the respondents somehow imply adults are responsible, by adults meaning politicians, public opinion, the working world and so on.

My generation is often criticized for no reason: it is considered as lost, not driven nor willing to pick up a challenge, but I think this is not the case, really. [...] Let me explain: our generation graduated at a time then the job market is in deep crisis, so we get very few job offers and many of those we get are preposterous. We are often offered six months apprenticeship with no future prospects and a compensation that sometimes will not even cover commuting expenses: some of us are luckier than others, but these are generally the offers we get. [A6]

I believe that my generation is in a bad situation and I think the reason behind this is the lack of trust in young people. I often read job advertisement looking for "young, experienced" personnel. This is nonsense: of course someone who is young will have no experience, unless he started working at 14. [C6]

The cultural and social ambience we live in is complicated: generations are fighting, competition, success, results and consumerism rule. [F9]

I can say that people in my generation mostly lost faith in their future, because we do not get work we would like the way we would like and because the outlook that comes out of the decisions made by politicians (legislations and planned investments) is not very positive for us. [P9]

This kind of answers suggests to resume the concept of "generational pact": according to Chauvel²⁷ and Vendramin²⁸, the current clash between generations refers to a precise period of our recent history, when the 80's youth questioned the model of society of their elder. Nowadays this collide involves the intergenerational process of transmission and solidarity and it arises from the contemporary work framework, which appears more destandardized than in the past.

²⁷ L. Chauvel, *Le destin des generations*, Paris, Puf, 1998.

²⁸ P. Vendramin (Ed.), *Generational approach to the social patterns of relation to work. A state of the art report*, Luxembourg, European Communities, 2007.

In Italy two successful essays have treated similar matters: Ambrosi & Rosina²⁹ have used the expression “robbed generation” to describe the young people; Laffi³⁰ has sustained the existence of a conspiracy in their comparison straight.

Otherwise, other respondents openly talk, sometimes strongly, about the responsibilities of the current young generation, described as lacking determination, consistency and being superficial.

Some people want their parents to go with them to job interviews, or in some cases the parents want to go with them and even attend the interview. This way, young people do not become independent or self conscious and they will always be under the wing of their parents. [...] I believe that the current condition of people in my generation is heavily influenced by the fact that they do not want to pick up challenges, by the selfishness in waiting to find a job that is just a few kilometers away from home and of demanding a proper contract from the very beginning. [D6]

I find my generation difficult. There are a lot of smart people who study, have jobs and work hard to make their dreams come true. Others already have everything, but they want to do absolutely nothing. They have no dreams, no plans and just a few, superficial passion. [H6]

On the one hand, I believe that there are very few job opportunities for us young in the area where I live. On the other hand, there's an entire generation who is willing only to complain and not to get moving. Most of the people my age complain about everything, but they are hardly willing to make sacrifices. They would rather stay and live off their families, their only concern being owning the latest smartphone. Racism and indifference to other people's needs are widespread among my generation. [Q6]

The graduates we interviewed are quite satisfied with their university education. There are two main grounds for some discontent:

the considerable difference between theory and practice: the Education Sciences curriculum is considered as a training for professionally successful operators, capable of working in situations of social alienation or distress in a different way from social workers or pedagogues, who are involved in planning, activating resources or coordinate services. Therefore, these students expect to have a good knowledge of the welfare system and to acquire some working tools. However, the answers we gathered describe a gap between what is taught in the classrooms, mostly theory, and the training, which is considered educationally very important;

some classes are not useful, either because teachers are not able to get the students involved or are not original in their teaching, or because the subjects are not consistent with the curriculum or with the professional figure they are meant to develop.

²⁹ E. Ambrosi, A. Rosina, *Non è un paese per giovani*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2009.

³⁰ S. Laffi, *La congiura contro I giovani. Crisi degli adulti e riscatto delle nuove generazioni*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2014.

We also asked our 18 respondents to provide an overall evaluation of their studies, considering the professional, cultural, personal and relational abilities they acquired. The two different trends which we are able to outline from the answers actually prove the limited self reflection abilities of our graduates and their difficulties in defining and acknowledging the abilities they acquired. Some answers concerning the professional and cultural abilities are generic and vague, others are clearly inconsistent.

When asked about the professional and cultural skills they acquired during their studies, our respondents provided some vague and inconsistent answers, often mistaking the nature sense of these skills. As for personal and social skills, most respondents consider university a highly valuable life experience and the first test bench for the transition into adult life, making them more independent and aware of their limits and possibilities.

During these three years I have grown up and have become more mature, I have become more independent and learnt how to manage my schedule and my deadlines, to draw up accounts and to discuss complex arguments. [F2]

On a general note, going to university helps build up one's autonomy; you learn how to manage your time and your study schedule, but also to go to the bank and make your payments, or again prepare the documentation for ISEE³¹, and so on. [H2]

I think I can say I have grown up a lot on a personal level. By learning more about certain kinds of problems I feel now I am more responsible. I have more empathy and I am better at facing problems and challenges in a calmer way, trusting my abilities. [Q2]

On a personal level, I believe I have improved my critical reasoning abilities and my intuition, since we have often been asked to reason about things rather than learn something by heart or writing things down without thinking. I have also become more flexible, in order to meet each professor's requirements when undergoing examination. [R2]

Social skills are generally associated with the relationships with fellow students and workers or teachers met during apprenticeship.

5. *Findings and Discussion*

5.1. *Theory and Practice of Hope*

The interviews are studied with the content analysis based on the transcriptions; the categories and the occurrences are elicited from the answer to the questions posed. The validity of the results is constantly verified by a continuous process of discussion and by a compared analysis conducted by the authors both separately and together.

The data analysis shows that respondents' opinions regarding hope are ge-

³¹ Acronym for families' economic situation index.

nerally optimistic and positive: *“everyday I hope that tomorrow will be better, I hope that things I am grateful for will never change in my life”* [A6] as a feeling related to one’s personal growth to the achievement of one’s personal goal: *“the feeling of wanting to achieve something that you desire with your whole heart”* [S7]. Hope is

something that keeps you alive and active in difficult times so you don’t totally abandon yourself in what the destiny has already decided for you [...] something that allows you to see even in the darkness, chance of an upcoming rebirth. [C7]

Hope is ambition and dream at the same time: *“I want to become something more than what I am now [...], it walks beside the dreams that men have always had. To me hope is an aspect of live that you can not give up”* [P7]. Hope is also defined by the interviewers as trust *“in the future, trust in themselves, in other people. In a future good, courage to live with its joy and its sufferance, authentically and fully”* [H7]. The idea is connected to a self experience attitude, as an of active walking towards personal will.

To me hope is a feeling that doesn’t allow you to wonder if you really want to be able to do what you set as a goal. I don’t consider it as a positive emotion though if it is only limited to this, meaning that if you hope for something you also have to believe in that. If someone has a lot of hopes but doesn’t put them into action, if that person doesn’t do anything to make those hopes come to reality has the most chances to be disappointed. It happens sometimes that even with our best efforts hope is not realized but in my opinion that means that something needs to be reconsidered. [L7]

Some use also vivid explicative images to get a more complete understanding: hope is seen as a light coming in a dark room, a sparkle in the darkness, a traffic sign giving direction, but also as a painter easel.

To me hope is like an easel. If my dreams are the painting that I wish I could paint in my life, hope is what sustains this painting. If I didn’t have hope I could not paint, I would have to bend myself, set my target down instead of up; the easel instead allows me to stand tall and set my target as high as I can. Hope has as a companion positivity: if I didn’t have a positive attitude towards the future the wind of negativity could make my easel fall down. Today more than ever young people need hope to believe that they’re able to make their dreams come true. [R7]

Moving from theoretical to actual level, the idea of hope loses its abstract accounts and fades its ideal dimension previously reported; answers converge on a few common and lifelike points: financial security, academic accomplishment, creation of a one or more children family. It’s a *“borghese painting”* of hope, realized in aspects and desires that seem to belong more to the past generation than to the contemporary ones. Maybe these young adults look at these points as typical topics of adulthood or they consider them as signs of a *“lost dream”* in a *“stable and safe”* way of life typifying former generations. Three quarters of participants hope *“to have”*, rather

than “to be” (happy, comfortable with him/herself, open minded to learn or to discover the world).

The idea of hope has converted in a personal desire to have; it occurs also in the answers about the hardest hope to realize: to have a safe and stable job, to become economically self sufficient from family, to buy a house, to have your own family, to improve personal abilities. The struggle in realizing hope/desire seems to be more dependent to the personal control or to a “winning” operative attitude than to be produced by economic or social reasons. The individual level in hoping is considered most important and effective than the causation found at the contemporary society or labor market.

It takes a lot of effort, a lot of patience, a lot of love, so much willing, sacrifice, trust, dedication, perseverance, respect. It depends a lot from the point of view you consider things, you face them with your head high and with a lot of effort, then desires are not impossible to realize anymore, you only have to fully believe you can do it, working it out aware of your limits and the risks. [F9]

I believe that the desire that is the hardest one to realize is to be happy because happiness is made of small things that are connected to each other in a harmonic way and sometimes it is not that easy to reach every single one of them. [B9]

There is no scale to determine if something is easier or harder than something else. It all depends on the attitude you have in facing challenges. With the wrong attitude even a simple task as riding a bike can become hard [...] I know it is all up to me, if I let myself be scared by my desires, I will be overwhelmed by them. [C9]

Participants’ life plan, to 5 and 10 years from now, doesn’t seem to really modify this picture. Five years from now, forthcoming hopes and present desires converge in the same things to have: a house, a job, a child, a partner, the economical independence. Many questioned are unable to find a position/ place for themselves in a future further away in time: *“I can not imagine myself 10 years from now, I think that’s so far ways and king of unreachable”* [F10]. Hope seems to be stuck in the transition between project and its achievement because there’s no difference in the temporal dimension of hope, that still appears to be described as a positive feeling for one’s future: *“I would really like to see myself realized as a woman and as a mother [...] in a nice house, with my husband and my child, holding a stable job”* [A10]. In that way, hope looks to be unfocused on a chronological prospective and focused instead on the horizon of personal desires.

When respondents are asked to assign hope a role and placing it effectively in their lives, their answers still contain trust and positive attitude towards the future and towards one’s personal willing. Hope is described as an “engine” to change, pushing toward the good, the “first utopic step”, the “impulse” to desires and dreams. But, there is a gap arising from the theory of hope:

without hope we would not even get up from our beds in the mornings since we would be too afraid that something bad could happen to us. [P11]

to the practice of hope:

I am a dreamer, but I also know when it is time to face reality; I always hope for the best but at the same time I know that things can turn out to be very different from what you expected and hoped them to be and that allowed me to never foul myself and to be ready to start over again. [M11]

Particularly meaningful are the answers that put hope on the existential level, going deep because of painful experiences in a sort of personal philosophical frame. Hope is a hook used for trigger and copy with troubles, stimulating new forces and new outcomes in life.

I was 10 years old when my mum got sick [...], since then I have been hoping every day that she would get better, but it didn't go like that [...]; I started hoping to have her by my side, I restarted living my life hoping that she was still with me. Even now no matter what I do I hope she is watching over me and I hope she is proud of me. I think I will always hope for this and I believe hope [...] will always be fundamental to still keep on looking forward. [A11]

In May my boyfriend's dad committed suicide, since then my life has been based on hope: of finally being able to face challenges [...], of being able to find a job, that things will get better so many other people will not have to go through what we are going through right now. Before may I thought hope was stupid, just like living trusting only in luck, but now I know hope is important to live a good life [...]. I think really believing in it can make your life at least a little bit better. [M11]

Otherwise, vision of hope in some interviewees appears less magical and enchanted or not at all consolatory and supportive; those respondents consider hope as an illusion, even damaging because in contradiction with the life as it is lived:

with only hope you can not do anything, you have to work hard and then maybe something can change. Just hoping without making an effort didn't take you anywhere, I start to hope only when I know I gave 100% of myself and of what I am capable of. [I11]

So, differently from the answers given in the first part of this survey, hope could represent an obstacle in undertaking one's own initiative and in reaching personal realization because it breaks desire and future plan in an abstract dimension of time:

I believe in what I choose and decide [...], I believe that hope is not enough to make your dreams come true, because for who I am now I have to say thank you to all the challenges and the people I met on my journey. Hope has a marginal role. [F11]

5.2 Hope and competences

Generally, respondents consider competences received during the university formation on the educational field very useful; educational competences acquired are foundational basis in increasing knowledge, and are source of self improvement, in professional autonomy, and in passion for the career chosen. These competences are therefore judged in a positive way, as a good “starting point” regarding hope:

the abilities and competences that I achieved at university are the ones helping me keeping my hopes alive because I know I have great knowledge base that can allow me to be comfortable working in different educative situations. [N12]

I believe that my experience as a university student gave me so many notions and so many experiences that I could potentially use both in my work that is strictly connected with my field of studies and in other works that I have done and that I will do, that in my every day life are related with relationships with other people and with personal ethic, knowing that my being in a university would have made me acknowledge a lot and it plays an important role in the way I see hope: I don't have any unreachable or impossible hope or dream; they are all practicable without being exclusive. And I am honestly happy about that because it makes me live peacefully with myself. I have to say that this hope does not influence my spirit of competition and my desire of always being the best person I can be. [P12]

Those are professional skills considered as essential for the job or, in particular, competences key in finding some personal *modus operandi* as an educator; these competences are also related with the personal growth and with capabilities in self reflection:

the abilities that I've obtained over the years are the ones that make me wanting to keep on doing something positive and constructive with my life and to make me still believe in mankind. [E12]

Pedagogical and educative abilities related to observation, listening, waiting, empathy, comprehension of the other people allow me to be able to face the world. Those who choose to follow such a path answered a call and decided they wanted to work with the most complex entity in the world: the human being. What makes education hard is the person itself, the relationships, the exposing yourself and putting yourself out there. Only by being aware of these dynamics I can have hope in my professional future because I am sure that I know who I am and that I can be a bridge for the people that I meet and that I will meet along my way. [F12]

Interviewees are also asked to specify what competences must be added to the ones already mentioned to make the concept of hope more effective and useful in their job. More than the majority indicate the need for experiential or qualified abilities: *“I am hungry for experience, I want to improve my abilities and be able to always give my best”* [E13].

Others underline the need in gaining new professional abilities (economical, linguistic) not directly related to the professional career, while few of participants demand to improve personal attitudes, soft skills or transversal competences not strictly linked to their professional profile:

I need to constantly feed my curiosity that is a characteristic trait of my personality, never stop on the superficial level, do everything remaining humble and knowing that there's always a chance of learning something from everyone. [P13]

Therefore, respondents consider that the ability they gained in educational field, during their learning process, made them able to keep their hope alive. University formation appears to be particularly appreciated because abilities and capacities acquired in academic training, can be transferred or applied in different and professional situation. Even if rooted on educator professional profile, educational knowledge and competences gained appear to be suitable to other scenarios: in family life, in everyday life, in cultural or social context, especially when responsibility or ethic decision are involved.

Pedagogic formation is a transversal formation that has to do more with everyday and personal life; therefore, even if I won't be able to work in the educational field I will have gained abilities that will allow me to face life with a smile, being able to understand other people, putting myself in a "waiting and listening" position. Besides, what I understood is the social responsibility that you become invested of, that I have to take and can not back up from whatever the situation is. The social educator figure is also a political one, its first action is the testimony. Even if I will not be able to work as an educator I will be one every single day of my life. [F14]

I think that some subjects in Education course could be really useful in the course of your life and we should all study then [...]; psychology, pedagogy, sociology and philosophy should be part of everyone's academic formation to better understand the multiple aspects that life has, to be able to handle interpersonal relationships, understand group dynamic, create your own professional ethic. Many of the notions I gained will be really useful if someday I would decide to have children. [R14]

The degree in Education gave me appropriate tools for every working field. My tutor used to tell me "do as many things as you can, attend every course and seminars, do as many experiences as you can even if they can't look useful or if they are not interesting now, because everything can eventually come to a hand!"; and it is true, an educator never stops to be an educator even if no working as one at the moment. Being an educator is in many ways a vocation and therefore it can not remain like that if that's what you're good at doing; being a dictator becomes part of a person and can not be taken away from that person, whatever job she/he is doing; it will always be done with an educator's passion and desire to question what she/he knows. I feel like studying this changed me, even if the way I car is always my own. [P14]

The biggest impact in competence transfer regards to human relations, where what respondents have studied emerge as a form of "gym" that makes

them well equipped in meeting and in listening to the people, in gaining a personal attitude in learn to learn suitable in other professional situations as well.

University is a life experience, therefore I believe that everything I have learnt in my university career will be useful in the future and in every working field. In particular, being able to relate to other people is fundamental because in every job you are in touch with people, even simply with your boss to sign a contract. [H14]

Before starting to study I was and I still am really interested in human psychology, the mysteries that there are in the human mind and its elements. After studying it and also because of my internship I became an “observer”. I like to pay attention to the way would act. I believe this is an important element in the communication with others and it could also be useful in many aspects of your life, not just in different working fields. [L14]

I believe that being aware that we're passionate about something is by itself already very important to me besides what I am going to do and who I am going to be. I can see that already today the way o think is different from the way business men do. They worry a lot more, maybe excessively, about the economic part, how much money that industry is making and how much it is producing, careless of the workers that are only seen as puppets that only have to work and make no questions. In this way workers are anxious and do not like what they do because they are always worried about losing their job for a single mistake. That is why, even if I am probably very ignorant about such a work experience, I still believe mostly because of what I have studied that the “human aspect” should be more important in order to achieve goals even on the economical level. [A14]

All what has been studied during academic education is commonly considered by respondents as form of opportunity in developing a critical thinking and an open mind attitude towards to the world and towards a positive communication with others. Even if this evaluation about their academic graduation has not been asked, interviewees show how hope is connected to their specific preparation. In other way, what they have studied made them talented in hoping: for their job and for their life too.

I believe that what I have studied made me who I am now not only professionally but also a person. During these three years I understood that respect toward everyone is at the base of everything, that having an open mind on diversities makes us able to have a better life, that autonomy is a right for everyone and you must look for it continuously and for your entire life, that having a friendly attitude and being able to handle stress and be open and ready for changes is useful in every situation. I will always take with me these things whatever job I will end up doing. [Q14]

6. *Conclusions*

The idea of hope emerging from the data, though limited to a restricted number of respondents, is not organic, but rather ambivalent or even contra-

dictory. There are three aspects to the concept we investigated, not connected nor communicating with each other: the first level is abstract and hope here is defined according to a theoretical perspective and in general terms. This level is in contrast with the definition derived by the second level, the materialistic one, which is closely linked to personal desires and needs. Finally, both these levels are not coherent nor in line with the third conceptual level, focussed on an idea of hope with idealized and illusory connotations.

Though generally hope implies an act of faith in ourselves and in the future, the respondents do not seem to be able to truly “believe” and commit themselves to their own personal and professional projects. They seem rather disillusioned, even though they acknowledge that having chosen a study curriculum in Education has provided them with a perspective of hope, as well as a basis of transversal, communication and social skills, which they recognise and appreciate. This, however, does not seem to be enough to feed that vital, active and essential motivation which should support the continuous development journey during adulthood.

Starting from the statements provided by the graduates in the exploratory study, we can try to formulate some conclusions, which do not intend to profile the modern young adult generation, but, along with the interdisciplinary literature on the subject, can still be useful to outline the trends which necessarily call into question the “Adult Education” field and its scholars.

The feeling of hope, as we wrote above, is a vital feeling: it is what grants the necessary impetus for the complex transition from youth into adulthood. Having dreams, desires, ambitions, no matter how idealistic or even utopic, is almost mandatory in this phase of our life, when even disillusionment has a positive value. However, hearing from young graduates that their hopes remain stranded in material and very tangible matters, such as a job, a house, the possibility of starting a family, poses serious questions about the solidity and the identity of the adults these young individuals will become.

We wonder to what extent the economic and social crisis, which was also mentioned in the answers of our respondents, is a plausible explanation rather than an alibi. According to the results, young people tend to aim hope to material and concrete desires, losing its links with dreams or ideal aspirations. However, these two should be the elements that mainly foster hope, guiding it towards the dimension of the future, opening to the ability to project, to the level of values. The challenge of contemporary adult education seems to be the new aspect of hope as a search for meaning or as an ideal dimension that should accompany young adults toward their personal development. In this sense, citing Danilo Dolci “ciascuno cresce solo se sognato”³², we can say that people can grow up only if they consider hope as a concrete dream for the realisation of their own future.

³² D. DOLCI, *Poema umano*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974, p.105: “each of us grows if he/she is dreamt of”, our translation.

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Although this paper is a shared and collaborative work, paragraph 5 is attributed to Chiara Biasin, paragraphs 4 and 6 are attributed to Matteo Cornacchia, and paragraphs 1, 2, 3 are attributed to Elena Marescotti.