

BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS: CASE STUDIES OF 9TH GRADE STUDENTS IN SLOVENIA

Abstract. *The article examines the biographical perspective of educational transitions through the methodological approach of qualitative case studies. An in-depth analysis of individual cases provides important insights into the processes of educational decision-making and reveals the key challenges young people today face when planning their future educational pathways. The article identifies and interprets the main findings with regard to a wider societal and institutional framework, which structures and shapes the individual lives of students: unequal access to education, the structure of the education system, institutional support, the processes of individualisation, de-fragmentation of life courses, familialisation and parental involvement.*

Key words: *educational transition, educational choice, life course, biography, parental involvement, case study*

Introduction

Educational transitions are one of the key life transitions in individual life courses. They usually bear great significance, both perceived and actual, for the life paths of individuals as education is often seen as vital for successful employment and, thus, for a favourable socio-economic position. This is even more the case for more disadvantaged and vulnerable groups who often regard education as an opportunity to climb the social ladder or at least as a way to secure a solid socio-economic position, with small or no risk of unemployment (McDowell et al., 2016). In the Slovenian education system, the educational transition from lower to upper secondary education is the first life transition which includes a choice, when students are for the first time confronted with a crossroads, a decision that will significantly shape their future life courses and structure their life chances. As Walter Heinz, a renowned researcher of life course studies, said: "Life chances are strongly dependent upon the structural context of employment opportunities that constitute social inequality across the life course" (Heinz, 2002: 188).

* Andreja Živoder, PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

Unlike the common expectations, however, employment opportunities no longer have a straightforward link with (at least formal) education. Late modernity, with its post-fordistic capitalist mode of production, is characterised by precarious labour markets, unpredictable employment opportunities, the self-responsible, flexible and fast-learning worker who has to be ready to jump to another, better job if the opportunity arises or quickly search and adapt to a new one if necessary if one becomes redundant, has blurred the link between education and employment. Moreover, today education is no longer a guarantee for future employment, but also the previously much more straightforward link between knowledge, skills and know-how of a certain educational profile and the necessary demands of specific vocational and professional profiles is becoming looser and less predictable, making the choice of educational programme a challenge even when other key elements of the choice are unproblematic.

What consequently is also becoming blurred and more difficult is the planning of one's life course/future (Leccardi, 2006a; Bauman, 2007). Choices (in a positive sense, i.e. choosing among (good) alternatives, but also in a negative sense, i.e. choosing the 'best worst-case scenario') and planning of the future have become a vicious task because one has no control over the structural conditions embedded in, for example, the education, health and employment systems which structure, shape and limit also personal individual circumstances and opportunities, but one has to simultaneously take over the risks and responsibility for one's choices (Salecl, 2010).

Applying the methodology of case studies (Starman, 2013), the article attempts to explore in detail the biographical, i.e. students', perspective of the educational transition to upper secondary school and thus focus on the in-depth and less visible qualitative findings that might shed some light on the processes and difficulties of the educational choices, transitions and life-course planning in contemporary Slovenia, in terms of both the systemic/institutional dimension (educational and employment systems) as well as the private dimension (family life and individual choices, barriers). The article adopts the biographical perspective of students at two different points in time in their life paths, just before and right after the educational transition to upper secondary education. The two students in the case studies were chosen as exemplary cases of two different ways of taking and coping with educational decisions and future plans.

The article begins with a conceptual theoretical framework, followed by a methodological description of the empirical research and sample. The central part of the article, the analysis of empirical data with a focus on two case studies, is presented in two subsections where the first examines the initial encounter with the students, when they were participating in the focus group, which took place before the transition and analyses educational

the choice and processes of decision-making, while the second subsection focuses on the post-transition in-depth interview and analyses the educational choice outcome, the course of the transition and future plans. In the discussion and conclusion part, the research findings and interpretation insights are placed in a wider societal context.

Life course, educational transitions and biography

The life course approach examines how individual life paths are shaped in structural, historical and cultural contexts, where equal attention is paid to macro-social conditions as to individual biographies (Elder, 1994). This makes the concept of a life course both sociological, as it refers to the social, institutional and structural conditions and changes in the individual's life habitus, social and historical time, as well as psychological, as it refers to the individual's biographical experience, identity and social inclusion throughout their life span (Ule, 2008).

Life transitions are key and critical passages in the individual's life trajectory, according to which individuals obtain new social positions and, accordingly, also new roles, responsibilities, rights and status (Heinz, 1997; Levy, 1997), whereby the processes of both social integration and subjective identities are negotiated (Cuconato et al., 2016), addressed and established anew. This makes the transitions *social situations* in which societal norms and structures of inequalities are also reproduced (Cuconato et al., 2016), which is very important with regard to educational trajectories and transitions. Educational trajectories are an individual's paths and transitions through educational institutions, which lead to different levels of educational capital. Educational transitions, like other life transitions, are affected by the structure (e.g. of the education system, social inequality, and of the welfare state) and agency (e.g. individual choices, abilities, interests).

Time is a key component of life courses; from a life course perspective, a distinction is made between *biographical or personal time* (the individual's life span), the *social time* and the *historical time* (historical events and patterns) (Carr, 2009: XIII; Hareven in Hagestad, 1997; Leccardi, 2006a). Yet, time has often been taken for granted, embedded in normalcy in sociology (Shirani and Henwood, 2011) or "generally treated as a backdrop to experience and rarely contemplated as a significant contextual dimension that contributes to how people make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their worlds" (Compton-Lilly, 2015: 2). However, the individual is constantly addressed by society to delineate the course of their biographical time, which in fact means that individuals are asked to construct a meaningful relationship with social time, i.e. establish connections between the individual and the collective past, present and future (Leccardi, 2006a: 15-16).

Educational transition is a critical passage in an individual's life, and the perception of time is vital (Leccardi, 1999; 2006b). Namely, educational transitions and the related educational choice are hardly a singular event (although technically they do occur at a certain point in time), but a process as they not only encompass the current opportunities wishes, options and actions since they are the result of both perceptions of oneself in the future (wishes, plans, aspirations) as well as the pool of past achievements, experiences and transitions.

In a life course perspective, biography refers to the subjective perception of an individual's life or the subjective life story that an individual constructs while moving through the institutionalised life course and transitions (Cuconato et al., 2016: 46). In other words, young people's biographies are "their subjective appropriation of their own life courses" (Walther, 2006: 120).

Case studies: Educational choice, transition, decision-making and future plans

The article studies educational transitions in exemplary case studies of 9th grade students in Slovenia. It draws on qualitative data obtained in the European project GOETE¹. The qualitative phase of the field work was carried out in two rounds and took place between April and November 2011 in three basic schools² in Slovenia located in three cities in different Slovenian regions. The article focuses on those 17 students who participated in the qualitative research twice, before their transition to upper secondary school (when they participated in either semi-structured interviews or focus groups) and just after their transition (when they participated in in-depth interviews)^{3, 4}.

The interviews and focus groups were coded in a thematically specific way using a deductive (focus on the pre-identified key themes – educational transition, educational choice, decision-making, future plans) and an inductive approach (Mayring, 2000). The coding procedure resulted in the following table:

¹ *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe* (www.goete.eu). For more information about the project and its international perspective, see Walther et al., 2016 and Ule, 2013.

² *Basic education in Slovenia lasts 9 years and comprises three cycles – two cycles of primary education (6 years) and one cycle of lower secondary education (3 years).*

³ *The sample of 17 students was obtained from a pool of 66 students who participated in the first round of the qualitative data gathering (28 students participated in semi-structured interviews and 38 in 9 focus groups).*

⁴ *For detailed information about the sampling, data collection and analysis methods, sample characteristics and research instruments, see Ule et al., 2012 (Slovenia) and du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012 (comparative perspective).*

Table 1: KEY CODING THEMES

Student*,**	Educational choice/ transition	Main decision- taker?	Educational choice outcome, personal evaluation	Future plans
S1-F	Decision-making effort, postponement of decision	Family – Way- keepers	Right choice	Loose, undecided
S2-M	Straightforward, no problems	Himself	Right choice	Explicit
S3-F	Decision-making effort	Herself	Right choice	Elaborated, explicit
S4-F	Decision-making effort, postponement of decision	Herself	Right choice	Undecided, no plans
S5-M	Straightforward	Family – Way-keepers	Right choice	Explicit, but changing
S6-F	Difficult, had to abandon her wishes (parents' influence)	Family – Gate-keepers	Wrong choice	Explicit
S7-M	Straightforward, postponement of decision	Himself	Right choice	Undecided
S8-F	Straightforward	Herself	Right choice	Elaborated, explicit
S9-F	Problematic, had to abandon her wishes (parents' influence)	Family – Gate-keepers	Ambivalent	Undecided
S10-F	Straightforward (after obtaining all the information)	Herself	Right choice	Explicit, elaborated
S11-F	Decision-making effort Difficult transition	Herself	Ambivalent	Loose
S12-F	Difficult choice, decision- making effort, transferred after a month	Family – Way-keepers	Wrong choice (transferred after a few weeks)	Loose
S13-F	Problematic, had to abandon her wishes (parents' influence)	Family – Gatekeep- ers & Socio-eco- nomic reasons	Ambivalent	Loose, changing
S14-F	Decision-making effort	Family – Way-keepers	Right choice	Loose
S15-F	Difficult, had to abandon her wishes (parents' influence)	Family – Gatekeepers	Ambivalent, plans how to proceed with the temporar- ily abandoned plans	Elaborated
S16-F	Decision-making effort, postponement of decision. Transition very stressful.	Herself	Ambivalent	Undecided, changing
S17-M	Decision-making effort Difficult transition	Family – Way-keepers	Right choice- school, but possible transfer to a shorter programme	Explicit, but changing

* The code for the students refers to, i.e. Student 1 etc., Female / Male.

** Both students who are analysed in the case studies below are highlighted.

The objective of the above presentation of the key themes was not to search for patterns or make an attempt at a classification system, but merely to outline the biggest coding themes and the diversity of the respondents in terms of how they view and feel the educational choice and transition and how they imagine and plan their future. Further, this will allow us a more detailed discussion of each of the key themes from the biographical accounts of the exemplary case studies.

Educational transitions and choices are social situations and therefore depend not only on the individual's desires, abilities or past achievements, but also on the systemic structures of access to education as well as everyday school and familial life, with its access to information, activities, parental support in/and control. Analysis of the extended qualitative data on students in the same research (GOETE) has shown that students, in line with the processes of the increasing individualisation of societal risks (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), growing uncertainty (Bauman, 2007) and unpredictability and decreasing standardisation of life courses (Walther, 2006; du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006), consider education to be highly relevant for their future lives (Walther et al. 2016; Živoder, 2013). This makes educational choices a demanding task, which is evident above all when students lack a vocational wish and then usually adopt one of two strategies, *postponement of the decision* (enrolling in a gymnasium to delay the educational decision) or more is better (the more education, the better – a tactic for reducing risks) (Živoder, 2011).

In our sample, 5 out of 17 students did not have any problems with educational choice, 4 of them had a very clear vocational wish, while 1 still had no vocational wish, which is why he chose a gymnasium without hesitation. Four students enrolled in gymnasiums in order to gain time and postpone their educational decision for the next 4 years. Other students included in the sample went through different processes of decision-making and transitions as they faced various barriers – a lack of educational or vocational wishes, a lack of information, parental influence or socio-economic barriers (only one student in the sample).

Analysis of the parental involvement in the international sample (of the GOETE project) has shown that parents exert a significant influence on their children's educational trajectories and transitions and are very much involved in their children's educational pathways in a multitude of ways, as advisers, supporters, caregivers, evaluators of children's wishes etc. and also children often choose them as the most trustworthy persons who would always ensure their best interests (Ule et al., 2015). In terms of educational decisions about upper secondary school, research has shown there are three general ways of parental involvement: supporters (no interference), way-keepers and gatekeepers (Ule et al., 2015).

Supporters are those parents who do not (directly) interfere in a child's decision-making as they believe that it is in child's best interest to choose by themselves. However, such an attitude is often only apparent as there are many less direct ways that parents influence their children, which limits the child's independence, for example, the parents' socio-economic and cultural resources or parental expectations and aspirations, which are often internalised by the child, even more so in today's society due to the high level of *familialisation* (Edwards and Alldred, 2000; du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006), which designates a general trend towards the private sphere (away from the public sphere), where all important decisions are taken. Way-keepers are those parents who generally leave choices to their children, but who offer soft guidance and support to keep them on the 'right track' when they consider it necessary, for example, when they assess that the child lacks crucial information or when the child asks their parents for help by him/herself. Gatekeepers, on the other hand, are those parents who also directly and strongly influence the child's educational choices, often by preventing or ignoring the child's wishes. Moreover, they often have a detailed agenda for their child's educational and/or professional future, sometimes regardless of the child's wishes, abilities or interests.

In our sample, eight students (according to their own discourse as well as in the researchers' opinion) made the educational choices by themselves; after the transition six of them consider this choice as the right one, while two are ambivalent. For the other nine students, the parents were more or less directly involved in the decision-making, five of them as way-keepers (soft support and navigation) and four of them as gatekeepers (all of them preventing the child's choice). Out of the five cases of parents as way-keepers, three students consider the choice as the right one, one as the right one, but with a possible transfer to a less demanding programme, while for one student the decision was wrong and she has already transferred to another school. Out of the four cases of parents as gatekeepers, none of the students considers the educational choice to be the right one. For one of them, the choice was wrong and she is already looking for a way to fulfil her vocational wish, while three of them are ambivalent, trying to cope with the situation and to appropriate the parental decision as their own or trying to invent new plans to get back on the right track (as in the case of Sanja below).

In only one case, parental involvement as a gatekeeper was coupled with systemic barriers, in this case a lack of financial resources. What concerns other institutional, systemic or instrumental barriers (such as not achieving enrolment criteria) was not directly mentioned by the students (at least in this sample). However, as we will see below, instrumental barriers might be hidden for example in parental attitude (the desired schools are too far away – the problem of access to schools for students living in distant areas).

Educational choice and decision-making

Sanja (S15-F) is a very lively, positive and communicative girl. She enjoyed participating in the research and did not hesitate a second when asked if she would be willing to participate again in 5 years. In fact, she immediately told the interviewer she would provide a new telephone number if she changes it in the following years. She was also very active and loud in the focus group discussion, which had five participants – girls from two classes. She told us that their schoolmates make fun of them and consider them as “nerds” as they do not want to play truant for example, but at the same time they ask them to help with their exercises, help with tests, lend notebooks etc.

Sanja has big dreams and is willing to climb many barriers for them. Actually, one could say she is already living her life in the manner of her dreams. Namely, she would like to become an internationally renowned actress, living in the USA and walking on the “*red carpet*”. She is very entrepreneurial and independent in her quest. She believes education and vocation are particularly important: “*Because if you have a job that you desire, you view it more as a hobby than employment*”. That is why she is willing to do many things and take many chances to follow her dreams.

For instance, she searched for all the information by herself, in terms of the more immediate transition to upper secondary school as well as about later studies’ vocation and living conditions abroad. She wanted to enrol in an artistic gymnasium, specialising in theatre and drama, which is located in another city, approximately 180 km away. She gathered information not only about the school, but also about dormitories where she would live, and made a presentation to her parents. However, her parents did not agree to support her educational choice (parents – gatekeepers), as she says, their argument was that she was too young and the school was too far away. She had to accept the situation and decided to enrol in another school, a general gymnasium, which is much closer to her home (she can live at home).

Nevertheless, immediately as she had to cope with the rejection of her choice, and even before entering the upper secondary school, she had forged another plan – to finish the first 2 years in the chosen gymnasium and then to transfer to another gymnasium in another city that offers an international matura (final exam), which would enable her to study abroad, in England or America.

Martin, on the other hand, is in a completely different situation to Sanja, even though they both enrolled in general gymnasiums, and both gymnasiums are the top gymnasiums in their regions. Martin is a very bright, talkative boy, but also cautious and sensitive to any injustice. He has a twin sister and she attends the same gymnasium, but is in a different class. We first talked to him in a focus group with two other boys (from the same class)

and two girls (from another class). The atmosphere in the focus group was very relaxed and Martin was one of the most active members. At first, he warned the other classmates that a teacher might hear them, but when we assured him that nothing of what they say will go to the teachers and that they do not need to give names, the group was very lively and shared a lot, including about the various injustices at the school and the relations between students and teachers.

He considers education very important and influential for his future (vocational) life: *"Yes, you have to find something that you will enjoy, really, 40 years, [...]. But yes, that you will not work only because it is paid well..."*.

He enrolled in a general gymnasium because overall worldliness is very important to him, but above all because he has no idea of what he would like to become: *"[...] therefore, I wanted to prolong this time and also that I have all possibilities open [...] I didn't want to decide yet. I chose this gymnasium because I know they have this programme for an international matura and supposedly it is much more difficult now to get jobs, especially in Slovenia and I want to leave myself an option for abroad"*. Nevertheless, he is afraid of making potentially wrong decisions, such as for example that he would "throw away" 4 years in a gymnasium while he could already get a vocation in that time.

Martin was very critical of the school in terms of providing relevant information for the educational choice. He felt that the school could do much more to inform the students about various possibilities and vocations, especially those students who do not want to do the same vocation as their parents (in this way students already familiarise with the vocation), so there is a lack of everything in this regard – not enough visits to examine vocations, not enough discussion with the psychologist, the social worker at the school could do more, nothing is sufficiently explained or clarified regarding the possible vocations and employment opportunities. In fact, he proposed that schools should have an "open to the public" day where you could really feel how it would be like there, as on the information days everybody is too kind to really get to know the school atmosphere. When asked about the role of his parents in his decision-making, he says that they talked about it, but they let him decide, that he could also go to a vocational school if he wanted.

Educational choice outcome, transition and future plans

Sanja is now attending the general gymnasium and appears relatively content, yet she is already planning how she will study and live abroad and, like before, she is already "ready" as she has by now gathered much of the necessary information. Her desire remains unchanged and her will is as strong as before: *"In 10 years I will be 25, 26 years old and you will*

watch me on TV, I will be in America on the red carpet. That is my goal! And even if I don't succeed to be an actress, my goal is still to at least live in the US. I have the feeling that America gives you such possibilities that you can succeed and that I think I could have a better life there". When asked if she has already been there, she again showed how decisive and determined she is – no, she has not yet been there, but she wanted to go on language-learning vocations, but everything is too expensive, together with the plane tickets around EUR 2,000–3,000 for a week; she also cannot go as an au pair because she is still underage. She would like to go to New York or California.

Nevertheless, she still regrets she could not go to the school of her choice, as she would "already have a background in theatre". When asked if she is angry with her parents since she made such an effort and they did not support her, she is ambivalent: *"Perhaps they were right, perhaps not. Perhaps I would be homesick, perhaps not. On one hand, this could be a good beginning for me, as I would be a little independent and all. Because if I were to find real friends, I would not be as home sick"*.

Her second-best plan remains the same – to transfer to another school in the third year and pass the international matura and then study abroad. When asked if she thinks her parents will allow her to go to America in 2 years if they did not allow her now to go to another city in Slovenia, she said they have already agreed. When asked if she believes them and that they will not change their minds, she responds that she will put pressure on them. Yet, when discussing the future and potential barriers, the biggest barrier she sees is convincing her parents, she could wrap them around her finger, she says, but she has to try hard and choose the right tactic. She feels that her mother, more than her father, stands in the way of her dreams, for example, *"No, my little child, my baby is not going"*. Or when she describes how everybody laughs when she says she would like to become an actress: *"And I wonder why? Or when, for example, I found a school in America and also in England that has all that [theatre, drama-related contents to become an actress], my mum says that those who talk the most about leaving the city, most often stay here. But the more she says this, the more I want to achieve my goals so in the end I can say, look, you were wrong"*. When asked if she will insist on her own desires, she responds: *"Yes I will, because when I set a goal, I also stick to it"*.

How certain and dedicated she is to her desire is again revealed by how she intends to realise her plans: *"Well, now I have to study very very hard in the next 2 years in gymnasium and the same also in the third and fourth years. Then I have to convince my mother and father that I can go study further away and then proceed with that and realise my dreams"*. Also, as soon as she entered the new school, she immediately joined the TV class,

which is the only thing available there, and later she will join the cultural marathon and film workshop. *“So my goal is to join everything that is related to television or theatre”*. As regards her future in other life spheres, her plans are much vaguer, expressed only in very general terms, for example, she has no ideas yet about her future familial life, she only knows that she wants to marry and *“have a beautiful white gown”*.

Martin, on the other hand, had a somewhat difficult start at the new school, he felt the basic school should prepare them more for this crucial leap, which you do not expect and you are not prepared for. He speaks about the “shock” of everything – a new environment, new friends, everything new, everything completely different. He feels a psychologist or someone like that should prepare them more, by presenting everything. Regardless, he says he feels better at this school as the students are more mature, and are on a different level of thinking. When asked why he thinks there is such a difference in the maturity of the students if only 5 months have passed since the previous interview at the basic school, he says that here they confront you with the fact that you are more free, more dependent on yourself, you cannot lean on others as much, and so you grow up a little. Further, he says it was difficult, he was a little scared at the beginning, but that you cannot do anything against it, so he actually accepted his fate that it will be hard work in the gymnasium.

In terms of vocational wishes and future plans, he remains as undecided as before, he says he does not see himself anywhere yet, although that he likes medicine or ecology, perhaps something in that direction. His worries and fear about making a wrong decision about his life have become even more visible in the interview: *“Yes, I am worried that I will not... that in a certain crucial situation I will not decide correctly, I am worried about a job, if I will get one and also because this will then influence everything later, for instance children or something like that. There are worries, but you have to be optimistic, everything can anyway change by then”*. When asked about what is it that changes, he says things might change, but also thinking about what you really want. Further, when asked about what he actually means by being afraid of making wrong decisions, he explains that you will do one thing and later find out that this is not what you wanted, for example, waste 4 years in a gymnasium while you could already have a vocation, such a feeling.

He shows also anxiety with regard to future employment: *“Insecurity, yes. You are afraid if you will succeed, that you will not struggle so much for something, I don't know, that you will work for something [a vocation] and then you won't get a job”*. He thinks education and knowledge are very important as the more you know, the more fields you can succeed in, although you still cannot be 100% sure that you will succeed. A good job

is: *"That you are paid for what you do, that you are not underappreciated or, how should I say, that you get what you earn... depends on what job you choose...otherwise that you can normally live with your family, that you can provide for your children without problems, that you don't have such worries"*.

Conclusion

At first sight, it might appear that Sanja's case is an example of unrealistic ambition caused by 'youth', inexperience and a lack of insight into the world of adulthood and employment. However, a detailed analysis of her discourse, dedication, resourcefulness and planning points to other structural dimensions – that of *access* to education (and vocation), the *young age* at which students have to make the crucial educational decision, as well as the *familialisation* and *child-centredness* of contemporary Slovenian families. Namely, Sanja's parents did not allow her to enter the desired high school, according to Sanja, due to her youth and because it is too far away. In this case, her parents acted as gatekeepers and prevented her from following her desired educational route. In systemic terms, her chosen school was a gymnasium and, although it is specialised in theatre and drama, in the Slovenian education system it still offers an open gateway to university education, which means there is no objective systemic reason for the gatekeeping. In addition, the discourse about how children are too young to decide in a mature and informative way is in direct contradiction with the systemic appeal by society to take over the responsibility for one's life course – educational decisions at the end of compulsory schooling. Although there are no interviews with Sanja's parents, her indirect speech hints that her parents consider Sanja's dreams unrealistic, feel she is too young to be independent and that they have to protect her from herself. This also points to the process of familialisation and the child-centredness of many Slovenian families today that on one hand would do everything for their children, who are the centre of their lives but, on the other hand, also stifle their children by keeping them too close and preventing their independence.

Here another aspect of structures of unequal access emerges – perhaps her parents would think differently if the artistic gymnasium were closer to their city of residence and she could live at home and attend school. This would mean that students who live in far way areas are disadvantaged in terms of their access to education as the choice of schools is much narrower if their parents do not support them moving to another city (like in Sanja's case) or due to socio-economic reasons if they are unable to support their child's move or certain schools (as in the case of a Roma girl whose parents could not afford for her to go to hairdressing school in another city – S13).

The in-depth interview with Sanja offered an insight beyond the general classifications of ‘normality’ and we certainly cannot dismiss her case due to unrealistic ambitions or naivety. Indeed, it seems that “walking down the red carpet in LA” is not a very likely scenario, but the point lies elsewhere. Her dedication and resourcefulness show that to some extent she is still realistic – she does not succumb when her wish is thwarted; instead, she immediately finds a new alternative, a new plan, which is still in the same direction, but perhaps a little less ambitious. The Slovenian education system is in this regard very kind to students and possible changes of mind since it is very open and permeable compared to other education systems, for example the German one which is highly stratified and much less permeable (see Walther et al., 2016).

If Sanja’s case is about barriers to the realisation of (vocational) dreams, Martin’s case is about searching for those dreams and patiently and simultaneously anxiously waiting for his vocational wish to crystallise. If Sanja had to involuntarily postpone her professional future due to her parents’ gatekeeping, Martin urgently needed it: The same institutional option, but with different personal consequences. Martin’s case highlights some of the unwanted aspects of the contemporary processes of *individualisation*, *de-fragmentation* of the traditional and more socially designated life courses and transitions and increasing *responsibility* for one’s life course. He is an example of how difficult or even terrifying the ‘freedom to choose’ and independence can be, especially in the absence of a clear educational wish and when one understands the significance of the coming educational choice and its consequences. Martin displays a lot of anxiety regarding his life choices and is very afraid of their consequences, particularly those arising from potential wrong choices. He feels he is alone responsible for those choices and the future in general, even though he also shows an understanding of the systematic and socially defined influences that frame and limit those choices (for example the changing world, unemployment problems, potential escape abroad), but this is simply not enough to relieve him of his anxiety and responsibility.

As overwhelming as his educational and other life decisions are for Martin, he cannot lean on the institutionally provided help – on more than one occasion, he expressed how he misses different forms of help, be it in terms of educational choice (activities to get to know different vocations, conversations with relevant people) or in terms of coping with the transition and the new school (conversations with, for example, a psychologist or somebody else who would prepare and help him to cope). This triggers an interesting discussion about *institutional support* in the Slovenian education system. On one hand, we have previously established that institutional support in Slovenia is relatively generous (i.e. the help of school experts (teachers,

social workers, psychologists) and outside local experts, i.e. a psychologist at the employment office), but that students and their families resort to it only in rare cases (Ule et al., 2012), which we understood as a consequence of the familialisation process since the majority of educational choices were taken in the shelter of the home, either by students alone or with the help of parents (with varying degrees of influence). However, Martin's case shows the other side of the same system – he desperately needed various forms of institutional support and guidance, but did not get it (sufficiently). What are the reasons for this discrepancy and what might be the problem with the institutional support is an important question to be tackled elsewhere.

The in-depth analysis of the two individual case studies reveals several issues relevant to the wider societal framework and illustrates the unprecedented challenges young people today face when planning and deciding on their future educational and employment pathways. It shows how contemporary circumstances and processes, such as unequal access to education, the structure of the education system, the processes of individualisation and de-fragmentation of life courses with the apparent freedom of choice, self-responsibility and appeals to self-creativity and self-reflectivity, together with what in many ways are the contradictory processes of familialisation and the child-centredness of modern Slovenian families, structure and shape individual student lives. It reflects the "Weltanshannung" and the position of the Millennium generation (see Ule, 2016 in this issue), i.e. how society's appeals, opportunities, contradictions, clashes and processes of individual coping and adaptation to actual possibilities are carried out, resolved and expressed by actual people with names, hopes and fears. The case studies illuminate how, in the absence of firm, long-term and unchanging social forms, institutions and expectations, young people are left to themselves to find individual, short-term solutions and answers in a world of contradictions, where apparently 'anything is possible', but 'nothing lasts', and 'everyone has to make their own choices', while at the same time they are 'too young' to make these choices or some choices are nevertheless out of reach. Young people have to be resourceful, modest, informed, open-minded and flexible to do well in the (adult) world and to not internalise and interpret such societal contradictions as a subjective failure.

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