

THE RELEVANCE OF EDUCATION TODAY: YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL CHOICES

Abstract. *The article interprets the results of qualitative research within the GOETE project. It discusses how 9th grade students relate to the relevance of education today by analysing their educational decisions within the framework of the ideology of choice in contemporary Slovenian society. It attempts to categorise reasons for the relevance of education and provide two typical strategies students employ in order to be able to make educational choices in a socio-economic environment which does not favour such important life-educational decisions.*

Keywords: *students, relevance of education, ideology of choice, choice, educational decisions, labour market, “master of yourself” discourse, self-responsibility, uncertainty*

Introduction

The article is based on interviews within the GOETE (Governing of Educational Trajectories in Europe) project; more specifically, it addresses the issue of the relevance of education, one of the project's key thematic themes. *GOETE will analyse how education is being given relevance by different societal actors and how this relevance is negotiated with individual learners. This implies relating economic, institutional and biographical perspectives as well as the comparative analysis of such constellations* (Walther et al., 2010: 15). We will seek to analyse how students relate to the issue of the relevance of education through an analysis of their educational decisions within the current socio-economic conditions of Slovenian society. Such educational decisions will be reflected through the theoretical framework of the ideology of choice and the individualisation of biographical trajectories.

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The current time and young people

In the last 20 years the socio-economic space in Slovenia has changed considerably; Slovenia has quickly got on board an express train which in 1986 Beck named the “risk society” and in 2000 Bauman called “liquid modernity”. And these changes were not only changes in the mode of production or relations of power, but also in the nature of the social bond between individuals and society, which has also altered everyday life along with the rights and duties of the individual. The individual is now more than ever responsible for their own life and decisions as they are being left alone in their expectations, risks and fears. They are expected to actively create their life and “surf” through all the available information (which is multiplying) and make the most rational decisions possible in their quest for the greatest welfare for themselves. The individual has become an agent of his/her life, similarly as an enterprise is a self-dependent production unit looking out for opportunities, maximising profits, minimising risks and thoroughly calculating the opportunity costs of alternative investments. Thus, in accordance with neoliberal logic, the individual has become their own “enterprise”. And along with this, the logic of everyday life and its self-evidence which sublimely guide our lives have changed. If during the period of socialist Yugoslavia the premise was that “everyone gets a job regardless of their ability and social status”, today we have another premise in place, along the lines of “everyone can be a winner, if only they try hard enough”, which has led to an inexorable competitive struggle for the limited privileged positions and battles with unemployment. The primary difficulty of this lies in the fact that in the public discourse it is contended that everybody can be a winner, while the hidden logic of capitalism requires many losers and just a few winners.

Young people today find themselves in a quite unenviable position; at least this is what many theoreticians and researchers believe. The youth unemployment rate is exceptionally high; according to data from the SORS (2011a) in the first quarter of 2011 38.4% of all unemployed were young people aged between 15 and 29 years. Research shows that young people are no longer active co-shapers of the social space but respond more passively to given circumstances (Ule et al., 2000; Miheljak, 2002). It seems that young people have lost their voice; on one hand they are expected to fully engage in creating their own and prescribed happy life while, on the other, they lack the proper socio-economic support that would allow them to do so (with the exception of family support, which is quite strong in Slovenian society, yet dependent on the socio-economic capital of their families). Young people are highly educated, but without jobs, they are leaving their parents’ homes late in their lives and are ever less politically active. They

close themselves off in their rooms, in public consumer spaces for entertainment in narrow circles of friends, they visit adrenalin parks, are diligent and exemplary consumers; in short, they are predominately oriented to their private lives.

In accordance with the contemporary capitalistic ideology of choice they above all work on themselves, taking care of themselves and individually attempting to elbow their way into favourable social positions, yet only a few actually succeed. They are resolving structural, societal distresses by changing and adapting themselves in line with another doctrine of modern times – to be as flexible and as creative as possible (as useful as possible). So what is the role of education in all of this?

The ideology of choice and the context of education

“A master of yourself”

The contemporary ideology of late capitalism says that an individual is *the ultimate master of his or her life, free to determine every detail* (Salecl, 2010:1). Thus, according to this ideology of choice, everyone is “the architect of his/her own happiness”, “a master of him/herself” or, in other words, everybody has open opportunities to do whatever they want with themselves if only they try hard enough. Every individual is a “story in him/herself”, everyone is special, different, everyone has at least some talent and it is only up to them whether they will effectively realise this talent and become successful and “happy”. Every part of our lives, not only classical consumer and lifestyle choices but also love, health and vocational decisions, has become a matter of choice and the appeal to “work on yourself” is heard everywhere, not only through marketing and PR services, through the media, especially magazines, books, or from the mouths of our friends and relatives, but also through invitations of many educational institutions which promise us a brighter future provided we are ready “to do something for ourselves”. As Mirjana Ule states, *a person is becoming more and more a choice of his/her opportunities, homo otionis* (Ule, 2002: 29). The ideology goes even further by telling us not only that we are dependent solely on ourselves, but also that we are completely responsible for our “happiness” and this happiness is one of the self-evident, indisputable aims of contemporary life (Bruckner, 2000).

But such an imperative has a distinctly dark side, namely, if it is only up to each individual what they are and will become, then at the same time there is also nobody to whom you can shift or attribute the burden in the event of failure. Choice is supposed to give us the greatest possible freedom, but this freedom is paradoxical and insidious; namely, the need for choice itself

is compulsory, we cannot avoid that choice and thus we also cannot avoid the risk and dangers inherent to choice itself. And because we have, at least seemingly, a freedom to choose, we also have to carry the consequences of these choices on our own.

There is another characteristic of contemporary circumstances, that is, in addition to having to accept full responsibility for our life-paths, we also have ever more different options for these paths. Since the choice is becoming bigger, there are also more possibilities for “wrong decisions” or, in economic terms, the opportunity costs of alternative choices are increasing. As Renata Salecl demonstrates in her book entitled *Choice* (2010), every choice is accompanied by anxiety, which also means that more choices bring more anxiety. The greater the number of alternative possibilities, the more overwhelming is the burden of responsibility which is related to a fear of failure, guilt and anxiety about regret which inevitably follows if we have chosen wrongly (Salecl, 2010: 7). At the same time, a wrong decision can also bring about fierce self-criticism, namely, if we believe we can become anything we want, if only our desire and dedication are strong enough and if there is nobody who would condition or prevent our success, then it is only us ourselves who we can blame for our decisions and our incapacity to be “in the right place at the right time”. And this can strongly shake our self-image, confidence and identity, especially since there are almost no traditional, solid identity markers left (i.e. tradition, religion, class, gender), which would at least to some extent determine in advance who we are. On the contrary, we believe in the claim that only we are the creators, the authors of our own destiny, from the beginning to the end.

In addition to all of this, many theoreticians and above all psychoanalysts, starting with Freud, have shown that rational choice as presented and offered by capitalist ideology is by itself impossible, even if we assume one can be thoroughly informed. A human by him/herself is by no means solely a rational being, but is also led by his/her unconscious desires and drives, which is why many choices happen on the unconscious level and with regard to the *Big Other*, a term Lacan introduced to designate language, institutions and culture, in other words, the Big Other is the social space in which we all live and defines all of our lives and to which we are all inherently clamped (Salecl, 2010: 59). These choices by no means function according to the economic principle of the maximisation of benefits, but follow the unconscious logic of subject constitution which does not always work to the advantage of the subject.

Capitalist ideology is therefore successfully redirecting attention and responsibility to the shoulders of individuals: problems are no longer seen or sought after in societal, socio-economic or political conditions of living but, quite the opposite, they are seen and solutions for them are sought on

the individual level, in particular in biographical projects (Rener, 2010). The appeal at work is “Improve, correct yourself and you will be successful!”

Education as a solution

The changed requirements of the contemporary way of life are also visible in changed patterns of education. According to the SORS, the number of tertiary education graduates in 1991 when 6,043 students graduated, to 2009 when 18,103 students graduated, represents a 200% increase (SORS, 2011b: 15). While the educational structure of the general population (aged 15 or more) in 2009 was the following: 4% no education, 21% primary education; 24% lower vocational and vocational education; 32% technical secondary education; and 18% tertiary education. At the same time, in the same year the educational structure of the younger population aged 25–34 years (for which we assume the majority has finished their education) was: 1% no education; 6% primary education; 22% lower vocational and vocational secondary education; 41% technical secondary education; and 30% tertiary education (SORS, 2010).

Hence, the general level of education is rising markedly and especially due to young people who are attaining ever higher educational levels; in 2009 30% of young people aged 25–34 years had at least completed higher education or above. Where has this rise in the general educational level of the population come from, and why? What is the underlying logic of this increase? Have such prominent changes occurred in labour market requirements, in the demand for qualified labour force, or are these more individualised, personal reactions to increasing educational opportunities?

Unfortunately, more and more young people are finding out that education does not necessarily also mean social security and employment, as they (probably naively) expected when deciding on their educational paths and investing (time and energy) in their educational capital for (what then seemed a bright) future. After they finish education, young people today can hardly find employment, particularly secure jobs for an indefinite period, while in labour markets there are record-breaking numbers of highly qualified unemployed people.

Employment is no longer self-evident and the definition of a secure vocational profile is almost impossible (with the exception of currently classical and fairly specific profiles such as a medical doctor), since the labour market is changing too fast for individuals to overtake or even catch up to its tempo. Only the most successful and most flexible individuals can manage to extract any significant benefit from this contemporary “chaos”. The employment market is unstable or inconsistent and therefore cannot help in one’s “rational” choice of vocation. The individual is, like in other important

life decisions, left alone with their ingenuity and resolution, except that this choice is much more important than other consumer choices like choosing a car since it has long-term consequences, which will influence nearly all other spheres of his/her everyday life.

Namely, choosing a vocation in the modern consumer society has become an important identity feature. When a young person is choosing their future vocation, they are in a way choosing "him/herself" since work has never before, except for a clear minority, been understood as a sphere of life in which the individual has to enjoy him/herself and achieve happiness. Today the paradigm is explicit – choose a vocation in which you will be exceedingly successful and happy, in which you will "fulfil" yourself. But the choice is manifold; there are more possibilities than ever before. And it is precisely because there are so many possibilities and no evident guidelines about which possibility will be good or prosperous (except for the desire of each individual) and because everyone carries the consequences of these choices on their own shoulders, the choice itself has become almost impossible. Educational decisions can therefore be understood as a paradigmatic example of contemporary decisions; decisions with which we make an incision in our lives, where we choose one possibility at the expense of others, where a decision has many psycho-social consequences.

The relevance of education and educational choices of (GOETE) students

The research results indicate that education is regarded as very important for future life by all groups of respondents (students, parents, teachers and experts); however, in this contribution we mainly focus on students' responses. We will attempt to show how the relevance of education is structured and how educational decisions are being made with regard to the ideology of choice in contemporary society.

The relevance of education

The majority of the students state that education is very important for their future lives, although the reasons for this vary. In this article we place those reasons in three categories: 1) to be something; 2) for work and an economic position; and 3) for a happy life.

1. To be something...

This category includes students' beliefs that education brings a special identity or social status because being well versed or having good

knowledge about different things is considered to be a value, an attribute of personal self-image. Here are some exemplary statements:

Education is very important because without it you are nothing (LJ-students-interview-Matej).

It seems to me that this is one of the most important things. For example, this is shown already in everyday conversation. For example, if you can talk about current events, you need to have some intellect (LJ-students-interview-Nejc).

A lot, because education is everything, it cannot be taken away from you and this counts as something, this is it. If you have, I don't know, for example a big house and you are I don't know how, very impudent, this is nothing, then also this house doesn't help, while education means something for the future. /.../ Also you mean something in society (LJ-students-interview-Jasna).

It is also good that you finish school so that you also know something then (MS-students-interview-Jasmina).

Yes, a lot, without education you are nobody, you can't do anything (LJ-students-interview-Jože).

2. For work and an economic position...

The second category of reasons refers to statements in which students believe that education is important chiefly because it offers a better starting position in the labour market and/or consequently a better economic position in general. They often think that, without education, it is simply impossible to get a job. Here are some illustrations of their statements:

A lot [how important is education] /.../ It is hard to get a job if you have no education (MS-students-interview-Jasmina).

If you are not educated enough, then it is hard to find a job (LJ-students-focus group2-Agima).

It is very important. /.../ First what I can see now with my parents, it is difficult, education would help us a lot (MS-students-focus group-Roma students-Jessica).

Yes, very, there are more people who are without a job and so I think it is important that you finish at least university so that you then have more possibilities, because I think that with secondary school you have no possibilities for a job. At least if you want to have a good job (MS-students-interview-Klara).

3. For a happy life...

The third set of reasons reflects students' beliefs that a good education is some sort of precondition for having a happy, fulfilled life. They emphasise it is crucial to enjoy your work and that work should be more than just earning money. Again, some exemplary statements:

Yes, you have to find something, where you will enjoy yourself, really, 40 years /.../ But yes, so that you won't work only because it is paid well, for example, and you will work like this for your entire life (LJ-students-focusgroup1-Russel).

Education is actually also part of your life. It decides how you will live, what kind of life you will have. It is not only the money, but your decision, how you will live (MS-students-interview-Ajša-Turkishgirl).

Yes, that he actually has a will to work, that he enjoys what he does, that it is not only that he drags himself and, oh yes, now I have to do this again. That it is not a sort of burden, but actually some enjoyment (LJ-students-focusgroup3-AgathaChristie).

A desire for a vocation. If you enjoy this vocation and feel good when you come to work, that you feel good at work and that it is not just a torment (KP-students-focus group 4-Matjaž).

Making enough effort

As shown by the above categories and statements by students regarding the relevance of education for their lives, we can say that the contemporary ideology of being a "master of yourself" has indeed reached Slovenia. When we asked students whether they believe they all have the same possibilities/opportunities and if school is equally demanding for all students, without any additional or more precise questioning we received an almost uniform answer: "It is all up to you, if you study hard enough, then you also have good opportunities." Let us have a look at some typical statements:

I think there are no obstacles if you study hard and so, then there are no obstacles (KP-students-interview-Ana).

Yes, everything depends on the individual, how much time you take for school. /.../ And yes, for some it is then more difficult because they don't make an effort (MS-students-focusgroup-girls-Maja)

... because we all have equal opportunities, it depends on how much effort you invest, I think it depends upon this (MS-students-interview-Klara).

I think motivation is the most important; will and motivation" (KP-students-focusgroup-Brane).

The students predominately believe that everything depends solely on them and hardly mention other factors that could influence the successfulness of students. All their attention is directed towards their own lives, which also means that their gaze is diverted away from wider, external factors which constitute the conditions in which we live. And along with this, it is not only the responsibility for one's own biography that has been transferred to their shoulders, but also the (social) critique transformed to self-critique and the once external coercion for discipline has converted to self-discipline.

In order to handle their present and future lives young people are self-regulating their lives more than ever before. Studying has become a duty, which they do by themselves, without bigger external pressure and they often impose their own measures, criteria, requirements or tasks on themselves. The traditional parental threat "Do your homework or you will be punished" is being replaced by a partnership relationship between parents and students; and with the help of this kind of relationship students and parents try to reach their common goal - the best school performance possible for the greatest possible future life and the essential foundation stone for this kind of life is precisely education.

Two strategies for educational choices

In the light of growing uncertainties, the research results also show that the students mostly think about and plan only for the near future, e.g. the transition to secondary school, while the distant future seems too remote. They have some general ideas about well-being, finding a job, or marriage, but the majority of students revealed no detailed wishes concerning nor attempts to imagine what the more distant future would look like. This all

confirms our theoretical assumptions that life in contemporary conditions is so uncertain and unpredictable on one side, and opportunities so numerous and diverse on the other, that educational decisions are a very demanding choice to make. In these conditions, the students mostly rely on their wishes and parental support. What is more, the parents also reported how difficult it is to actually give advice or proper support to their children, for example:

It is hard because today it is this way, tomorrow it could be different (MS-parents-interview-father-Janez).

Yes, I don't direct him, I don't know how to. In fact, I don't know what will be good for him. It is very interesting, no, to see, oh yes, this has prospects, here more jobs are available, but one such interesting thing, well, from a colleague, his son is now finishing at the Faculty of Civil Engineering. And he said, well, you see, when he was enrolling, everybody said, here there are prospects, and say look, now four years afterwards he is finishing, and civil engineering is in a wreck, right? So, what to advise my son, I don't know (LJ-parents-interview-mother-teacher).

We are aware that in time, when they graduate, that maybe the situation will be altogether different. So, if anybody asks me, I would say study what you wish for yourself, what you know you will be successful at (LJ-experts-interview-librarian-teacher-history).

And how do the respondents cope with these demanding choices which decide the individual's life, success and happiness? The research results indicate that in the absence of straightforward, defined desires about education or a future vocation, the students together with their parents usually resort to one or both of the following strategies: 1) the postponement of decisions; or 2) "more is better".

Certainly there are also students who know exactly what they want to do when they grow up but, as told for example by one of the teachers, this is not common at this age: *at 14, 15 they are actually too young for this kind of decisions. Only a few children know exactly what they want to be. Maybe two per class are like this (LJ-teachers-interview-classteacher-physics).*

Thus, most students do not have clear wishes about their future vocation and experience difficulties when choosing, yet these difficulties are not always recognised as such, or are even not "conscious". So, in order to avoid this difficult position and demanding decision, they resort to one or both of the defined strategies.

1. The postponement of decisions

The first strategy is “*the postponement of decisions*” to a future date, which means enrolling in gymnasiums, which can also be seen as a non-decision since they thereby keep all their (vocational) opportunities open for the future. According to Ministry of Education and Sport (Večer, 24.6.2011), in the 2011/2012 school year the biggest share of students (41.6%) has enrolled in gymnasiums.

Likewise, during the field research we noticed that young people are unable to decide what they would like to do in the future, which is why the majority of them postpone this decision. On one hand, we could say they enrol in gymnasiums precisely because they wish to gain some time in order to get to know themselves better in the next four years, to define their desires more clearly, to acquire sufficient information and wisdom and thus be able to take this important decision in the next years. Here are some typical statements by the students:

I don't know, I haven't even thought about it yet. /.../ Now I have decided on a gymnasium (LJ-students-focusgroup2-Agima).

I don't have a clue [what he will do when he grows up] (KP-students-interview-Jan).

There will be time [for thinking about what they will do when they grow up]. /.../ Only, if you will make the right decision, and this. /.../ For example, if you already know, but you can, for example with a gymnasium or such a school prolong this decision (LJ-students-focusgroup1-Russel).

On the other hand, they also explain and relate their decision to enrol in gymnasiums with future opportunities; they regard a gymnasium as the most appropriate choice for keeping as many opportunities open as possible:

Yes, because if we were, for example, to go to a vocational school, we would have to start with a vocation immediately, but now, when we are in a gymnasium, all possibilities are open for us (MS-students-focus group-girls-Patricija).

Regarding further education I will see in the gymnasium how I will manage, I have four more years to decide. /.../ But if you go to a gymnasium, you are more versed, have more opportunities (MS-students-interview-Bojko).

The postponement of decisions is also substantiated by another belief, namely, that this decision is not as important since they have one possibility of changing their mind and transferring to another school. And because of this they talk about how you can correct your decisions if the first choice turns out to be wrong, for example:

Not very [if which secondary school you go to is important]. It is possible to transfer to any school you want (KP-students-focusgroup-Franci).

All of this substantiates the assumption that the decision is too difficult and too risky so the students would prefer to postpone it, together with the hope that this decision is fully reversible, that it will not have a bigger influence on their lives; this means that nothing wrong will happen because you can change your mind. But this postponement, despite all the flexibility and multi-ability required, is nevertheless not timeless.

The teachers and experts also understand the high enrolment levels in gymnasiums as a certain time postponement, “a refuge”, because the students do not have explicit ideas and desires for the future, either because they are too young, or yet to recognise their own desires and what they enjoy. For example:

If he cannot decide what to do in life, he is taking four more years so he then sees what really pleases him (KP-teachers-focus group-Italian).

The one thing when I was talking to the students and parents is that they don't actually know what they want to be in life. /.../ As a sort of a refuge, what they would be, what they would do in life, so as to be able to decide more easily afterwards (MS-teachers-interview-Antonija).

This is precisely why so many students go to a grammar school – this is to postpone a decision for four more years (KP-experts-interview-librarian).

The majority /.../ don't know exactly where to go and what to do. This is also one reason they usually go to gymnasiums. /.../ I will say it like this, they don't have clear ideas, right (KP-experts-interview-pedagogue).

Still the majority of children decide at the end of primary school on a gymnasium, right? And I think that many children do this because they don't know where, which vocation they would do at the age of 15. Also, they don't have a concrete perception, nor have those desires developed, right, so they postpone it a little. During gymnasium they do mature a little and think they will choose a path more easily (LJ-teachers-focus group-Slovenian).

Otherwise, the students mostly like the fact that there are so many different possibilities available to them and are aware that the range of their possible choices is considerably wider than what was available to their parents – but the problem is they cannot choose rationally even if they wanted to. The decision is highly risky and there is no evident basis, no compass which students can rely on in order to choose the “right” possibility from among a variety of options. Therefore, only one choice remains and this choice is to postpone the decision, which is fully in line with the ideological appeal to keep all your possibilities open for the currently still undecided, but necessarily happy and bright future.

2. “More is better”

I see it this way, for my children, I want them to attain a high education, right. And if there is even more, then even better (IJ-parents-interview-mother-teacher).

The second strategy that young people and their parents use when deciding on further education could be briefly named a “more is better” strategy. One of the school principals explains:

We often try to convince the parent to adapt the choice a little bit to the child's characteristics and talents. But it still somehow happens that 60% of the generation that finishes 9th grade enrolls in gymnasiums, which I think is in a way too high a share of children to go into a general programme, which is quite demanding for the majority of children (IJ-experts-interview-principal).

Namely, the parents and students are often fully aware that the world situation of today is very risky and that socio-economic conditions have changed such that a high education level does not necessarily mean a good starting position for the future or, in other words, that education is not a sufficient condition for a successful and secure career. Yet, they act “as though” education would represent and mean precisely this.

I think it is very important, but also if you have quite a high education it's not necessary that you get a job, you need some connections, this is all happening through acquaintances, but if you have a high education, it can help you get a better job and have a nicer future (IJ-students-interview-Amir).

My mother was a tailor and worked at Mura and was given notice, and said to me that I should rather study so I won't be like her (MS-students-interview-Ronaldo).

Now every parent wants that his child would have, I don't know what, university, faculty, not so much because of the title but because of the easier life afterwards (MS-parents-interview-mother-Jožica).

Since nobody has an answer or solution regarding how to assure oneself a “decent” position in society, the students and their parents try to minimise the risk as much as possible and seek security in higher and better education. In other words, higher education is a “safer, less risky” path to take. And in this way, society is producing considerably more highly educated workers than it needs for its reproduction or is required by the labour market.

It is not necessary if somebody has a high education that he is also successful at his work. Somebody with a lower education can be more successful in the same job! But today if you want to be employed somewhere, they only look at your diploma and certificate showing which school you have finished (KP-parents-interview-mother-Tina).

Education is important, it is a basis, and especially for certain vocations. But, at the end, it seems to me, that you can finish, we had also a situation at school when a person almost had a doctorate but couldn't help himself too much with it (KP-parents-interview-mother-Ana).

However, the consequences of this kind of behaviour and decisions, which we could in fact describe as “rational” in the given situation, are not negligible. The teachers and experts report that many children “overestimate” themselves and thus feel the consequences of these decisions later in life, in gymnasiums or at the faculties. One principal reflects this:

And this is also evident in enrolment in secondary schools, when they overestimate themselves and the parents unfortunately also support this somehow and we find almost all of them and tell them in a friendly manner that they will be disappointed... /.../ Yes, concretely, this year 18 children enrolled in gymnasium and more than half had overestimated themselves (MS-experts-interview-principal).

Therefore, precisely because of the ideology of education many students, together with the help of their parents and various other instructors, invest immense amounts of effort in schooling and learning already in primary

schools so as to have good grades and thus expand their possibilities for further education. The result of this is the exceptionally high enrolment levels for gymnasiums. Yet, when many of these students come to gymnasiums they often realise that the level of education is too demanding and they only hardly manage the workload. The end result is either to put even more effort to meet the minimum standards or to transfer to another school or drop out of school. And this can negatively affect their self-image, their identity; they might feel inadequate, not smart enough. And they only blame themselves for this and by no means the general ideological principles which have actually led them into this situation. Some other students manage to meet the gymnasium's standards with considerable effort, but when they are done they have no vocation; they therefore enrol in faculties and fail there. As one expert put it: *Because now it looks like everybody can go to a faculty, but it isn't so! Maybe everyone can enrol, but then they can quickly return back home (KP-experts-interview-CIPS)*. The story is similar in both of these cases; mutilated self-respect and in a way "lost" years. Then these students apply for jobs for which they are at the same time over- and under-qualified. Actually, they do not belong anywhere.

Regarding educational decisions, our research revealed another interesting matter. Namely, at primary schools and in institutions related to schools there are several experts available whose duty includes counselling on how to choose a proper education/vocation. Yet, they have virtually no real influence since students and parents do not avail themselves of their services. Despite all the professional knowledge that is available, these important choices are decided within the shelter of home. At first glance, this is somewhat in contrast with the thesis offered by Renata Salecl (2010), namely, that due to the increasing possibilities of choices and along with that the checking or examining whether the right choice has been made, modern individuals actually want to get rid of the burden of choice and, for this reason, seek a lot of counselling – from self-help books, media advice, all kinds of psychotherapy, to other counselling experts from various fields. However, our respondents almost do not do this, they somehow believe that they have to look into themselves and act according to their inner desires, mostly because they wish to work in a profession with joy and without torment.

Where does this discrepancy with regard to the "general circumstances" of today's society come from? In fact, we could say that this only provides further confirmation that the students and parents consistently follow the appeal to "discover yourself" but, since this is often quite hard, some kind of "Sisyphean task", they simply postpone their choice. They do not realise they are unable to take this decision and are comforted by the belief they will be able to do so in the future, when they will be (even) more informed (about themselves and opportunities in society). In addition, it is not true

that students take these decisions completely alone (even if this is mostly heard in their statements), but seek the support and comfort of their parents, sometimes even friends. According to the ideology of choice, parents also strongly believe in the desires of their children and support them; however, different experts are not needed yet since, in their opinion, the students are still young and have time to choose correctly, while education is the safest choice for all possible situations in the future. In this individualistic world where you can or must rely solely on yourself, it actually is not odd that the family is considered the safest and warmest resort since, unlike various vocational experts, parents are surely and entirely “on your side”. Yet, it would be interesting to see how much parents use these kinds of books and counselling when deciding on their own lives or even precisely in relation to bringing up and guiding their children. Here, compared to their children, we would probably find out that parents are more likely to seek experts’ advice and to thus try to minimise the burden of a “proper” choice.

The relevance of education today?

There is nothing wrong with the fact that young people today have many possibilities to educate themselves, nor is there anything wrong with the fact that they are more and more educated; the problem lies in *what education promises* these young people. And it promises something which cannot be fulfilled since the labour market does not follow the educational ideology. Young people find themselves in a highly undesirable position; on one hand they are encouraged by the contemporary ideology to do something with themselves by persuading them they have “all the possibilities in this world to do exactly what they desire” while, on the other hand, a harsh reality awaits them with a tremendously competitive labour market in which there are considerably more applicants than vacancies. Accordingly, highly educated young people end up either at the employment service, either working in various part-time, temporary jobs which are usually far removed from their educational accomplishments.

The modern ideology of choice presents the world as being a world full of opportunities, a world which knows no limitations, only opportunities, which lure the individual to create him/herself and his/her own destiny according to his/her desired image. By unveiling and lifting the spell from the traditional authorities of religion, faith, class, ethnicity, gender and in the modern world also of place of residence, since distance has become bridgeable either instantly through the virtual world or in a couple of hours through the modern traffic regime, it at the same time hides the fact that the individual is still bound by various limitations which could prove to be even more vigorous, but surely more subtle. The individual virtually has no

influence on the conditions of societal (re)production, on the labour market, social security, on the education and health system; they only have a possibility and choice to work on themselves, their privacy and immediate social surroundings, in a miniature social network which includes their family, friends, volunteer associations, or the virtual world. But the problem is that these limitations are no longer recognised by the individual; everything they feel or understand is their own personal deficiencies. And when a young, highly educated person is searching for a job, sending out numerous applications and, if they are lucky, receives an invitation for a job interview, they will in most cases return home low-spirited since the interview will only reveal new personal and vocation imperfections which they must improve on in order to become a more interesting, flexible and creative and thus more employable member of society. The way they are is namely not good enough since only a few will recognise that they are confronting structural, societal limitations and demands, and not with a biographic life-course which does not meet contemporary requirements.

All of this means that something essential has changed. And what has changed is the burden of responsibility, which is carried individually. When someone lives in an “ideal world”, as presented by the modern ideology of only opportunities, then this individual has to confront many crossroads which contain the burden of decisions, of self-creation. One of the most powerful, most influential crossroads is that of educational choice since this holds tremendous psycho-social and economic consequences for future life and this decision also implies the uncertainty, fear, shame and regret which follow in the event of a “wrong” choice. And in order to avoid possible wrong choices, in order to “really” find and invent themselves, young people prefer not to decide and thus enrol in gymnasiums so as to prolong the desired status that still promises many possible paths and minimises the risk of making a wrong decision. In addition to this non-decision, the gymnasium is the embodiment of yet another ideology which states that knowledge is everything since we live in a knowledge society and this knowledge is a universal means for achieving the best possible position in society.

This ideology also offers illusory security. It seems you are “well on your way” if only you invest enough time and money for your education since you can succeed only by yourself and education is the key to success. Unfortunately, the reality is quite different as we can choose only within predetermined, consumer designed decisions and we overlook the fact that we cannot choose in what kind of social conditions or circumstances we want to actually choose, educate and work. As Renata Salecl writes:

The success of the ideology of choice in today's society has been in blinding people to the fact that their actual choices are becoming severely

limited by the social divisions in society and that issues such as the organisation of labour, health and safety, and the environment appear more and more beyond their choice (Salecl, 2010: 148).

Without doubt, education is important and the fact that the educational level in Slovenian society is rising means that the cultural and production capital of society is also increasing, and this has many positive effects and can potentially increase the well-being of the entire population. What is bad in this battle for education is that attaining high educational levels has become a profitable activity like almost all other spheres of human life. What is negative is that this battle for titles, diplomas and certificates more reflects the consumer/entrepreneurial behaviour of individuals than the desire for knowledge. Individuals are those fighting this battle and competing with each other for a better starting position. It is also wrong that young people believe and hope that they can become anything they desire, that they invest their whole "selves" in these desires and ambitions and only to then find out that this is actually not possible. The difference between one's desired self-image and the actual situation in the adult world is therefore big. And this difference leads to a mutilated and damaged self-image and the blame for failure lies on the shoulders of each individual instead of being perceived as a common destiny of many young, educated people and a reflection of the economic, social, political circumstances of the society in which we live.

The capitalistic appeal individualises individuals as isolated strugglers in a complex, muddled mass of choices, demands, opportunities, hopes, desires and separates individuals from each other, from their community, from society. Namely, it suits the capitalist mode of production that individuals (through a high and specialised) education professionalise themselves and fight for their own survival and position in society and thus divert their gaze away from society itself, from reflecting on what kind of society they live in and if perhaps there could be something wrong with society itself or the manner of socio-economic production. We may conclude with the words of Mirjana Ule:

The key problem of new individualisation lies precisely in the epistemological deception of late modernity, in which masses of individuals, each for him/herself, are contesting for the best life space and cannot see that they are crumbling collective and political problems into the sand of self-disciplinary activity (Ule, 2002: 30).

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