

GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES IN SLOVENIA: DILEMMAS AND CONTRADICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse the relationships among the different actors involved in educational trajectories in Slovenia, to understand their different perspectives, and to describe the constellations of factors of relevance, responsibility and support in students' educational trajectories. The research instruments are semi-structured interviews with different actors (students, parents, teachers, counsellors, experts). Since the 1970s, Slovenia has managed to strongly raise the educational level of especially disadvantaged groups of young people, such as women and children from socially weaker families and milieus. This kind of system has supported the social integration of disadvantaged, socially vulnerable and handicapped groups of young people. However, today and especially in the light of the increasingly serious economic and social crisis this system is under threat from both the outside and inside. Externally, it is threatened by the lack of financial and material resources, the neoliberal austerity policy and the weakening of the institutions of the welfare state; internally, it is weakened by the imbalance between key educational agents, students, parents, teachers and experts. While the external pressures are weakening the strength and position of schools as the key educational institutions, the internal pressures are diminishing the professional authority of teachers and their professional competencies.

Key words: relevance of education, educational aspirations, social integration, atypical educational transitions, self-responsibility, individualism

IL GOVERNAMENTO DELLE TRAIETTORIE EDUCATIVE IN SLOVENIA: DILEMMI E CONTRADDIZIONI

SINTESI

Lo scopo di questo articolo è quello di analizzare le relazioni tra i diversi attori coinvolti nelle traiettorie educative in Slovenia. L'articolo aspira a capire le loro prospettive diverse, e di descrivere le costellazioni di fattori di pertinenza, responsabilità e sostegno nelle traiettorie educative degli studenti. Strumenti di ricerca sono interviste semi-strutturate con studenti, i loro genitori, insegnanti, consulenti ed esperti. Dal 1970 del secolo scorso la Slovenia è riuscita ad aumentare fortemente il livello di istruzione di gruppi svantaggiati in particolare di giovani, i bambini provenienti da famiglie socialmente più deboli. Questo tipo di sistema ha sostenuto l'integrazione sociale dei gruppi svantaggiati, socialmente vulnerabili e dei giovani portatori di handicap. Tuttavia, oggi e soprattutto alla luce della sempre più grave crisi economica e sociale, questo sistema è in pericolo, sia dall'esterno che all'interno. Esternamente è minacciata dalla mancanza di risorse finanziarie e materiali, la politica di austerità neoliberista e l'indebolimento delle istituzioni del welfare, internamente si è indebolito dallo squilibrio tra agenti chiave educativi, studenti, genitori, insegnanti ed esperti. Mentre le pressioni esterne stanno indebolendo la forza e la posizione delle scuole come istituzioni educative fondamentali, le pressioni interne indeboliscono l'autorità professionale degli insegnanti e le loro competenze professionali.

Parole chiave: la pertinenza dell'istruzione, aspirazioni educative, integrazione sociale, transizioni educative atipiche, auto-responsabilità, l'individualismo

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyse the relationships among the different actors involved in individual educational trajectories in Slovenia (students, teachers, parents, experts), to understand their different perspectives, and to describe the constellations of factors of relevance, responsibility and support in students' educational trajectories. The focus is on the educational period between the end of primary education and the early stages of secondary education, vocational education and training. Educational transitions from primary to secondary school are considered decisive as they considerably shape the future life courses of students. Safeguarding transitions to the next educational level is considered the most important task of primary school. The main research topic is the relationship between education and the life course and how this is connected to the process of social integration. In modern societies, individual lives have been standardised by institutionalising distinct life phases and the transitions between them (Walther et al., 2006).

The empirical and contextual data which this article and others in this thematic issue draw on were collected in various parts of the project Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE – see www.goete.eu). While the participating countries included Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK, we focus here on Slovenia and Italy as Mediterranean countries with comprehensive education systems. In this article the analysis is based mainly on qualitative data obtained in semi-structured interviews with teachers, principals, internal and external experts, parents and students of our case study schools¹ (Walther et al., 2010).

In European knowledge societies the adequacy of education means a balance of individual, social and economic aspects. This is operationalised by exploring how educational institutions conceptualise and organise individual educational trajectories (Walther et al., 2010). Whereas up until the end of the last century institutionalised *educational trajectories* were intended to prepare children for adulthood, and the phase of youth was understood as a kind of “educational moratorium” (Zinnecker, 1991), in the last 20 years we can speak of “new learning life courses” which extend over the whole life span and are no longer specially restricted only to youth (Chisholm, 2008). The ongoing differentiation and de-standardisation of life courses have extended the

perspective of school learning towards *lifelong learning*. Accordingly, life courses are addressed as *lifelong educational trajectories* (Walther et al., 2010).

While education today has an ever more important role in the social integration of individuals, at the same time the contribution of education to social integration is no longer self-evident in the sense of providing individuals with meaningful and secure life chances, the economy with a well-prepared workforce and society with responsible and active citizens. While public and scientific debate in the past two decades has focused on lifelong learning, *school* education continues to be the formally institutionalised and certified backbone of lifelong learning careers (Walther et al., 2010). Success or failure in education is increasingly ascribed to individual decisions and performance. Apart from leading to unequal status positions, individual learning achievements are ever more related to inclusion or exclusion at each single transitional step within the education system (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). Simultaneously, school failure is no longer only addressed in terms of social justice but increasingly also in terms of the costs of school failure (EC, 2008).

However, the adequacy of education is being questioned not just by the external factors but also through the dilemmas that emerge within schools (OECD, 2008). Teachers feel overburdened by societal challenges, which are perceived as ‘invading’ the school from the ‘outside’, such as poverty, violence and bullying, bad health and risky lifestyles of students (Peček Čuk and Lesar, 2011). Students’ well-being is affected by stress, uncertainty, competition or alienation; parents often express a lack of satisfaction with education. Employers refer to the mismatch between school qualifications (lacking basic skills or key competencies) and labour market demands as reasons for not employing or training school leavers. All of this raises questions regarding the effectiveness of school education. It is no longer self-evident what makes skills and competencies relevant for social integration and for meaningful working and personal experiences (Robertson, 2009).

Education policies apparently often underestimate this complexity of education and educational transition by prioritising economic criteria over social criteria of quality, as a review of educational research suggests (Power 2007, 10). Especially the effects of intersecting inequalities require a shift from one-dimensional benchmarking approaches in terms of ‘more’ or additional education towards approaches to managing diversity with-

¹ The qualitative field work was carried out in two phases, in spring and autumn 2011 (in the second phase in-depth interviews were carried out with ex-students who had already participated in the first phase) in three Slovenian primary schools located in three cities: Ljubljana, Koper and Murska Sobota. The research methods employed were semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions and unstructured observations. In total, 102 interviews and 12 focus groups with 135 individuals were carried out: 3 interviews with principals, 9 interviews and 3 focus groups with teachers, 12 interviews with internal (school) experts, 15 interviews with external (local) experts, 28 interviews and 9 focus group with students, 18 interviews with parents and 17 interviews with ex-students. 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).

in mainstream education: a diversity of strengths and weaknesses, of learning rhythms and speeds, of available support, of individual learning biographies across formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. "In recent years there have been concerns that its national education systems are insufficiently flexible to respond to contemporary challenges" (Power, 2007, 4).

These circumstances are a challenge for both students, who seek their own way to adulthood, as well as for the main agents of education and transitions to adulthood (parents, teachers, peers, advisers, experts etc.). The question is how these agents should act as a medium for the individualised socialisation of young people, for instance beyond stereotypical conceptions about age, gender, family or school roles, and still provide significant support for young people in their educational decisions and achievements.

MAIN TRENDS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES IN SLOVENIA

In comparison with the other EU member states, the position of young people in Slovenia in terms of educational opportunities is relatively favourable. This assessment is chiefly based on the large share of young people who are integrated into the education system and the large share of those, who after completing compulsory education, obtain at least basic qualifications. In Slovenia compulsory education starts at the age of 6 and lasts for 9 years. After completing the 9-year compulsory programme a student selects a secondary school. This decision is, in principle, voluntary. The choice is, however, restricted by the number of places available. Access to general schools seems to be satisfactorily regulated. In the last five years, approximately 95% of students in primary education (aged 6–15) finished school. There are no data on the remaining 5% of children (Kobolt et al., 2010). The transition from compulsory to secondary education is regulated at the national level through the national joint application system. It is estimated that in 2011/12 all students who had completed basic school continued their education at the secondary level, i.e. 41% opted for grammar schools, 39% for technical and 20% for vocational schools (SORS, 2012). In secondary education the drop-out rate is between 6–10%. The most important objectives of secondary education in Slovenia are: to provide all residents with opportunities to acquire the ISCED 3 level of education; to enable all residents to acquire the highest level of education possible while maintaining high standards of knowledge; to increase the creativity of the greatest possible number of residents; and to foster the development of society (Kobolt et al., 2010).

Available data on enrolments in all levels of education show a high level of inclusion in education, which is also a result of governmental policy on state grants for education (Kobolt et al., 2010). However, some research studies, such as for example the research "Life of

young immigrants of the second generation in Ljubljana" (Dekleva and Razpotnik, 2002), show that students who do not identify themselves as Slovenians (in most cases as another ethnic group from ex-Yugoslavia) more often than the rest enrol in lower, less demanding two- or three-year programmes and significantly less in gymnasiums. The same is true for those with a low family socio-economic status. Of course, this information is not available through official statistics since data about ethnic origin are not gathered. The data suggest (Dekleva and Razpotnik, 2002) that the stratification regarding the demands of schools taking the socio-economic status (SES) of students into account is obvious: less demanding schools have statistically significantly more students with a lower SES, and students with a higher SES are significantly more often enrolled in more demanding schools, which promise better future social positions.

All students who have completed a general secondary or vocational secondary education programme and passed the final 'matura' examination may enrol in tertiary education programmes (academic, professional or higher vocational programmes). In the 2011/12 academic year, the share of students who enrolled in post-secondary, professional and university courses amounted to somewhat more than 42% of the generation aged 19 to 26, and somewhat less than 35% of the generation aged 19 to 27. More than 72% of all students were full-time students (SORS, 2012). In this regard, Slovenia displays similar trends as the whole of Europe: there is a general trend (demand) to participate in education also on tertiary levels, and the number of enrolled students is growing on a yearly basis. The result of this is the exceptionally high enrolment levels in gymnasiums. A gymnasium is a general upper secondary school, which subsequently offers the easiest entry to universities. As one policy expert at the national level stated:

the wish to enrol in a gymnasium is produced already by the value system in society... Parents simply have a negative attitude to physical work, crafting knowledge, skills. ... And of course, in children, in these growing-up persons, this works, they assume this logic. This is the way tertiary education is increasingly seen as a goal, where a gymnasium needs to be skied through to get there (National policy expert, 10).

Enrolment in gymnasiums can also be understood as a sort of 'non-decision' regarding a specific educational programme since in this way students keep opportunities open for their future education and also 'gain time' to make a choice on their future vocation/career. Thus, enrolment in gymnasiums is considered the 'safest' transition because all opportunities for a future career remain open to students, while this is not considered the case when enrolling in technical and especially vocational schools (Vezovnik, 2013).

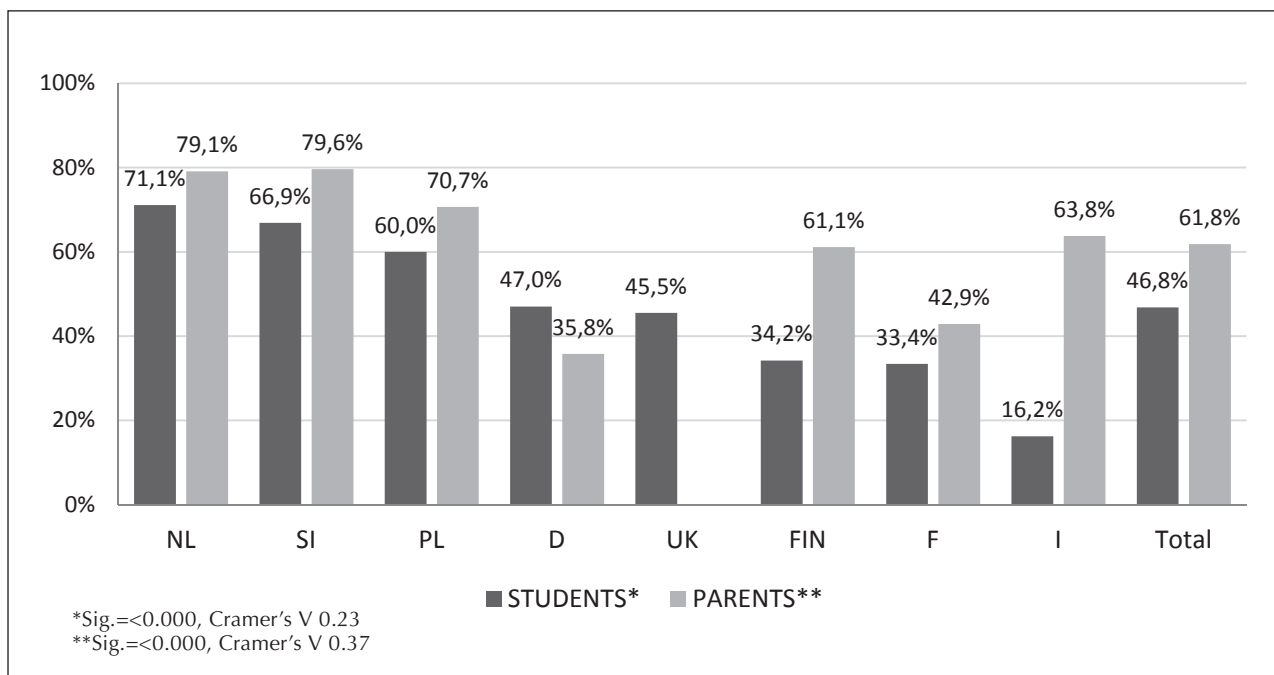


Figure 1: Proportions of students expecting to achieve a tertiary education and proportions of parents wanting their children to achieve the tertiary level of education (country²)

As far as the perceptions of the experts are considered, they 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 have yet to recognise their own desires and what they enjoy. For example:

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-pedagogue).

This trend towards the majority enrolling in non-vocational general education programmes in Slovenia can also be attributed to the high aspirations of parents who see education as the most important factor in their child’s life success. As we have established by quantitative research on students and parents, educational aspirations in all countries are very high. In the overall sample of the GOETE research, 46.8% of students and 61.8% of parents expect students to achieve the tertiary level of education (McDowell et al., 2012). However, parents’ educational aspirations are the highest precisely in Slovenia, where 79.6% of surveyed parents wish their children to attain the tertiary level of education.

The discrepancy between the students’ and parents’ aspirations is around 10–15 percentage points in the majority of countries, while it is clearly the biggest in Italy at 47.6 percentage points. The aspirations of students are also very high in Slovenia, which indicates that children have strongly internalised the aspirations and wishes of their parents. This also means that parents have a strong influence on their child’s educational trajectory. For example, as one student stated:

I would really like to be a photographer, but my parents won’t let me, saying that this school is not good enough, the salary and this vocation. ... We had a discussion one day and we came to this conclusion (that this school is not ok for her). ... I was thinking a lot and then decided that they (her parents) are right about that (KP-interview-student-Zvezdica).

Further, one of the primary concerns held by both parents and students are limitations regarding enrolment: notably, not so much about whether the child will manage the selected educational programme, but whether they will be able to enrol in it or not. Consequently, figuring out how to enrol in the chosen programme and

2 The figure is based on the quantitative survey data with students and parents collected in eight countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK). To ensure equivalence in the national samples’ data structure for the purpose of the statistical analysis, the data were weighted according to the country sample size and the national school sample distribution; UK parental data were excluded following a consideration of the small and biased sample. The weighted samples include 6,390 students and 3,290 parents. For detailed information about the survey, sampling, data collection and analysis methods, and sample characteristics, see McDowell et al., 2012.

how to collect enough points thus proved to be the main preoccupation of all actors involved in the educational process: students, parents and teachers. The experts report that many children “overestimate” themselves and thus feel the consequences of these decisions later in life. One principal reflected on 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).

One of the consequences is that many students find out that gymnasium is too demanding for them and they therefore either drop out or try very hard and end up with a general education with no profession and no real options for furthering their education at the tertiary level. These kinds of transitions may be considered unsuccessful transitions (Ule et al., 2012).

Moreover, deriving from the above stated assumptions of normality and reflecting on the most desired educational transitions, we can say that these days atypical transitions in Slovenia are all transitions to vocational schools with a 3- or 2-year programme.

Fifteen to twenty years ago, children were happy and proud to enrol in vocational schools. And not because they were unsuccessful, but because certain vocations were already present in their families. Today, only unsuccessful students enrol in vocational schools. Therefore, it is happening, what is happening is that 75% of children go to a gymnasium (KP-experts-interview-principal).

There are many reasons why vocational schools became so unpopular, among which the small selection of programmes in vocational and technical schools as well as their low status in society in general are the most prominent. This is related to the expected low income of vocational jobs, the low cultural and social capital of students enrolled in vocational schools and, moreover, the general perception that associates these schools with more violence, vandalism, alcohol and drug abuse.

We need the best teachers for vocational schools, who would also have to be additionally financially motivated, like they are for example in Scandinavia (National policy expert, 10).

Considering the low evaluation of certain vocational levels we can assume that the choice of secondary schools is based on a negative selection. Lower vo-

ational schools are chosen by students with a lower school performance and lower social markers, maybe even to a greater extent among citizens whose mother tongue is not Slovenian and, finally, persons with special needs, or lower intellectual and learning abilities. In addition, children of economic immigrants ‘fill classes’ in less demanding, vocational secondary schools.

Another atypical transition in the Slovenian case is the absence of a transition to secondary school – a specific characteristic of the Slovenian education system is that virtually everybody is included in secondary education. However, this does not mean that all students also finish the secondary level of education as the drop-out rate is between 6–10%.

TEACHERS’ VIEWS ON EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The main actor of changes in the education field in Slovenia is the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The consequence of this kind of top-down approach is the formation of such frameworks for the functioning of schools that do not allow the flexibility of schools and teachers that could be derived from their own experience and perspective. All local schools depend entirely on the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and on the local communities that provide some of the financial support for the schools.

Teachers had many complaints about school reforms which in their opinion are too many and too often. They change the good and the bad things, and often with no insight about the long-term consequences and no knowledge of the agency of the school system in practice (Peček Čuk and Lesar, 2011). In sum, the teachers’ most frequent critiques of the education system were: the fast, unnecessary and premature reforms in the field of primary school education; the top-down approach to policy making; the complete detachment of governmental policy makers from everyday school life and practices; politically charged reforms, especially when it comes to planning enrolments in vocational schools vs. gymnasiums and when adopting new reforms as such.

I think that a very crucial reform would be the one about which the policies speak of the least. They always speak about structural reforms. That is, about how to remodel the whole system, how to make different ratios between vocational and professional education, between general and vocational education... But I think that it would be very urgent to reform the process of teaching itself. That is, the process that takes place in the classrooms... I think it is essential how to motivate the students so that they would work, not in a way that they would learn by heart in torment, but that they would understand that learning can be something great (National policy expert, 7).

Further, teachers are having difficulties keeping track of all these changes as they have to adapt their work all the time. Teachers believe that they are left out of the decision-making process on reforming since decisions are taken at the national, high institutional level, often without asking for their opinion (Peček Čuk and Lesar, 2011). This means going without the opinion of those who are actually doing the job in practice.

But the laws are written in such a way that without parental consent you cannot do anything. Not even a transition from one level of difficulty to another; I cannot even do this as a teacher, who nevertheless knows [the child] more, because I follow him in the subject course so I can direct him so that the student could feel better, if he would at least get some praise [...] I can only advise, the parents have the final say (MS-teachers-interview-class teacher-English).

Teachers also feel that their autonomy is partially taken away by parents who frequently interfere with the school, making criticisms of and demands on schools. In their opinion, this pressure comes from the parents'/students' 'rights and duties' adopted on the governmental level and consequently implemented in schools.

The school has, the teacher does not have free hands, he is not allowed to do anything. The students know they have only rights, about their duties, some are good students, they know, the rest: they cannot suffer any consequences (MS-teachers-interview-class teacher-English).

Moreover, according to several principals and teachers, the teacher training is also insufficient for the good functioning of the educational process. Especially young and newcomer teachers lack practical experience. Teachers frequently reported having a lack of knowledge, especially when dealing with disadvantaged students, or students with behavioural problems. In their opinion, the problem is that they learn the practical level of teaching only when they already start working as a teacher. This often leads to various problems (educational, conflicts in class etc.) since teachers are incapable of efficiently solving such problems in the classroom.

Teachers feel frustrated by the education system that is in place. In their opinion, students are under too much psychological and time pressure. Teachers also find the system of learning is based too much on 'factographic' knowledge that tends to be quickly forgotten. One of the reasons for this is the lack of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary connections among different subjects taught at school. Some experts and teachers claim that knowledge is no longer "what it was before", that there is a fierce competition for titles, diplomas and grades,

which means that knowledge today is often considered as a means to achieve something else (career, status, money) and is no longer a value in itself.

If I compare previous generations with this one, I can see that ... this generation is empty, without values. This is a mistake on our part, on the part of society, and I'm sorry for this. They [students] don't have ideas anymore, no enthusiasm, and I don't really know where they can get that. ... It's hard to get motivation after what's going on in society (KP-teachers-interview-class teacher-arts).

Teachers believe that the main task of primary schools is to provide knowledge, to prepare students for further education and especially in relation to transitions, to inform and advise students. They believe the role of the school is to teach students how to search for information and how to differentiate between quality and non-quality information; teachers also pointed out that the role of upbringing is mainly kept in the background of the tasks.

We are especially short of time given that we also have other obligations besides teaching in class. We do a lot for this but it's never like there's nothing more to be done. Therefore, we could do absolutely more for these children. And the differences will probably become even greater (LJ-interview-teacher-teaching foreign students Slovenian language).

In general, the teachers feel powerless in front of the systemic changes to education and the growing impact of parents. However, when trying to suggest solutions based on their practical and professional knowledge they seem to be ignored by policy makers.

Well, it is the culture of silence, when the teachers do not wish to expose themselves... This is essentially also a reflection of what is going on in a society; when somebody points to a problem, the usual story is to 'kill the messenger of bad news', not solving the problem. 'I will not interfere' is a very serious problem because it is becoming increasingly problematic in Slovenian education (National policy expert, 10).

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL EXPERTS IN STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING

One of the most striking findings of the empirical research is the fact that counsellors and experts in Slovenian schools only play a minor role in the decision-making processes of educational transitions, despite the well-established and wide network of counselling ex-

perts working in and outside schools (Ule et al., 2012). Namely, in primary schools and in institutions related to schools several experts are available whose duties include counselling on how to choose a proper education/vocation. Yet, as our research has shown, they have virtually no real influence since students and parents do not avail themselves of their services.

Despite all of the professional knowledge that is available, these important choices are decided within the shelter of the home. Many experts state that the role of the family and parents here is very strong. Some contend that the influence of parents is even too big as students rely considerably more on their opinion and guidance than on those of experts who are trained to advise on transitions. They also report that the influence of experts on these decisions has been decreasing in recent years.

I'm afraid there is no counselling for development, for transitions, for planning of the school career... Because this is, because it is considered as part of the job, counselling services in primary and secondary schools, this is a reason why this is so, because this is not performed by teachers, but by counselling workers (National policy expert, 11).

Regarding transitional support, students mostly have experience of a vocational test they are all involved in and possibly feedback given on its basis, but they rarely look for more support regarding their transitions from supporting professionals. They mention external professionals even more rarely. School experts mainly see their task as supporting students in their transitions and informing students about their possibilities and options. They feel their role in the transition process is not important enough and not really decisive in students' transitions to secondary schools. The school experts notice that parents have a bigger impact on students' decisions than they used to have in the past and are quite critical of this fact. They believe it is the other side of the passivation of students:

Counselling takes part [in school], but our role here is not so important any more, the parents' role has become more important. Parents have become so strong and ambitious for their children that they do not allow the school to suggest something. So, here we have loosened up, but it was the only way for us (MS-experts-interview-principal assistant).

Thus, the empirical findings show that parents are the first people students rely on or would rely on in the case of problems at school (Žakelj et al, 2013). The next important groups on which students would rely in the case of school or other problems are friends and siblings. Finally, teachers (mainly class teachers) are also

perceived as those on whom one can rely when they have problems. However, this does not imply trust in school personnel in general as at the same time there is a low level of trust in school experts. They are not perceived as trustworthy in this respect (students gave some examples about cases where they had entrusted some problems to school experts but when they saw that nothing happened, they felt no support but accusations etc.). It seems that students rely on those agents with whom an intimacy level that enables trust is achieved. As one of the national experts pointed out in an interview:

The school staff has to be available to children... It is also difficult to expect that a child would come and say like an adult person that he or she would like to make an appointment at 15:15. The child will come if he or she knows that the teacher or experts has a free hour and if they are also otherwise responsive, emphatic. In short, this kind of help, which a child, a teenager or even a younger child could use, does not exist (National policy expert, 11).

Views of students and parents on school and educational transitions

One of the most unanimous findings of the qualitative empirical research is the *great importance and its obviousness* of education for students and parents. The majority of surveyed students and parents thus agree that education is very important for the future lives of students. Nevertheless, there are different specific reasons for the relevance of education; while some are more personal (identity, happiness), others are more socio-economic (employment, socio-economic status status) (Živoder, 2011).

For example, many students believe 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, for example: *"Education is very important because without it you are nothing"* (LJ-students-interview-Matej).

Further, a good education is considered by some students as a 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.

Well, to me it seems veeery important, right. Considering the influences on your life, right... for example, on how you feel in your vocation and if you have enough money, you can buy whatever you want and you are happy... (KP-students-interview-Andrej).

Students and their parents also believe that education will bring them opportunities to be able to choose

the desired vocation which they will enjoy, instead of *being chosen* by the labour market and doing the jobs that are available/offered. They 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. Students and parents often think that, without education, it is simply impossible to get a job. Education is also understood as a means to become (economically) independent. Yet, especially in the light of the current employment crisis in Slovenia (a high youth unemployment rate, among whom many have a high education), respondents are aware that education is the basis, but not a guarantee for secure employment or success in life. For example:

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).

The majority of students are generally very satisfied with their school so the school itself was not often a subject of criticism by either students or parents. More often criticised were teachers and their “unfairness”. Some teachers were also criticised because they do not treat students equally and sometimes because they are not prepared for the lessons. Students often complained about being overburdened with school demands. They spoke about great pressures experienced in school and about the overload of study material. They have a lot of activities after school, they are lacking leisure time (some even sleep), they lack time to meet all their responsibilities. There is an all-present use of having special private lessons at home, to help with school work and learning.

Regarding the curriculum, students mainly complained about the lack of practical subjects (which would prepare them for work and life), they believed that school gives them too much theoretical knowledge which they do not find useful. It therefore seems that the education system is unable to satisfy the present and immediate needs of students as they feel schools are excessively focused on the quantity and amount of knowledge instead of its depth or the compatibility of study materials with an individual child and their interest in it (Ule et al., 2012). Thus, they feel that the existing education system does not allow them to develop their ‘natural’ abilities, interests and inclinations.

Another of the more often expressed complaints was the lack of community; many students believe there is too much individualism in schools (everybody takes care of themselves first and foremost) and express a wish that students would be more connected in class and that a class should be more like a community.

Well, I can't really remember [about the problems in everyday school life], but my biggest problem was that they [classmates] didn't accept me, and then if I miss school, e.g. I'm sick, and then when I come to school and ask for notebooks, nobody will lend them to me; but it's not just me – everybody is so competitive in our class (LJ-students-interview-Metka).

In general, the students also pointed out that teachers prefer to use negative sanctions than positive ones which in their opinion leads students to lose their self-confidence:

Sometimes it seems to me that teachers are too, they tend to bring down our self-confidence, you are not good, you do not study enough, you will not succeed in life, sometimes even if we do some little thing well, they should praise us, so we could get a... / ... / Inspiration to continue trying, but not if they are always humiliating us we cannot be golden sunshine (MS-Students-focus group-girls, Patricia).

On the systemic level, they are critical of school rules that are constantly changing. Parental critiques mostly address ability grouping as a teaching method. In their opinion, differentiation leads to individualism instead of building a group spirit and to social differentiation among students.

... Well, now they are jealous, they watch if they are overtaking you, they don't give you notes to make a copy, they look as if they would throw you completely on the ground. I mean, it is not how it used to be, then you were a classmate, I mean, all these and friends... For example, then the classmate came and asked you things, such as if you were at home ill, gave you her notes, now this is no longer so (LJ-parents-interview-mother-child with special needs).

Similarly to the students, the parents also think that teachers appear to be focusing on the lack of knowledge instead of searching for knowledge. However, the parents also think teachers should have more authority in class but, at the same time, they see the school as too demanding and time-consuming, which is why they have to hire and pay for extra teaching lessons. They think students are burdened with too much information, frequently factographic knowledge. They report the lack of in-depth knowledge and classrooms that are too big, not allowing teachers to work with students individually.

Even though the teachers do not see certain ethnic groups as being marginalised or having fewer possibilities for educational success, the students themselves report they feel they are not being treated equally, es-

pecially when marks are in question. Roma students, immigrants and those with lower marks mainly report this issue.

For nine years I have been attending this school, I feel all right here, just some teachers are rude to us. They behave in a different way to others than to us [note: Roma students]. And concerning school marks too (MS-students-focus-group-Roma-students-Rihana).

CONCLUSIONS

Since the 1970s Slovenia has managed to strongly raise the educational level of especially disadvantaged groups of young people, such as women and children from socially weaker families and milieus. This was made possible by the introduction of the extended network of schools and an inclusive educational policy (Krek, Metljak, 2011). However, today and especially in the light of the increasingly serious economic and social crisis, this system is under threat from both the outside and inside. Externally, it is threatened by the lack of financial and material resources, the neoliberal austerity policy and the weakening of the institutions of the welfare state; internally, it is weakened by the imbalance between key educational agents, students, parents, teachers and experts. While the external pressures are diminishing the strength and position of schools as key educational institutions, the internal pressures are weakening the professional authority of teachers and their professional competencies.

Through the analysis of the interviews with all key agents in the educational process, i.e. national policy experts, teachers, parents and students, we have found a number of dilemmas and contradictions both in the educational trajectories as well as in the roles of each of these actors engaged in the process. Among all the reference groups we interviewed, one issue was very strong, namely they all agree that education is regarded as very important for students' life courses. An international comparison reveals that the aspirations of parents and children in Slovenia are among the highest in Europe. One of the most important reasons for this that we can highlight in this respect is education's perceived high level of importance and influence on the life chances of individuals and, conversely, the lack of alternative options which would enable satisfactory or propulsive positions to be reached in society (Ule et al., 2012). Nevertheless, these different actors have diverse views on how students should achieve a good education and how young people should be motivated to meet school requirements.

The dominant discourse regarding the role of the school in students' transitions is to offer all the necessary information and to provide good career advice. Experts, teachers, parents and sometimes even students themselves pointed out that at the end of basic school

they are still too young to make such important life decisions. This discourse about students being too young to make informed decisions about their life is in fierce contradiction with the expectation of experts, teachers and parents that students will manage their educational transitions with a high level of awareness, self-responsibility and commitment. These differences raise occasional conflicts among agents, for instance between teachers (schools) and parents or students regarding teaching methods and demands.

Another important finding is that there is a prevailing and underlying conviction in Slovenia that the general education offered by gymnasiums is by far a better foundation for a future vocational career and life path than a specialised and concrete vocational education. In recent years this has led to the hyperextension of gymnasiums and to the neglect of vocational secondary education. What is more, 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'. Students thus enrol in gymnasiums precisely because they wish to gain some time in order to get to know themselves better over the next four years, to define their wishes more clearly, to acquire sufficient information and wisdom to be able to take this important decision in the following years. Yet, when many of these students come to gymnasiums they often realise that the level of education is too demanding and they can hardly manage the workload. This leads such students to either put in even more effort to meet the minimum standards or to transfer to another school or, in some cases, to even drop out of school. Any of these scenarios can negatively affect their self-image, their identity; they might feel inadequate, not smart enough.

Another important finding of the research is that teachers feel vulnerable in their professional competence from two sides, on one hand because of the increasingly informed and interested parents and, on the other, because of the education and school policy which often plans, designs and implements changes to the education system without the input of teachers. As we have seen, in the last few decades the Slovenian education system has undergone many reforms whose primary goal was to improve the quality of the education. Although many positive effects have indeed been achieved, a distinctive negative aspect of these positive efforts is the mainly top-down approach to reforming the system and the schools, the growing bureaucratisation of the school system, together with the excessive emphasis on knowledge as the key achievement of education, and the side-lining of experience-based learning which in this period has primarily become a family duty (Kobolt and Rapuš Pavel, 2010).

Further, another common view found in all the respondent groups is that of the individual responsibility of students (and their parents) for their school performance, success and consequently also for their access

to education and later employment. The teachers, experts and students seem to use the discourse of 'individual responsibility' in quite a harmonious way. The topic of individual responsibility (of students and their families) and the emphasis placed on their internal motivation results in overlooking the structural causes of inequalities in success, transitions and prospects. Individualism in terms of self-responsibility is visible in how students and parents cope with everyday school life and achievements, such as good grades, learning difficulties and similar (Mencin Čeplak, 2012).

The individualistic and familialistic orientation leads to another characteristic that was found in our study, namely that there is a lack of solidarity among students in school. It seems that school is not an environment where students are encouraged to cooperate with and help each other, which is especially seen in competitiveness and a lack of willingness to help and support classmates. Students from de-privileged groups in particular lack such support. This is particularly important for further discussions as the school seems to be an ideal social environment that could, in the everyday life of young people, provide 'competition' to the over-emphasised parental support and influence, offering students a way out of parental control on their way to personal autonomy, and could at the same time, by promoting peer cooperation and solidarity, be some sort of a buffer zone that could alleviate the negative effects of individualism and prepare students to cope with them successfully. According to our study, it seems that the situation is in fact the opposite. Instead, we face a wide gap between the school and its strategies in coping with the educational (and life) demands of students on one side and students and parents on the other who do not trust the school and strive to find their own strategies for coping with such demands and problems.

Thus, we can say there is an overlap of two essentially different ideological discourses in the contemporary education field in Slovenia: on one hand, the discourse of equal opportunities or social integration, and the discourse of individualisation and personal responsibility for educational trajectories on the other. While the first discourse is mainly part of the official policy, the second is part of the hidden curriculum which is present in both the consciousness of students and parents as well as teachers and experts. The contradiction between these two discourses produces misunderstandings and problems in the interactions between different actors. The discourse on individualism is increasingly shifting the burden for societies' social and economic reproduction on to the shoulders of individuals: students and their parents. The particular ways in which the redistribution of property has been occurring over the past two decades have also considerably increased the differences in the starting positions of young people who are becoming ever more dependent on family capital, support and familial social networks.

Jeremy Rifkin ascertains that in the process of economic liberalisation many of the substantial social rights

have been replaced by rights of "access" (Rifkin, 2000). This trend has been caused by both neoliberal interests as well as the diminishing power of national welfare states. It seems as if the increased globalisation and the greater complexity of self-responsibility in the activation and policy of lifelong learning are an expression of the embarrassment of state institutions that are no longer capable of assuring their sovereignty in the form of the social inclusion of their citizens. Within such a framework, the right to equal and universal access of all people to various educational levels is manifested as a moment of individual choice regarding one's own life and career path, which does not assure the social integration of individuals. It is true that in the real circumstances of the labour market and capital distribution, the individual includes, engages and enters into various forms of socio-economic relations but hardly, if ever, reaches a more permanent and stable social role. In the transition countries with a weak economic basis and feeble democratic tradition, such as Slovenia, these forms of uncertainties affect young people from socially deprived groups and environments the most. These are the young people who most often 'choose' non-prosperous and or socially stigmatised educational and vocational paths. However, the rest of the young generation, who choose educational paths with supposedly greater prospects, often also cannot 'find themselves' in their school achievements and certificates, but lean on random and often only temporary opportunities for self-confirmation. Thus, in these cases, the education system as an institution for the social integration of young generations is turning into an institution of social segregation.

Otherwise, a positive trend of the democratisation of education, i.e. to enable each citizen to attain an education that matches their abilities, has today transformed into something else. Mass education in Slovenia has become an open path whose chief negative consequence is the lowering of the quality of knowledge, particularly at the higher levels of education. This means that the finishing of an educational level, as visible through school-leaving certificates and diplomas, no longer holds the value it once had. When these certificates and diplomas are produced, the key decisions about employment are transferred to employers. What was previously one of the roles of the school, i.e. to limit the arbitrariness of employers, is now slowly vanishing and the school more or less only performs its negative function of selection; namely, without the school-leaving certificate an individual can neither continue education nor become employed. With so much decision-making power and choice, employers are in a way reducing the value of education and hold much greater power in determining working and payment conditions. This leads to the so-called freedom of the servant; that is the freedom of someone who depends on the good or bad will of a person who decides about their individual destiny. All of this puts young people who are finishing their education in fully subordinate positions.

UPRAVLJANJE Z IZOBRAŽEVALNIMI POTEKI V SLOVENIJI: DILEME IN PROTISLOVJA

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POVZETEK

V Evropskih družbah znanja ustreznost izobraževanja pomeni ravnotežje med individualnimi, socialnimi in ekonomskimi aspekti izobraževanja. To lahko operacionaliziramo v vprašanje, kako različni akterji izobraževalnega procesa konceptualizirajo in organizirajo individualne izobraževalne poteke šolarjev. Namen članka je analizirati razmerja med različnimi akterji vključenimi v izobraževalne poteke v Sloveniji, razumeti njihove različne perspektive in ugotovljati porazdelitev aspiracij, odgovornosti in podpor v izobraževalnih potekih šolarjev. Ključno raziskovalno vprašanje, s pomočjo katerega bomo analizirali podatke, je: kaj različni akterji menijo o pomenu izobraževanja; kakšni so pogledi in izkušnje različnih akterjev na prehode v izobraževalnih potekih. Raziskovalna metoda so polstrukturirani intervjuji z različnimi akterji (učenci, starši, učitelji, svetovalci, eksperti). Skozi analizo intervjujev z vsemi bistvenimi akterji v izobraževalnem procesu: eksperti na nacionalni ravni in lokalni ravni, učitelji, starši in učenci, smo ugotovili vrsto dilem in protislovij v odnosu do izobraževalnih potekov pa tudi do vloge posameznih akterjev v tem procesu. Vsi akterji, ki smo jih intervjuirali, so si bili enotni v eni točki, da je izobraževanje zelo pomembno za življenjski potek učencev. Mednarodna primerjava pokaže, da so aspiracije staršev in otrok v Sloveniji med najvišjimi v Evropi. Obstaja vrsta razlogov za to. Najpomembnejši je pomembnost izobraževanja in vpliv izobraževanja na življenjske priložnosti šolarjev ter pomanjkanje alternativnih možnosti, ki bi šolarjem omogočale doseči zadovoljive in stabilne položaje v družbi. Vendar se akterji razlikujejo glede tega, kako naj šolarji dosežejo čim boljše izobrazbo, predvsem kako motivirati mlade za izpolnjevanje šolskih zahtev. Kar je sicer bil pozitiven trend demokratizacije šolstva, se pravi vsakemu državljanu ali državljanke omogočiti šolsko izobrazbo, ki ustreza njegovim sposobnostim, je danes prešlo v nekaj drugega. Ugotovili smo, da s tem, ko šola producira ogromno število spričeval, diplom, omogoča, da se ključne odločitve glede zaposlitev prenašajo na zaposlovalce. To, kar je včasih bila vloga šole, da je omejila samovoljo zaposlovalcev, to funkcijo počasi šola izgublja. Opravlja le bolj ali manj negativno funkcijo selekcije; brez spričevala, diplome posameznik ne more niti nadaljevati šolanja, niti se zaposliti, vendar diploma me odloča o tem, ali bo zaposlitev dobil ali ne.

Ključne besede: pomen izobraževanja, izobraževalne aspiracije, socialno integracija, atipični izobraževalni poteki, samo-odgovornost, individualizacija

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