

IT IS ALL UP TO ME: ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND THE DISCOURSE OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Abstract. Today's young people are considered the most educated generation ever, yet their (employment) perspectives are uncertain, the job market is open to them yet offers changed conditions that every day seem to be more exploitative. The transitions of young people to work have in the past decades become prolonged, diversified, unstable and uncertain. In the course of destandardisation such transitions have become fragmented. Inequality has also changed in terms of its forms of reproduction and consequences. Success or failure in education are increasingly ascribed to individual decisions and performance in line with the individual responsibility discourse. Even in these new circumstances, education is still a key factor in reproducing structures of social inequality. The article explores dimensions of inequality reproduced by the education system, especially the role of social status and ethnicity. These dimensions (and their intersections) are placed in opposition to the idea of individual responsibility that seems to be an explanation of inequalities in educational success, transitions or access according to all of the reference groups included in the presented research (students, parents, teachers and other school experts).

Keywords: *educational transitions, access, social status, ethnic identity, individual responsibility discourse*

Introduction

Young people's transitions to work have become diversified, unstable and uncertain, and thereby destandardised and fragmented. The link between education and other transitional strands (e.g. with regard to the family, partnership, lifestyle, housing or citizenship) has continuously dissolved. As a result, the former linear status passages have changed into "yo-yo" transitions in which young people experience aspects of youth and

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adulthood simultaneously and feel “somewhere in between”. Understanding these destandardised youth transitions requires a model of social integration in which social integration is understood as the result of the interplay between structure and agency (Cohen and Ainley, 2000; cited in Pohl and Walther, 2007).

Socio-economic structures and agency are mediated by institutions which are subsumed under a structure. They regulate individual access to education, training, labour market and welfare. These institutions also understand and address the notion of disadvantage in different ways. Two competitive ways of interpreting (diagnosis) and addressing (policies) disadvantage can be identified in transition policies across Europe: structural diagnosis that calls for a structural policy that increases demand for labour; and diagnosis that refers to individual deficits in terms of a lack of skills or an unwillingness to work, and policies that aim to adapt young people by increasing their employability (or trainability) (Pohl and Walther, 2007). The second one employs typical neoliberal (conservative) rhetoric to explain deprivation and inequalities.

Policy measures deriving from the individualised approach to youth unemployment are activation policy, individualised guidance and counselling, retraining, active labour market policies (*ibid.*), and structural approaches to focus on access and opportunities, access-support for the disadvantaged, job creation and subsidies. In various European countries different approaches and their mixes are in use but at the moment, due to the uncertain social conditions, the individualistic approach seems to be very popular.

When discussing access, the structural approach is certainly at least as important as the individual one. The GOETE project (Walther et al., 2010) proposes that the category of access points to social inequalities in educational trajectories. The phenomenon of early school leaving in particular shows how transitions into, within and out of education are affected by unequal starting positions, learning conditions and life perspectives according to class, gender, ethnicity, region and neighbourhood (EC 2008; Walther and Pohl, 2005; Jones, 2008; all cited in Walther et al., 2010).

Inequality has changed in terms of its forms of reproduction and consequences. Success or failure in education are increasingly ascribed to individual decisions and performance. Apart from leading to unequal status positions, individual learning achievements are increasingly related to inclusion or exclusion in every single transition step in the education system (Castel, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; all cited in Walther, 2010). At the same time, school failure is no longer only addressed in terms of social justice but increasingly also in terms of the costs of school failure. In addition to traditional factors such as parental socio-economic status and its relation to

social space (Bourdieu, 1990), ever more attention is being paid to gender and ethnicity and how they intersect as well as to different degrees of mobility and flexibility. All across Europe young women perform better in education than young men. While this has not yet led to equal opportunities in transitions to work, the reduction of low-skilled jobs in knowledge societies highlights the need to understand the relationship between early school leaving and masculinity. The other key factor highlighted in current debates and EC reports is under-achievement among migrant and ethnic minority youth. According to existing EU research, this is due to a complex interplay of factors such as social deprivation, spatial segregation, institutional discrimination and a lack of language skills (GHK 2005; Walther and Pohl, 2005; Heckmann, 2008; Hodgson, 2008; Jones, 2008; all cited in Walther et al., 2010).

This raises the question of whether different social groups of students and their parents (in particular those from disadvantaged social groups), receive or fail to receive comprehensive educational support that would adequately respond to the challenges they face in a changing society. Different groups of students, deprived by the dimensions mentioned above, are in danger of being perceived exclusively through the current lens of individual responsibility rather than being treated in accordance with contemporary paradigms based on dialogue and are thereby gaining a voice, more power and opportunity to actively participate in discussions about their social position, needs, visions, and finding consensual solutions to the common challenges of today.

The article aims to encourage reflection on those issues, especially the dimension of socio-economic status and ethnicity in relation to access. The discussions are enhanced by results from qualitative research undertaken in three different schools with different reference groups providing answers. The contribution proposes some paradigms aimed at replacing the focus on individual responsibility with a focus on relations, reciprocity, co-creating and dialogue.

Social status and school performance

Education has proven to be a key factor in reproducing structures of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Walther, 2010). While up until the 1970s this meant that working class children “inherited” the working class jobs of their parents (Willis, 1971; cited in Walther et al., 2010), nowadays a low level of education implies risks of social exclusion for many other reasons.

One can identify the socio-economic conditionality of the education system in studies published on the factors of school performance in

Slovenia. Klanjšek, Flere and Lavrič (2007) mention studies such as those by Makarovič, 1984; Justin, 2002; Razdevšek Pučko, 2002; Piciga, 2002; Flere and Lavrič, 2003, 2005 and Peček, 2006 which show that, despite all the efforts of educational policy, stratification factors still have a significant impact on educational achievement. The social status of the family has a significant impact on students' school performances, and this is defined and measured by a variety of factors. Flere, Klanjšek, Musil, Tavčar Krajnc and Kirbiš (2009) explored the interrelation of family social status and school performance. Researchers' explanations of the nature of interrelations of family social status and school performance are not uniform. They differ in how they explain the transfer mechanisms of inequalities. The prevailing interpretations are mainly related to the following theorists: Bourdieu (1974) emphasises parental cultural capital, Bernstein (1973) stresses the language code that is in use in the family, Goldthorpe (1996) claims that parents and children in school transitions employ a rational calculation that takes their own resources into account.

When discussing the importance of the socio-economic status of individuals and their position within the education system, we can also base our discussion on the analysis of school performance in relation to social status since school performance is an important factor of stratification. In this regard, many studies have been performed, including in Slovenia. Klanjšek, Flere and Lavrič (2007) consider that the academic (school) performance of the individual, besides the property they own, is one of the main factors of social status. They (*ibid.*) explain Hansen's (2001) theory that stratification in contemporary society is based on the education system. The same authors (*ibid.*) explain that this theory comes from two otherwise diametrically different interpretations of the relationship between the education system and (in)equality. The first one relates to the nature of the contemporary, knowledge-based society where academic performance is a factor of social status because both the school system and state apparatus operate in accordance with meritocratic rules whereby the most successful ones are considered to be those most able and those investing maximum effort. The other explanation relates to the concept developed by Bourdieu (1974), namely that the education system presents and legitimises itself as an equitable institution where certificates, which lead to a relevant employment or social position, are granted solely on the basis of ability and effort. But at its core, Bourdieu argues, the education system functions as a mechanism that reproduces and legitimises existing social inequalities. As Lesar (2009) puts it, socio-economic and cultural factors are incorporated in the functioning of the comprehensive school system through the selection of curricular content and language of instruction as a way to reproduce and maintain the existing social injustice relations.

Those who possess the cultural capital of the upper class will be more successful at school; moreover, the doors that lead to higher social positions will be open to them. The education system (and associated apparatus and policies) are in this respect bound to the power and leadership structures that determine what legitimate knowledge is. Alternatively, as Apple (1995) argues: The vision of legitimate knowledge is formed in accordance with the ideologies of hegemonic structures which, through the hidden curriculum legitimises and creates a reality, including the power relation and stratification pattern.

When considering the factors of school performance, authors most often study socio-economic categories, where those categories are interrelated with the stock of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974, 1990). As the meta-analysis of Considine and Zappala (2002, cited in Klanjšek, Flere and Lavrič, 2007) shows, this influence manifests itself in the fact that children of a lower social class display less ability in reading and understanding, withdraw earlier from education, rarely attend university, have a negative attitude towards school and education in general and face more difficulties in school transitions and in transitions to the labour market compared with their colleagues from families with a higher socio-economic status. The mentioned outcomes manifest themselves irrespective of the method of measuring the socio-economic status and whether the study was based on information contained on an individual or aggregate level (Graetz, 1995, cited in Klanjšek, Flere and Lavrič, 2007). Although education no longer leads to or predicts a specific career in the changed social circumstances, it is without doubt still a crucial prerequisite of social inclusion.

Ethnicity and educational trajectories

Already according to the results of the PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] one can make an assumption of high socio-cultural heterogeneity between different secondary school types (programmes) and socio-cultural homogeneity within certain secondary schools, which directly indicates social exclusion. Besides, the PISA shows the correlation between the education the parents completed and the school their children choose (Kroflič et al., 2009).

In a study on the social position of descendants of immigrants from other republics of former Yugoslavia in Slovenia (Dekleva and Razpotnik, 2002; Razpotnik, 2004), we found that both the socio-economic status of families and ethnic self-definition for a non-dominant ethnic group also are significantly associated with a student's choice of secondary school: Students with a higher family socio-economic status and those defining themselves as Slovenians (irrespective of whether their parents migrated from

other republics or not) continue their education much more often at more demanding and more promising secondary schools, namely gymnasiums or upper secondary (four-year) programmes, than those with a lower family socio-economic status and those who identify themselves with any other (non-dominant) ethnic group. The latter are significantly more likely to continue their education in lower vocational programmes (2 years) or secondary vocational programmes (3 years), which are considered less demanding and (traditionally) do not promise a higher socio-economic status, flexible professional inclusion or certain future success in the labour market. Lesar (2002) notes that, among immigrants and descendants of immigrants, one's peer group has an important influence when deciding on a secondary school. All of this combined with lower expectations of teachers (Kobolt et al., 2010) and families can help explain why immigrants and the descendants of immigrants are more likely than the general population to enrol in less promising secondary schools, leave schools earlier and in the future have a worse position in the labour market.

Let us look at some more data that substantiate similar tendencies: For the countries participating in PISA 2006, socio-economic factors are supposed to explain less than 20% of the dispersion of school achievement, while for Slovenia the figure is 46%. Within this result, the low school performance of immigrants has a great impact. The PISA also includes in its definition of immigrants those students whose parents were not born in Slovenia. In Slovenia there are approximately 10% of so-called second-generation immigrants. Their school achievement is lower, on average 30% of them do not achieve the basic level of natural science literacy, while in the "dominant ethnic" population there are about 10% of who do not. Besides, the PISA study also confirmed that a substantially higher proportion of the children of immigrants attend lower secondary and vocational education than middle and high school education (Medveš et al., 2008, cited in Kroflič et al., 2009).

Also in the European perspective migrant and ethnic minority youth is one of the key issues in the discussion about an equitable education system. "In fact, PISA studies suggest that disadvantage of migrant and ethnic minority youth needs to be primarily understood as failure of European schools in dealing with diversity – not only with regard to ethnicity but also with regard to gender and learning needs" (Karsten, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb, 2008; M rch et al., 2008; Jones, 2008; OECD, 2008,; cited in Walther et al., 2010: 13).

Walter et al. (2010) argue that a disadvantage in education and transitions to work is often associated with ethnicity and migration. However, the causal directions of parental education, language deficits, precarious living conditions and the anticipation of lacking career opportunities remain

unclear. Heckmann (2008, cited in Walter et al., 2010) denounces both the ethnicisation of social disadvantage as well as the need for appropriate support for migrant children and youth.

The individualisation of social inequalities and the discourse of individual responsibility

Scholars in the 1970s increasingly argued that the traditional welfare state could no longer efficiently tackle the new social questions such as re-emerging poverty and unemployment. Rosanvallon (1995, cited in Vandembroeck et al., 2009) claims that the end of the twentieth century was marked by a triple crisis: a financial crisis (states were faced with growing spending on social security issues such as unemployment benefits, while facing reduced income), a bureaucratic crisis (states were increasingly perceived as being ineffective and inefficient by the general population as well as by policymakers) and a philosophical crisis (raising questions about the very concept of social welfare and social security). As a means of dealing with these new social fractures, Rosanvallon called for more individual attention by the state, which would value social inclusion. However, throughout EU countries social inclusion has increasingly been defined in terms of employability. This dominant construction of the welfare state entails a growing focus on risk management, individual responsibility and a discourse of “no rights without duties” in which allowances are no longer taken-for-granted entitlements. These manifestations have been described as “the enabling state” (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1989), “the employment first welfare state” (Finn, 2003) or “the contractual state” (Crawford, 2003). They have affected the relationships between parents and the state since parents are considered to be responsible for the future success of their children (Featherstone, 2006) and legitimated the introduction of coercive practices. There are many examples of new pieces of legislation that shape the “pedagogicalisation” (Popkewitz, 2003) of social problems and, consequently, the responsabilisation of parents (Vandembroeck et al., 2009). Finally, there is a focus on the provision of parent support as risk management to prevent later costs for society in the context of the social investment state, the same authors state. Vandembroeck et al. (*ibid.*) critically analyse how relations between families and the state are framed in the late modern social investment state, with a focus on emerging ways of governing the family through coercive prevention projects. Vandembroeck and Bouverne-De Bie (2006) argue that these changing relationships are contingent with discourses on parental responsibilities that frame educational spaces, children and parent support programmes and need to be analysed in the context of shifting concepts, from that of the welfare state in Western European countries to that of a social

investment state (meaning a welfare state that does not compensate for failure, but invests in future success (Giddens, 1998).

Pohl and Walther (2007) critically reflect the term activation which refers to a shift in social policies through which individuals are given more responsibility for their own social inclusion. While in a narrow sense activation aims at a “rapid return to work”, activation may also serve to characterise a wider trend in social policies. On the European level, activation is referred to as a common trend in the sense that, in times of globalisation, social integration can only be secured if individuals take responsibility for their own lives and their own educational and later on labour market value. Activation policies focus on the adaptation of individuals to social change. Because these policies rely largely on over-simplistic assumptions about young people’s motivations for taking an active role in their transitions, they contribute to the individualisation of structural problems.

The increasing importance of individual decision-making highlights the motivations of young men and women as they engage in their own transition process. This increase in the importance of young people’s individual decision-making should not be misunderstood as signalling a reduction in social inequality. In contrast, the need to take individual decisions and be responsible for one’s own outcomes is also experienced by those who – subjectively or objectively – do not have any choice due to restricted resources and opportunities. It is clear that even “soft skills” such as biographicity and motivation are distributed unequally since they depend on access to resources which are likely to provide a feeling of control, and access to meaningful experiences (Pohl and Walther, 2007).

In Belgium, for example, (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009) report that the poor PISA test results show there is a substantial educational gap at ages from 14 to 16 years and that school results are significantly linked with the socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of their pupils. What should be seriously analysed as an issue of social inequality is, the authors contend, framed and presented as an educational problem and as an issue of parental responsibility. There are many more specific examples of how professionals legitimise the pedagogisation of social problems based on inequalities (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1997; Popkewitz, 2003) and helps to picture the image of individual responsibility for school success. In Slovenia disadvantaged groups within the education system, (descendants of) immigrants and Roma exist as well and are constant topics in professional debates (Grobeljšek, 2010; Mujkanović, 2010; Lesar, 2009) But the topic is still left without comprehensive educational/political solutions.

In terms of decision-making in the process of their children’s education and transitions, parents with less social power certainly have less of a word and more likely rely on the decisions of professionals, “the competent

ones". Their own competence may be in doubt and unworthy of confidence, not least because it is not disclosed in accordance with the prevailing cultural norms. But they are still perceived as responsible for the decisions they make and responsible for the future of their children. Those whose choices are more limited due to a lower social position and lack of resources (needed for "deciding") are at risk of making wrong decisions more often.

Vandenbroeck and Bouverne Bie-De (2006) argue that the focus on different psychological aspects of youth and currently popular educational standards are linked to the themes of globalisation, neoliberalism and the currently transforming issue of the welfare state. The increasing individualisation and pedagogisation of social inequalities is the trend here. A person's individuality is emphasised over reciprocity or interdependence. Forms of intervention that should be appropriate for students, according to these authors, need some reconstruction and it is essential that this deconstruction is contextualised. A contextualised manner means a manner which, amongst other things, seriously considers cultural differences in meaning making, political and socio-economic contexts.

Empirical part

Research question

This research focuses on topics related to issues of access. The aim is to discover which topics are expressed and which of them are silent (hidden) in answers given in interviews with different reference groups (experts, parents, teachers and students) in the context of the transition from primary to secondary school. Topics already discussed in the theoretical part, namely, socio-economic status and ethnicity within the education system and the discourse of individual responsibility vs. the structural view, receive special attention. I also searched for some topics in the research material that might overcome this contradiction by suggesting new possible forms of acting within educational transition contexts. For detailed description of data collection methods, description of the field work and sample characteristics see Ule, this issue.

Results

Education is not perceived as a necessary pathway to a future professional career

Education has become an indispensable prerequisite of social inclusion while it no longer leads predictably to specific careers, labour markets are

creating precariousness and, as a consequence, life courses have become de-standardised.

With friends we discuss it and we agree upon that next to school you can do whatever you enjoy doing, and then you see where you succeed (LJ-students-interview-Adi).

Four years [tourist school], then he [her son] can complete the fifth subject at the final exams and go to any university. He said, mum look, at gymnasium they will work hard but in the end we will all study together (MS-parents-interview-mother-Jožica).

Neither access to, successfully coping with, or the relevance of education can be taken for granted for today's youth (Pohl and Walther, 2007). There is also a substantial decrease of low-skilled jobs, the link between education and employment is becoming ever more blurred, while the link between education and work and other transitional strands, e.g. with regard to family, partnership, lifestyle, housing or citizenship has continuously dissolved (ibid.). Education is not seen as a necessary (straight) pathway to a future professional career by students and their parents in our research.

The gymnasium as a one-size-fits-all solution?

For students and their parents the future is uncertain, so the gymnasium seems to be the right answer for many because it does not close off professional career options (and it is much more available than in the past, also see Ule and Zidar, this issue).

The best thing is to go to a gymnasium and after that think further, it's the best (MS-students-focus group-girls, Maja).

School experts and teachers are very critical of this situation; they see it as a wrong decision of mainly parents and even as a wrong decision regarding their children's future. They do not refer to any analysis regarding the future employability of certain professions/vocations, nor do they question the changing nature of the transition of the young generation into the labour market, but instead they seem to rely on "commonsense" or ideas that have their roots in the past. Teachers also express doubts about the future success of their students once they are attending a gymnasium.

Parents are too eager to help their children achieve higher levels of education than they have themselves, and perhaps strive for more than their

children are capable of. (KP-teachers-focus group-housekeeping and biology).

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, students maybe still go to upper secondary schools but not to vocational schools. In vocational schools only unsuccessful students enrol, and even those are thinking about gymnasium after. I think the story of vocational schools is over. Therefore, it is happening, what is happening, that 75 percent of children go to a gymnasium (KP-experts-interview-principal).

Teachers and professionals also report they have noticed the flexible *changing of orientations* in certain steps of their ex-students' pathways.

I have been meeting my ex-students who have already graduated; some of them are already employed. But they have all finished a certain secondary or at least a vocational school. ... But all of them have completed a secondary or at least a vocational school. Many of those who were not sitting still on benches, and had barley passed through, then became serious. They have entered a vocational programme and are continuing in some other, and do some more school there. They can tell the difference between working hard for four or five hundred euros and being exploited. Everybody wants something better and they ... go and study something (KP-teachers-interview-class teacher-history).

Some of the experts also reflected on the fact that studying at university is becoming open to all and they are sceptical of this change.

Someone who hardly passed through here [primary school] is now studying. I also think that these universities which are opening up now to part-time students take everyone they can just to gain money. And it seems to me that the picture the students have is a bit obscured. Not everybody can study (MS-teachers-focus group-Slovenian).

Some argue that studying at university is also becoming a "provisory waiting room" in today's situation of high (youth) unemployment in Slovenia (Kuhar, 2011).

Parents' concerns

Parents are the reference group that often mentions and questions

perspectives regarding the future vocation/profession of their child and are concerned about which secondary school it would be clever to choose in this regard. This especially affects those children whose prospects and school performances are (for different reasons) not good. In particular, the parents of children categorised as “children with special needs” express a great concern regarding their children’s vocational prospects. When talking about children with special needs or those who are not so successful in primary school, parents and teachers express that the economic factor (possible future employability) is more important than students’ interests, peer group influence or anything else. They focus a lot of attention on how promising a certain vocation is in terms of future employability. Therefore, the choices for these students are obviously being narrowed in this regard.

One girl is choosing a school that would help her to find a job and earn well enough. Her mother also encouraged her in that way. It is not so important what exactly she will be doing but that she will get a job, a salary and will be able to live from it (IJ-experts-interview-social pedagogue).

He is not good at school so I decided for him to go for servicing, which is needed nowadays (KP-parents-interview-father-Tone).

1457

Some students also use this employability rhetoric when explaining their choice of secondary school.

Because tourism is blooming, tourism will always be here, not like robotics, for example (MS-students-interview-Bojan).

Very often other dimensions are hidden behind “bad school performance” in a parent’s or teacher’s discourses, like the fact that the family had migrated recently:

Yes, we dealt a lot with this issue [within the family, with the decision on which secondary school to choose]. I chose finally and I think it is the best because this is where he could find a job. Because, you know, we are foreigners and if they only read his last name, he will get no job. Regardless, he might be capable. ... It is like this that Slovenians get the job first, we come after them. But that’s normal (KP-parents-interview-father-Tone).

For students who must have in mind a possible migration back to the country they came from, this makes their decisions even harder:

Yes, I was thinking which school to choose so that I can return to Moldavia and find work there (KP-students-interview-Tilen).

Parents' support in school transitions is an important issue (also see Švab and Žakelj, this issue) and is considered by different reference groups much more important than any other source of support.

Parental support

"It's very important that parents support you" (IJ-students-interview-Jennifer).

"Links between parents and children have become very flexible; parents have become confidants and advisers of children in psychological or economic matters, but also incredible child advocates in the public sphere and institutions" (Ule, 2008: 193). But this parental role can not only be seen as support but also as a constraint whereby parental ambitions (probably based on the feeling of individual responsibility in the context of uncertainty and fear for their children's future existence) sometimes collide with their child's interests. Parents often use a "not-good-enough" discourse when describing their children's school choice.

I would really like to be a photographer, but my parents won't let me be one, saying that this school is not good enough, the salary and this vocation. (KP-students-interview-Zvezdica).

Teachers and other 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 passivisation of students.

It seems to me that actually parents decide what would be best for their child and children are so passive, inactive, they have very few interests. That's what seems to me lately, if I compare it with previous times (MS-experts-interview-psychologist-Štefka).

School experts express a loss regarding their role within the transitions from primary to secondary school. They feel their role in the transition process is not important enough and not really decisive in students' transitions to secondary schools.

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).

School experts' perceptions of disadvantage

School experts see reasons for the possible disadvantage of students almost exclusively in parents or families. Accordingly, their perception of disadvantage relates to individual or family factors. In other words, they see reasons for and possible solutions to students' difficulties as lying almost exclusively within their families.

I think we are again back to working habits and regular work. ... Personally, I am trying to involve parents. They have to monitor their children's work at home, support them in doing their homework on a regular basis and attend supplementary classes etc. Now, when parents are strong, there are shifts. However, when parents do not cooperate, then it's bad for the child (KP-teachers-focus group-housekeeping and biology).

1459

School experts do not indicate they see parents as partners in dialogue, although they emphasise their co-operation regarding the objectives the school defines as important.

I think it all comes from the family. ... Everything (MS-experts-interview-principal assistant).

Individual responsibility

Among all the reference groups we interviewed, one issue was very strong – the issue of the responsibility of students themselves and of their parents for their school performance, success and consequently also for the choices they make.

Roma children do not learn so well, they do not learn much, not that they wouldn't be able to but they are just lazy or what, also a lot of ours are lazy, also I am lazy when it comes to learning. But, if they were to try hard they could be as good in their marks as others; they are equal otherwise (MS-students-interview-Bojan).

Students, teachers and experts perceive that students are all equally able; they just do not put enough effort if they do not succeed. Parents of deprived students report they are not equipped to help their children as expected and express bad feelings about this.

She is not doing well in maths but I can't help her with these things. I didn't go to elementary school but to special programmes, so I don't have any education (MS-parents-interview-Roma mother).

In connection with immigrant children the topic of "internal motivation" is exposed. Teachers or other school experts often use a "good examples" discourse, with which they suggest that it is all about individual motivation in succeeding in school and reject the impact of social circumstances.

In that class I have a couple of students, perhaps three, who come from Bosnia, but they are excellent students and excellent mathematicians. But I have also others who are not (LJ-teachers-interview-mathematics-self with experience of being a foreigner).

We get kids who are very, very motivated for school success and for being included in the environment and to make something out of them. Such children can be very quickly integrated (LJ-experts-interview-principal, p. 4).

Teachers, experts and students seem to use discourses of "individual responsibility" in quite a harmonious way.

It is all up to me (KP-students-interview-Andrej).

School responsibility for failure or success is not really exposed in the answers.

Deprived groups

Even though teachers do not see certain ethnic groups as being marginalised or having less possibilities for educational success, students themselves report they feel they are not being treated equally, especially when marks are in question. Roma students, immigrants and those with lower marks mainly report on 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 manner

to others than to us [Roma students]. And concerning school marks too (MS-students-focus group-Roma students-Rihana).

Members of the Roma population also report disadvantaged prospects regarding employment as they are traditionally excluded from all institutions of the dominant society.

We are not all the same, some are really such a disaster, but others want to try hard. But if a Roma student is educated and wants to find a job, when they see he is Roma, they say there's nothing for you here (MS-students-focus group-Roma students-Jessica).

Teachers or other school experts perceive that coming from a poor family can be an obstacle to equal opportunities. They especially emphasise students who would have to move to a bigger city to enrol in a certain secondary school but their families cannot afford that (transport/accommodation costs...). Some students also mention the topic of moving to another city for secondary school and, besides parental control, this is mainly an economic question.

Some children would like to go to Ljubljana to study, but come from poor families. So they just cannot afford it (KP-teachers-interview-class teacher-history).

Another of the questions connected with GOETE is what do school experts see as their task with regard to supporting students in their transition. In other words, this means what schools do to prevent early school leaving and to what extent they provide students from different social and ethnic backgrounds, equal access to education, especially at transition points on their educational trajectories. School experts mainly see their task as informing students about their possibilities and options. Within the education system there is a test for a vocational orientation, mentioned quite often by the school experts and the students, which very often serves as a basis for further advice on which main abilities and competencies a student has.

They come at the beginning of 9th grade; first with some quiet and then more explicit questions, they look for advice, information. ... They are interested in how it is at secondary school. In fact, they cannot orient themselves, they cannot make a match between their abilities and their expectations; maybe also the expectations of their parents and also the environment. However, during the school year they go to these tests (for

vocational orientation) and they have clearer ideas. However, they come here to find confirmation if their decisions were right (KP-experts-interview-librarian).

Sometimes experts also express that their role is to support students on their transitions and to empower them to follow their desires. Their ideas for how to improve access to pupils are not truly expressed, as the majority of them still perceive choosing too demanding a secondary school and strong a parental role within the transition as the main problems regarding such transitions.

Conclusion

The results show that the main factors students consider when deciding on a secondary school are non-determination of the programme (gymnasium seems open enough in the sense that it is difficult to determine one's future career already at the end of primary school, especially due to the broader social situation which is very uncertain and requires constant flexibility), employability in some cases, peer group influence, parents' will/advice (usually linked to employability or status of the school and/or future profession), as well as the geographical accessibility of the school. Their interest is a less exposed topic when describing the network of factors linked with their secondary school choice. In addition, an opinion, information or advice from someone from the school (a teacher or expert) is not mentioned very often as a crucial factor. Students do not attribute a lot of importance to the social circumstances that frame their choices, e.g. uncertain career pathways, youth unemployment etc. It goes in line with the thesis that they ascribe the responsibility for their choices to themselves.

The different and at times contradictory demands of youth transitions need to be reconciled on an individual basis in the framework of each person's own biography. The biographisation and individualisation of youth transitions mean that young people are forced (but also allowed) to take decisions (for) themselves and to "invent adulthoods" beyond reliable collective patterns. The competence needed to navigate through individualised and uncertain life courses and to construct meaningful biographies has been referred to as "biographicity". This includes the ability to constantly assess and reflect on the balance between subjective interests or needs and external demands and possibilities and to integrate new experiences into a coherent learning biography (Alheit and Dausien 2000, Pohl et al. 2006, cited in Pohl and Walther, 2007).

One of the indicators of the "structural blindness" of school experts is their denial of different social groups having different starting points and

resources for success. They seem to perceive all students as equal; all that matters is “hard work”, ability and familial preparedness to collaborate with the school regarding their (school defined) objectives. Looking at students as a universal category may mask some communalities in how specific groups of children and their parents are marginalised (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne De Bie, 2006).

Lesar (2009) claims that the history of education commonly reveals a systematic process through which dominant groups organise the structure of educational provision in ways that construct the differences children bring to school (race, class, gender, language...) as an individual (intrinsic) deficit. Children’s poor academic performance is therefore ascribed to those differences.

Professions embedded in the field of education not only educate, intervene and treat, but also participate in the construction of discourses on educational trajectories, transitions, disadvantage, responsibilities, difficulties and challenges. One of the key issues in these discourses nowadays is the division between focusing on individual problems on one hand, and a trend towards radical social change in order to reduce inequalities and increase the well-being of disadvantaged social groups, with common responsibility for greater social justice, on the other.

Families which live amid difficult circumstances and whose children face difficulties within the education system can be easily blamed for being bad students or bad parents. If they refuse to participate in the different programmes or interventions on offer, or drop-out prematurely, they may risk being blamed again for not taking advantage of “good” measures. It is characteristic of these families that their educational possibilities are debilitated or hindered by their socio-economic, personal, relational and social problems, or a combination of these factors. This brings us to a broader criticism about the decontextualisation (individualisation) of different measures/ policies within the education system, interventions and programmes dedicated to students with “difficulties”. The historical and socio-cultural context in which their difficulties are developed and the political context in which they are embedded is all too often excluded from the discussion. Consequently, students and their parents are silenced in the debates on the definition of the problems they and their children are believed to be facing. The problem construction takes place without dialogue with the families involved (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2009). It is therefore crucial to bring students and their parents (not only but primarily “disadvantaged” ones) into the discussion about possible solutions for the transitory challenges they are encountering not as problems any more but as part of the solution.

Besides introducing new, more dialogical paradigms in educational settings, a range of comprehensive measures to reduce the gap between privileged and marginalised social groups also needs to be introduced. Further, taking up policy measures involving a rethinking of the current education system and the access it offers different social groups should become one of the more important topics.

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