STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL CHOICES
AND FUTURE ORIENTATIONS IN SLOVENIA

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the link between students' educational choices and future orientations within the framework of contemporary societal conditions. It draws on quantitative and qualitative data obtained in a survey, essays and interviews with 9th grade students in Slovenia in 2010–2011. The research results show that in the context of the increasing individualisation of societal risks, growing unpredictability and decreasing standardisation of life courses, the students consider education to be highly relevant for their future lives, and their anticipation of the future has a significant effect on their present (educational) choices. The article attempts to highlight the vital links between educational choices and expectations concerning the future, identify the key individual and structural factors of students' educational choices and future orientations and recognise the main difficulties and paradoxes of Slovenian students' planning for the future in contemporary circumstances.

Key words: educational choice, future, students, life course, educational transition, vocational wish, aspirations, self-responsibility, risks, unpredictability

SCELTE EDUCATIVE DEGLI STUDENTI E GLI ORIENTAMENTI FUTURI IN SLOVENIA

RIASSUNTO

L'articolo esamina il legame tra le scelte educative e futuri orientamenti di studenti nel contesto di condizioni sociali contemporanee. Essa si basa sui dati quantitativi e qualitativi ottenuti nel sondaggio, saggio e interviste con gli studenti di nono grado in Slovenia nel 2010-2011. I risultati della ricerca hanno dimostrato che nel contesto della crescente individualizzazione dei rischi sociali, imprevedibilità crescendo e diminuendo la standardizzazione dei corsi di vita. Gli studenti considerano l'educazione come altamente rilevante per la loro vita futura, e l' anticipazione del futuro ha un effetto significativo sulle presente scelte educative. L' articolo cerca di evidenziare i collegamenti vitali tra le scelte educative e le aspettative del futuro, identificare i fattori individuali e strutturali chiave delle scelte educative e dei futuri orientamenti di studenti e di riconoscere le principali difficoltà e paradossi della pianificazione del futuro di studenti sloveni in circostanze contemporanee.

Parole chiave: scelta educativa, futuro, gli studenti, corso di vita, transizione educativa, desiderio professionale, aspirazioni, auto-responsabilità, i rischi , l'imprevedibilità

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will attempt to examine the link between students' educational choices and future orientations within the framework of contemporary societal conditions in Slovenia. The educational choice that takes place at the end of lower secondary education[1] can be considered to be highly important and far-reaching for the lives of students in many aspects. For instance, in the context of the Slovenian education system it is the first important *life transition* for many students, when they have to reflect on and weigh up their wishes, opportunities and constraints and choose one option among many for the first time and thus take a crucial step on their future educational and career paths. Choosing one alternative among many also entails assuming responsibility for the choice as well as its later consequences and the effects it has on one's life (Salecl, 2010). The more difficult and far-reaching is the choice, the bigger the burden of choosing responsibly and informatively. Thus, it is not difficult to see how crucial and decisive the educational choice of upper secondary programme is since in most cases it will vitally influence not only a student's future educational and vocational career, but also their future position and status in society, social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), social identity and decision-making power, as well as their personal life and identity (Živoder, 2011).

Young people today are precisely the social group in which the contemporary risks and uncertainties are most distinctively expressed (Ule, 2008; 2010; Ule and Zidar, 2011; Ule and Živoder, 2012). They are also significantly enhanced by the contemporary "ideology of free choice" (Salecl, 2010), whereby the individual is addressed as a free, independent subject, appealed to creatively shape their own identities and life course and also assume full responsibility for their own choices. In this kind of setting, attention is diverted from the structural, social, economic and political conditions and focused on individuals, who are compelled to search for individual solutions to systemic risks (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991). The ideology of choice masks the radical uncertainty and unpredictability of contemporary life as an opportunity to 'freely' and actively create 'oneself'

through the many choices, possibilities and opportunities offered by the contemporary way of life (Žižek, 2001). And precisely educational choice can be regarded as a present-day choice *par excellence* as they are those choices which in many respects significantly influence and mark their future life courses, their identity and their social (vocational) and private practices and thereby play a crucial role in placing individuals in the social world. The topic of educational choices is particularly significant today when the future of young people is very uncertain, while their reflections about the future, education and their particular ways of entering (or being excluded from) the socio-economic and political spheres of society are a key factor of the common societal future.

The article draws on quantitative and qualitative data obtained in a survey and interviews with 9th grade students in Slovenia in 2010–2011 within the GOETE project[2]. While the quantitative data[3] will serve as background information and a reference framework for the key indicators related to students' perceptions about the relevance of education and their future, an analysis of the qualitative data will serve to explore these issues in greater detail, allowing us to examine more subtle connections between education and the future as they are individually formed in a socially relatively strongly structured framework (e.g. the Slovenian education system). The qualitative data were obtained in interviews and focus groups[4] with students along with short essays[5] written by students. In this article, the analysis is restricted to those parts of the research material related to the issues and discourses on educational choices, perceptions of education and views on the future.

FACTORS OF EDUCATIONAL CHOICES

Within the *life course perspective,* where life course is understood as the trajectory or path of an individual through the social structure (Levy, 1997), *transitions* (such as entering school, getting a first job, marrying, becoming a parent etc.) are understood as key and critical passages in the life of individuals, whereby they acquire new social positions and related specific roles, duties and rights (Heinz, 1997; Levy, 1997; Ule, 2008). In this

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1 In the Slovenian education system this refers to the end of the third cycle of basic education, that is, the end of comprehensive nine-year compulsory education.

2 Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (www.goete.eu). For more information about the project and its international perspective, see Ule (2013a) and Walther et al. (2010).

3 The survey with students was carried out in November 2011. The sample includes 725 9th grade students (52.2 % females and 47.8 % males) from 20 primary schools located in Ljubljana, Koper and Murska Sobota. For detailed information about the survey, sampling, sample characteristics as well as data collection and analysis methods, see McDowell et al. (2012).

4 The qualitative phase of the field work was carried out in two rounds and took place between April and November 2011 in three primary schools in Slovenia located in Ljubljana, Koper and Murska Sobota. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews, 9 focus groups (38 participants) and 17 interviews with ex-students (those who had already participated in the first round of interviews or focus groups) were carried out. 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).

5 The essays were written in May 2011; 9th grade students from 3 primary schools were asked to freely write about their thoughts and feelings regarding their future, aspirations, wishes and fears. In total, 105 short essays were collected.

framework, the notion of *educational trajectories* refers to the individual's paths and transitions through various educational institutions that lead to different levels of educational capital and where transitions and access to educational levels are affected by the structure (of the education system, social inequality, and of the welfare state) and agency (individual choices, abilities, interests) (Cuconato and Walther, 2013).

Educational choice as a vital passage or transition within an individual life course can be considered a sort of *rupture* in an individual's life, where the perception of time plays an important role. Namely, in a time of significant life transitions, which require the taking of influential life choices and decisions, one is compelled to review both their past experience and achievements (such as school performance) that are eventually embodied within the scope of present opportunities and possibilities, as well as the perception of oneself in the future, which are then embodied in one's present wishes and aspirations about who to be in the future. As other research has demonstrated, the anticipation of the future has a significant effect on the present choices, which are thus not only limited to past and present experiences (Leccardi, 1999; 2005; 2006; Nilsen, 1999; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; 2007). Thus, we can say that in a life transition, such as an educational transition, three times coincide: the *past* (individual, social, economic and cultural resources); the *present* (choice, dependent on opportunities, support); and the *future* (wishes, aspirations, hopes, outlook). Further, within this setting these three times can be understood as *biographical time,* e.g. the life span of the individual, while the life course perspective deals with the intersection of the biographical, *social* and *historical time* (Hareven, in Hagestad, 1997) and therefore analyses how this biographical time is intertwined, and mutually interdependent with the social and historical time, e.g. how the life span "becomes a socially created pathway" (Hagestad, 1997, 21).

Therefore, in order to grasp in what way educational choices and subjective notions of the relevance of education emerge, they have to be placed in wider societal settings and thus account for the specific contemporary conditions in which the individual lives of students are embedded. Among the contemporary societal characteristics that have also been acknowledged in other international research related to youth and education, the most important and influential trends are: individualisation and the related increasing individual responsibil-

ity for managing life choices and societal reproduction (Beck, 1986; Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Rener, 2010; Salecl, 2010), the de-standardisation and pluralisation of life courses and transitions (Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Walther, 2006; du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006; Kohli, 2007), the changing relationships between parents and children (i.e. prolonged youth, education and economic dependence on parents, rising importance of parental support) (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Biggart et al., 2002; Leccardi and Ruspini, 2006; Ule, 2013b), the insecure, precarious and rapidly changing labour markets, the unclear links between education and later job/career possibilities, and recently also the current economic recession and high youth unemployment. Moreover, educational choices and notions of relevance are also framed by the features of respective education systems. According to Allmendinger's typology of education systems[6] (Allmendinger, 1989), the Slovenian education system is highly standardised and lowly stratified, where the differentiation of students, compared to other European countries (for example Germany or the Netherlands) is relatively low[7]. In addition, the routes to higher and/or between different educational tracks are open and permeable[8].

On the basis of an analysis of the survey, interviews and essays with the students we propose and discuss the following five key factors that frame and influence a student's educational choices at the end of lower secondary school: vocational wishes; the relevance of education; employment prospects; barriers and constraints; and resources and support. Moreover, these five factors are embedded and intertwined with what we here refer to as the *future outlook,* that is, each student's subjective view and perception of their future, which contains a wide range of attitudes towards their personal future, from ignorance or distance towards the future to detailed and concrete wishes, aspirations and plans. Future outlook may be regarded as a sort of umbrella factor of educational choices and will be more specifically addressed in the next section of the article.

Vocational wishes. Vocational wishes could be underlined as the single most important factor of educational choices as the discourse about (vocational and general) wishes was (directly or indirectly) all-present in the students' thinking and writing about their choices and future. The interviewed students were in many ways very concerned and preoccupied with thinking about what they would like to do in the future. Certainly

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6   According to Allmendinger's typology (1989), education systems can be classified according to the criteria of *stratification* and *standardisation*, where *»stratification is the proportion of a cohort that attains the maximum number of school years provided by the educational system, coupled with the degree of differentiation within given educational levels (tracking)«* and *»standardization is the degree to which the quality of education meets the same standards nationwide«* (Allmendinger, 1989, 233). According to these criteria, the Slovenian education system is lowly stratified and highly standardised (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011; Cuconato and Walther, 2013).

7   For a critical analysis of the integration policies and discourse in the Slovenian education system for the case of students whose first language is not Slovenian, see Vezovnik (2013).

8   For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of the Slovenian education system and a comparison with other European education systems, see Parreira do Amaral (2011).

this is not surprising as the interviews were purposely carried out just before and right after (with ex-students) their educational transition to upper secondary school. Nevertheless, this fact should not in any way diminish the pervasiveness and high level of importance that students ascribe to the need to find the 'right' vocation and employment in which they will be able to enjoy and fulfil themselves and have a sense of meaning. Not so long ago, a sense of meaningful, fulfilling jobs was reserved for a handful of people, while the majority of the population were 'working to live' and not the other way around, namely, 'living to work'. This means that work, employment, is more than ever before becoming a key identity factor through which one finds a purpose in life.

For example: *»Above all I would like to enjoy what I would do, that I would not be in torments, I think it is very important that you find what gives you joy... with your soul, that you enjoy vocations, like this«* (LJ-ex-students-Nina[9]). Or, even more vividly: *»My dreams are to become an actress outside Slovenia, maybe even outside Europe. I have had these dreams since I can remember and I'm ready to do everything and more to realise them. /.../ This is what I want the most in the world. I only fear that I will not be able to achieve this goal, but I don't burden myself too much with it. This is the only thing I want to do and I will go for all or nothing«* (essay, KP-32, f[10]).

In terms of vocational wishes, we could place the majority of students in two general groups: those with a more or less clear and defined vocational wish, and those who have no specific wishes. Interestingly, the great significance of vocational wishes is actually most clearly manifested in students of the second group. This group consists of a variety of attitudes to the vocational wish (from the need to find the 'right wish' in the future through to ignorance towards such wishes, where the educational choice and future constructions depend more on other factors). Nevertheless, for the majority of students in this group the need to find their own interests and wishes in the near future (and consequently the 'right and interesting vocation' which they will enjoy and will fulfil them) is a crucial and urgent matter.

In a previous article (Živoder, 2011) where we discussed the relevance of education, we identified two strategies students adopt in the absence of straightforward, defined desires about education or a future vocation: the postponement of decisions and 'more is better'. Both of these two strategies are a mirror of how demanding the educational choices are, especially given the common contemporary assumption that education and work are one of the most crucial factors that will influence one's life course, identity, future happiness and fulfilment.

In the case of the postponement of the decision, students most often enrol in general upper secondary programmes in order to 'buy some time' in which they hope they will be able to find their wishes and interests and to 'keep their future possibilities as open as possible' as the gymnasium in the Slovenian education system opens doors to university studies. For instance: *"Because I'm in my last year of primary school I enrolled in a gymnasium so that I will have 4 years to think about my future and about work which I would dedicate to"* (essay, MS-09, f) or *"When I will finish gymnasium I want to go on to study, but I don't know where yet"* (essay, LJ-15, f).

The second strategy is in a way intertwined with the first one, although 'more is better' is focused on gaining desired educational levels (and certificates) to secure the future rather than on gaining adequate qualifications or skills that will allow students to work in the profession they like, which is the key characteristics of the first strategy. Thus, in the 'more is better' strategy students aim to attain the highest and best education possible, most often in order to try to minimise the risks and secure safe and promising employment careers and socio-economic position in society. In this sense, education is often valued more as a means to achieve desired goals (through educational certificates) rather than knowledge being considered as a value in itself. This strategy, where *"higher education is a 'safer, less risky' path to take"* (Živoder, 2011, 42), is yet another reflection of the pervasiveness of the risks, uncertainties, unpredictability and related high self-responsibility in contemporary society. Further, it is sometimes used to secure a prosperous social position and/or to move up the social ladder, especially among more disadvantaged groups (also see Litau et al., 2013; du Bois Reymond et al., 2012).

Relevance of education. Students' perceptions about the relevance of education for their future educational and vocational career and future orientations generally should be understood as a contextual or implicit factor in which thinking and planning about education is embedded.

Figure 1 shows that the educational aspirations of the Slovenian students included in the research are remarkably high as almost 60% expect they will complete the tertiary level of education. Among other things, this figure speaks of the high relevance or even obviousness that students attribute to attaining an education. However, if we compare these aspirations to the national levels of educational attainment we see a distinctive

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9   All names of the participants are fictitious. The citation mark of interviews (i.e. MS-students-interview-Ajša or LJ-ex-students-Nina) includes information about the city of the interview (LJ – Ljubljana, KP – Koper, MS – Murska Sobota) and the round of interview (students or ex-students), where ex-students refer to the second round of interviews.

10   The citation mark of essays (i.e. essay, KP-32, f) includes information about the city (LJ, KP, MS) and gender (f – female, m – male).
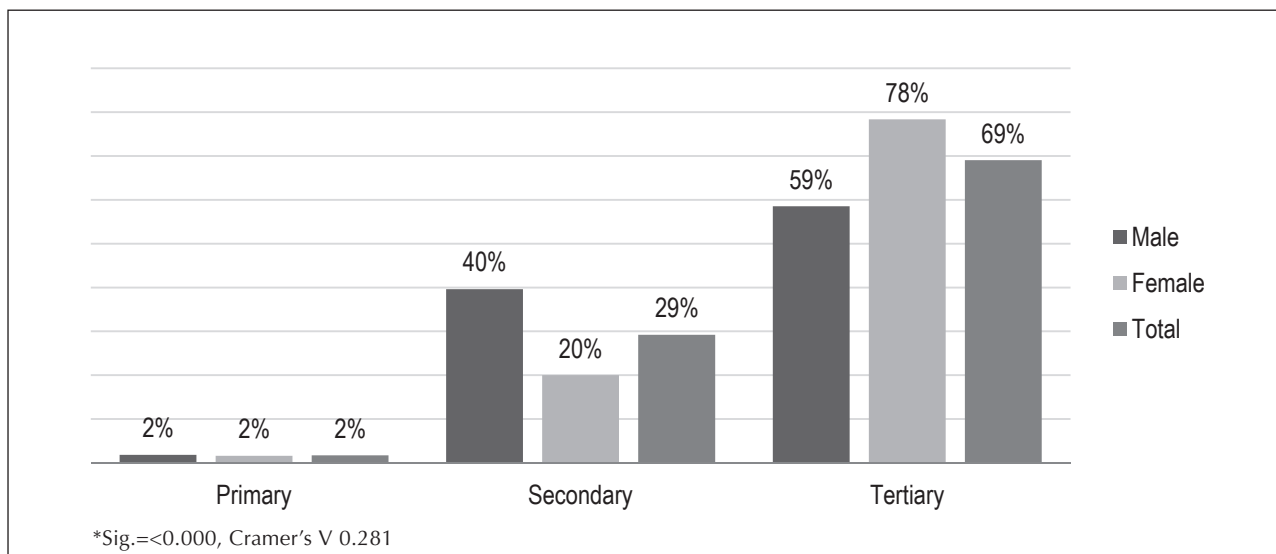
Figure 1: What is the highest level of education you expect to complete (by gender)?
Graf 1: Katera je najvišja raven izobrazbe, za katero pričakuješ, da jo boš dosegel/dosegla (po spolu)?

gap between aspirations and achievements: for example, 17.5% of the total population has attained at least a short-term higher tertiary education (SORS, 2011). Nevertheless, more relevant and comparable are the data on younger age groups, for example in 2011 among the population aged 30–34 23% of men and 42% of women had achieved at least a short-term higher education qualification (SORS, 2012, 32).

Moreover, the share of the population participating in tertiary education in Slovenia has been significantly increasing in the last three decades years, especially in the case of women. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS), in around 1980 the share of women graduates exceeded the share of men for the first time and it has rapidly increased since then; namely in the last 30 years the number of male graduates has grown by 135 %, whereas the number of female graduates has increased by 300%; thus, in 2010 there were almost two-thirds of women among graduates (SORS, 2012, 45). This trend is also confirmed by our data, where female students reveal significantly higher educational aspirations.

Figure 2 shows the importance a family's social position and cultural capital has on the educational as-
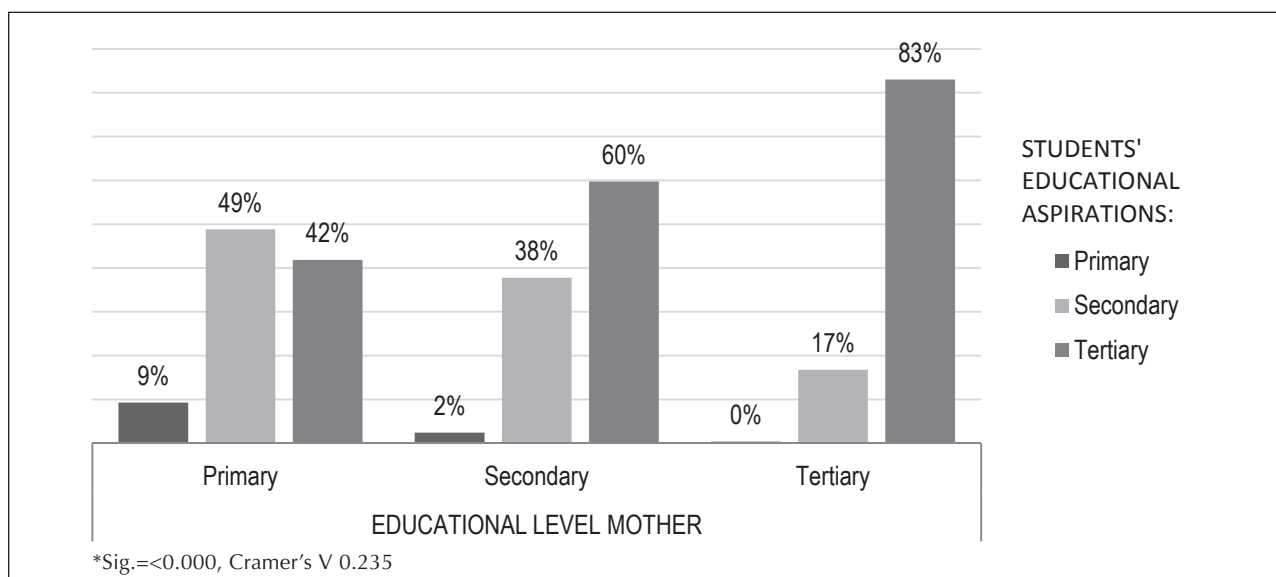

Figure 2: What is the highest level of education you expect to complete (by educational level of mother)?
Graf 2: Katera je najvišja raven izobrazbe, za katero pričakuješ, da jo boš dosegel/dosegla (po izobrazbeni ravni matere)?

pirations of a student. Differences with regard to the mother's educational level are substantial and statistically significant; the higher the educational attainment of the mother, the higher are the educational aspirations of the student. These results are not surprising as the influence of the socio-economic position and capital has been well-established in international research (for contextualisation within the GOETE project, see McDowell et al., 2012; Litau et al., 2013; Cuconato and Walther, 2013). These differences in educational aspirations are to some extent no doubt a reflection of the actual educational possibilities of more disadvantaged students in contemporary societies. Their lower educational ambitions, coupled with lower support mechanisms (in terms of economic, social and educational resources), are certainly a recipe for the reproduction of the socio-economic disadvantage. Nevertheless, too ambitious expectations can also have adverse consequences for students, who could be under great pressure to perform well at school and meet the high ambitions set by themselves and/or their parents; a vivid example: *"The family, teachers and above all me have always thought and expected that I will enrol in a gymnasium, but I've been slacking at school in recent years and my school success went down. Many people have been disappointed over this because they had much greater expectations for me and also I had much higher goals. I'm determined to make much more effort in secondary school, put in more effort and goodwill and show that I can do it"* (essay, MS-04, f).

There are also numerous straightforward students' statements which testify to the great significance students ascribe to education. For instance: *"Education is actually also part of your life. It decides how you will live, what kind of life you will have. It is not only the money, but your decision, how you will live"* (MS-students-interview-Ajša) or *"Education is very important because without it you are nothing"* (LJ-students-interview-Matej).

Other vivid examples of statements that speak about the importance of education are those related to future employment[11], both in terms of working in desired professions or getting secure and sufficiently well-paid employment. Here are some exemplary statements: *"In the next five years, I want to become a successful woodwork technician because I like to work with wood"* (essay, LJ-14, m) or *"No, even if the work is poorly paid, but you like it, you will prefer doing that than a certain job where you get a lot* [note: of money] *and you don't like it"* (KP-ex-students-Zvezdica) or *"In five years I see myself in Ljubljana or Maribor at the Medical Faculty, but there is still a long, long way until there and God knows what is

still waiting for me. My big dreams are to become a paediatrician, but not because there are not enough paediatricians, but because I like that job and I very much like to work with children"* (essay, MS-13, f) and *"When I finish studies, I hope I will get a well-paid vocation, which I will do with at least a bit of good will"* (essay, LJ-12, f).

Further, we can also find a number of more indirect statements or frames of thinking where the high relevance of education is evident, most clearly for example in students' effort and worries about their school performance: *"At the end of the school year I expect an excellent school achievement because I made a lot of effort for good grades during the school year and above all I wish that this performance would open me the door to further education"* (essay, MS-09, f) or *"I would like to achieve something in my life, that is why I will make an effort to be successful in school"* (essay, LJ-12, f).

Conversely, the students also expressed reasons why they think education is not important. In their view, these are especially related to the unclear links with employment opportunities as many raised concerns that education today does not guarantee getting a job in the first place (especially due to the poor employment prospects and economic recession) nor sufficiently well-paid or secure (long-term) employment. With regard to this, some students mentioned their dissatisfaction about contemporary employment possibilities since having the proper 'connections' is often much more important than having adequate qualifications[12].

Employment prospects. The link between education and employment opportunities is one of the major concerns of the students when deciding about their future education. On one hand, it is closely linked to the first factor (vocational wishes), but here the emphasis is placed more on external circumstances and opportunities than on subjective wishes and aspirations as with the case of vocational wishes. Employment prospects turned out to be a major cause of worry for the students as they embody the high level of unpredictability and insecurity in the present labour market and socio-economic circumstances in general. Namely, one of the students' clearest messages is that the link between education and future employment is no longer always evident because employment prospects today are changing quickly, which renders students' future plans difficult: *"Most of all I am afraid that if I don't choose the right education, I won't have a job"* (essay, MS-12, f).

Figure 3 shows the link between education and work, what students regard as the most important reason for choosing a job. In the survey, the students were offered five options[13] which we have clustered in two umbrella categories: instrumental and subjective reasons

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11 Also see the section *Employment prospects* below.

12 For a more detailed discussion and analysis of findings on the relevance of education that have emerged within the GOETE project, see Litau et al. (2013).

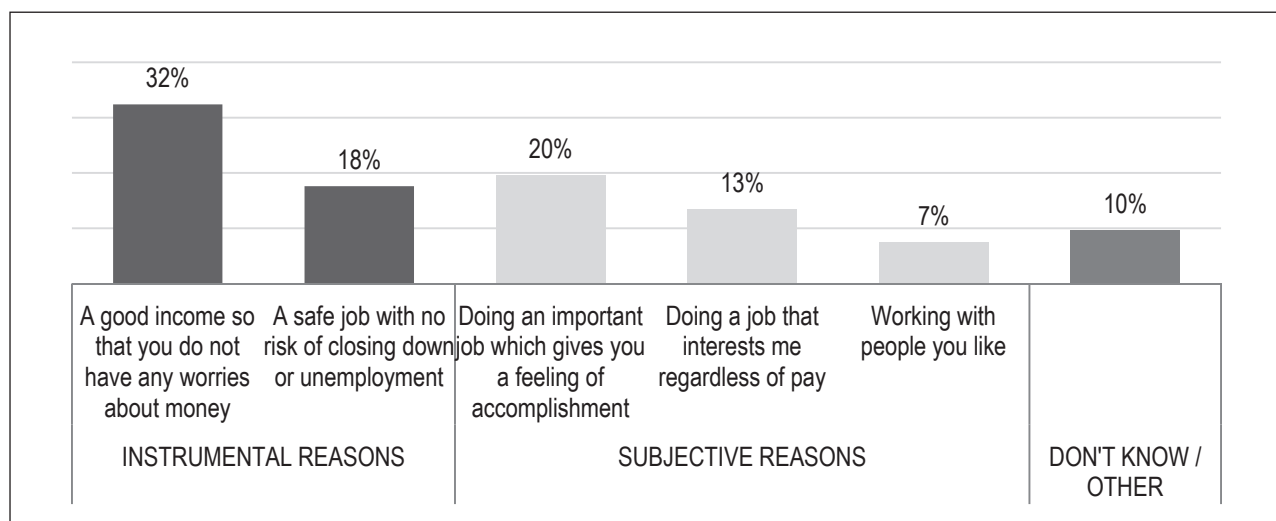13 Next to "I don't know" and "Other reason".

Figure 3: Here are some of the things many people take into account in relation to their work. Which one would be your main reason for choosing a job?
Graf 3: Spodaj je naštetih nekaj dejavnikov, ki jih ljudje upoštevajo pri izbiri službe. Kaj od naštetega bi bilo pri izbiri službe zate najbolj pomembno?

(for an international comparison, see Litau et al., 2013). A cross-analysis with socio-demographic indicators showed that there are no statistically significant differences in relation to gender, educational level or working status of parents, which means that students' perception about future jobs do not depend on socio-economic status but are more bound to other societal circumstances such as, for example, the general discourses on the meaning of jobs or labour market trends. The data show that 50% of students chose instrumental reasons related to sufficient income and safe employment, which can also be partially interpreted as a response to the current difficult position of young people, who are facing a highly insecure and uncertain future with high youth unemployment rates and an unstable and ever changing labour market: *"Yes, actually they have also told me that* [the profession] *is much sought after, that there is a need for computer science and that I will be able to get a job. This was almost the most important for me"* (LJ-ex-students-Bruce Willis).

Nevertheless, also more subjective reasons are not unimportant since for 33% of the students the most important factors of a future job are those related to one's interest and the feeling of a meaningful and important job. These reasons are in line with the contemporary discourse on ideology of choice, self-reflexivity, being the creator of oneself, aiming for a fulfilled life and taking responsibility for your actions and choices described above.

Barriers and constraints. In terms of the barriers and constraints that frame and condition students' educational and career choices, empirical evidence shows a relatively strong prevalence of individual or subjective barriers and constraints, among which two especially

stand out: school performance and achievement, and learning and working habits, for example: *"The biggest barrier and fear are the grades, they could be the main problem"* (essay, KP-35, m), *"Most problems are caused by my* [lack of] *diligence"* (essay, KP-23, m), or *"In all these, what hinders me is my knowledge from the past because I didn't make any effort in school and, because of this, this year I can't enrol in the school that I would like to"* (essay, LJ-26, f).

Among the structural/systemic barriers the students emphasise the most are: worries about enrolment in the chosen upper secondary school, employment possibilities and a fear of unemployment, support of parents, and social and economic circumstances in society, for instance: *"I think that the biggest problem in these times of crisis is to get a job. Although you have a degree, for example in economics or something similar, you can work as a salesman. So in these times it is really very difficult to get a job for which you have educated yourself and degrees and PhDs don't help you a lot"* (essay, KP-16, m); *"I fear the most that I won't get a job and then there will be no money and then none of my plans will come true and then everything will suck"* (essay, LJ-11, f).

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the mean values of the students' worries. It reveals that they are most often concerned about their school performance and future employment, which is yet further confirmation of young people's difficult position in today's society. Also, we can again see how important education is in the eyes of the students, who are often worried about their school performance, for example, 21% of them are frequently worried and 9% are always worried about doing badly in school; again the gender differences are considerable as 24% of male students and 35% of female students
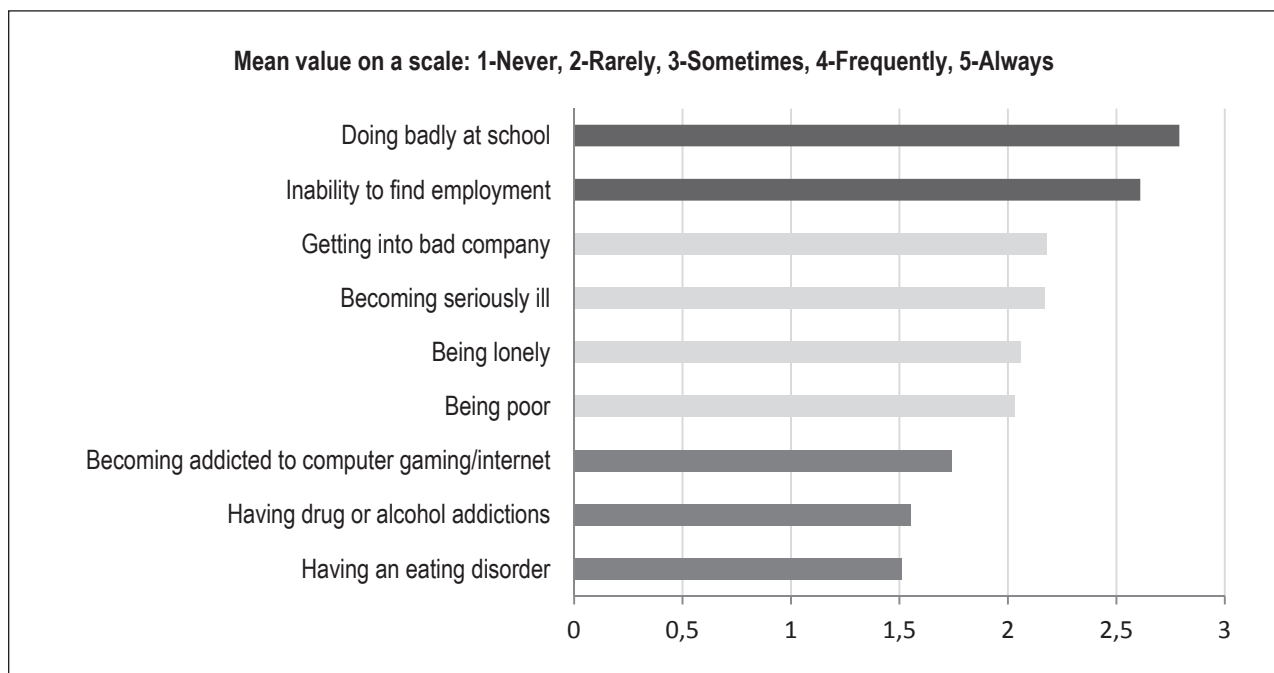
Mean value on a scale: 1-Never, 2-Rarely, 3-Sometimes, 4-Frequently, 5-Always

Figure 4: How often do you worry about the following situations becoming an issue for you at some point in the future (mean value)?
Graf 4: Kako pogosto te skrbi, da bi nekoč v prihodnosti imel/a naslednje težave?

are frequently or always worried about doing badly in school, which is in line with the substantially higher educational aspirations and actual educational attainment levels of female students. Moreover, these findings endorse the above assumption about the high self-responsibility for individual life courses today.

Further, there are also great concerns about finding employment in the future (21% of male and 24% of female students are frequently or often worried about the inability to find employment), especially if we consider that the sample includes 9th grade students who are yet to continue education at the upper secondary (and some tertiary) level before they will actually make a transition to the labour market. These results speak about how the general perceptions of the young population about the uncertainty and unpredictability of employment, about the unclear links between education and employment (high educational aspirations and yet high worries) and again about the individualisation of societal risks and high perceived self-responsibility.

On the other hand, not all students feel burdened or constrained about their lives and future, and their statements show high levels of optimism that is mostly based on trust in themselves, the people around them and the future in general, for instance: *"I'm not afraid of barriers and problems because I'm determined and persistent"* (essay, LJ-24, m); *"I think there are no barriers for my dreams and nobody can persuade me otherwise"* (essay, KP-12, f); and *"I'm not afraid of problems because I have people that I trust by my side"* (essay, KP-02, m).

Resources and support. The support and resources available to students at the time they have to make their educational choices is a crucial contextual factor as they not only frame but also earmark the opportunities they have. This is not only in terms of whether a student is able enrol in a certain school (for example, due to their previous school performance or financial abilities of their families), but also in terms of whether and to what extent a student is acquainted with the available options, which depends heavily on the social and cultural capital of their surroundings. As an international comparison of the empirical results has shown, not only educational opportunities but also educational aspirations are still strongly dependent on the economic, social and cultural capital of the students' families; a fact widely recognised in many other research studies (McDowell et al., 2012; Litau et al., 2013; Cuconato and Walther, 2013).

In terms of resources, students again most clearly refer to their own subjective abilities and past achievements, most often about their previous school performance (grades, worries about enrolment criteria, questioning their previous diligence and commitments to learning), while in terms of external resources they speak about available information (provided by the schools and related institutions, such as tests at the Employment Service, friends, and families), and available options in terms of financial capabilities (such as, for example, whether a family is able to support them to enrol in more distant schools).

Nevertheless, what is clear from the students' responses is that their parents or immediate family is, next

to their own school achievements, the most important support factor of educational choices and future planning[14]. For instance, the quantitative data reveal that 63% of all the students have at least weekly or daily conversations with their parents about their school work and 49% often discuss this their future education and career possibilities. Moreover, in the event they were to have problems in life, 88% of the students would seek advice from their mother, and 72% from their father; the percentages are similarly high in the case of problems with school work, 85% would turn to their mothers and 71% to their fathers. Further, more than 75% of the students stated that their mothers often or always tell them how important it is that they are successful at school and that they show a lot of interest in their school progress.

How crucial the support of their parents and families is for the students becomes even more evident from their statements in the interviews. Although parents certainly assume different roles and attitudes towards their children's independence in taking educational choices – from "children must choose by themselves" (Ule et al., 2012; Cuconato and Walther, 2013), to "way-keepers" or even "gatekeepers" (Cuconato and Walther, 2013) – it is clear that for a large majority of the researched students, parental support is vital and influential for their lives, regardless of the specific form it takes. When students feel they are not supported by their parents, their influence is of a different kind, but certainly not smaller; one vivid example:

"But I know that if you are for example an artist-painter or a musician (which are my highest priorities), you can live through many ups and downs, for which I am ready, but unfortunately my parents are against this. Against the real life. If I were indeed to be an artist, I should receive the most parental attention and encouragement. But I don't know if this will be true, this is why I will try to find another way in art, which is more reliable. This will not be a real life, where you can reach the highest point, therefore ordinary but, if I will follow my expectations and dreams, maybe then I can persuade my parents, who will then encourage me with all of their hearts and I will become what I have subconsciously wished for forever. A painter" (essay, MS-03, f).

PLANNING OF THE FUTURE: TIME HORIZON, HOPES AND DIFFICULTIES

Since educational choices at the end of lower secondary school are in many ways a key step towards the planned or desired future, the students' accounts about their choices and reflections on the future are deeply intertwined, and in many respects no clear distinctions can be made between the two. Nevertheless, perhaps the most evident distinction relates to the perspective of *time*; while educational choice occurs at the present moment (taking account of past experience, present resources and opportunities as well as future wishes and expectations), general reflections about the future refer to undefined and various individual timeframes. Nilsen (1999) distinguished between *plans, hopes* and *dreams,* where the timeframe is a crucial differentiating aspect: *plans* refer to the extended present rather than the long-term future and are strongly associated with a sense of being in control of the situation; *hopes* concern more distant events that extent over the projection of the present actions, but are at the same time seen as possible within a certain space and time, even if only vaguely; while *dreams* are related to the more distant future, belong to a timeless and spaceless realm and are completely beyond one's control (Nilsen, 1999).

A similar time horizon also emerged in our research material; the majority of the students plan and think about only the most immediate future (the time of upper secondary education), while the more distant future is only roughly sketched through more or less vague hopes, dreams or even fears and worries: *"Next I will be going to an economics secondary school; what I will do after that… some work experience or something similar"* (essay, KP-07, f); *"I don't know about the distant future, let it be a surprise, I will probably go to university"* (essay, KP-15, f).

Thus, the students' more detailed reflections and planning of the future are mainly oriented to the time frame of the next five years, which could be referred to as the "extended present" (Nowotny in Leccardi, 1999, 13; Nilsen, 1999). More specifically, the students mainly reflect about two different future 'events': enrolment in secondary school (and the related finishing of primary education) and the time of secondary education; both of these two events belong to the realm of the immediate future and not only allow, but also require some planning and reflection and thus seem to be at least partially within the students' control.

Further, with regard to how detailed, well-conceived and elaborated the students' future wishes and aspirations are in their statements, we can identify two different umbrella orientations towards the future. The first orientation regards those students who manifest clear, precise wishes and/or goals about their future lives, even where the paths towards them are not yet clear to them. For example: *"In the near future I hope I can go to a higher medical school where I will educate myself to become a paediatrician, because I like working with children a lot. In the distant future, I hope I will work at the Paediatric Clinic in Ljubljana and help ill children"* (essay, LJ-13, f). In this statement, we can see how the student has a vivid image of herself in the future, no doubts

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14 For a more detailed discussion about the role of parents, see Žakelj, Švab and Mencin Čeplak (2013).

about her dream vocation, yet, for the time being, she is not familiar with the specific educational routes towards becoming a paediatrician (enrolling in a higher school instead of the medical faculty). Similar reasoning is visible in the following statement where there are no doubts about the goal and aspirations, yet the path towards them is not easily attainable, although the student shows some awareness of this: *"In the future, I will continue with basketball and become a professional basketball player. I think it will be a problem how to reconcile all these with the school. I hope I will successfully finish basic, secondary and further education. My greatest dream is that after I successfully finish secondary school, I will go study in America and play for a school team there"* (essay, KP-17, m).

Moreover, there are many statements where the students express distinct wishes about the vocation they wish to perform in the future and are also familiar with it since they already have some experiences, such as becoming a cook, a tourist guide, a wood-crafter, auto-mechanic etc., for example: *"In the near and distant future I hope to become a professional cook and open my own restaurant"* (essay, LJ-32, m). Another group of students also expresses distinct wishes about their vocations, but with less knowledge about the specific details of the desired work, for example, becoming an actress, a lawyer or a doctor.

The second orientation regards those students whose future currently seems completely 'open' to them; they have little or no vision about their future lives. Their focus lies in the present moment, while the future (near or at least distant) seems not to be a concern. The reasons for this differ from student to student, yet we can identify at least two common markers: most often such attitudes are distinct for those students who have a fundamental doubt about their own wishes[15], some of whom show a keen need to find their own 'selves' in time to come, while others display a sort of ignorance or apathy towards their future by claiming they are not even thinking about it, for example: *"I have no idea what I will do in the near and distant future"* (essay, LJ-16, m) or *"I don't think about the future a lot"* (essay, KP-13, m). These kinds of statements are certainly not necessarily a sign of a lack of interest and motivation, but could very well also be an expression of the difficult choices among the plethora of options, the lack of distinct wishes, support, orientation, or even a consequence of the high insecurity and uncertainty in contemporary society, where one is left to find their path more individually and considerably less than socially and collectively than before.

This uncertainty is immediately manifested in a lot of the students' statements, which show that many of them are strongly aware of the difficult contemporary socio-economic and political situation pervaded by risks, in-

security and uncertainty, all of which severely aggravate their personal planning for the future. Some exemplary thoughts: *"I'm scared that there will be an even greater worldwide economic crisis"* (essay, LJ-13, f); *"But I fear that I won't find a job, because it is very difficult to find one even now"* (essay, KP-28, f); *"I hope that I will have or get a job because I notice that we are doing very badly right now. I don't want to look for a job abroad, but I still think that many young people will decide for abroad"* (essay, MS-22, f); *"I think this is unfair and also, how should I say it, if you have certain connections, you can get somewhere faster than one who makes effort and works and can't get anywhere"* (LJ-ex-students-Nina).

The difficulties and burden the students face in their planning for the future is also visible in the high awareness of individual responsibility for their own life paths (also see Razpotnik, 2011; Živoder, 2011; Rener, 2010; Mencin Čeplak, 2012). On one hand, the majority of the students believe that 'everything' is up to them, i.e. they see themselves as the key actor in their future personal and professional life (often the only recognised important condition is the support of the family) which often, yet not always, leads to a disregard of the other societal and social factors, actors and milieus which can trigger an even heightened sense of self-responsibility: *"My parents support me as they can, but I mostly support myself. And the idea that I do all this so that I will achieve something in life"* (essay, LJ-11, f).

On the other hand and deeply interrelated with the shared perception of self-responsibility is the willingness and determination to make a lot of effort and do everything that would lead to success, for example: *»I will have to face many fears and challenges since you have to study for a long time and have good grades. Sometimes I am also afraid, but I know that I will do everything in my power to get this profession and I will cope with all the challenges«* (essay, MS-01, f); *"I always try to look positively about my future, I believe in my dreams and whilst ever there is still a slight chance of realising these dreams I don't intend to give up. For my dreams, I intend to make an effort and fight until the end. Namely, my big passion is physiotherapy. I am aware that I have these abilities and a sense towards fellow human beings and, in addition, I look forward to this work"* (essay, MS-17, f); *"Yes, now I have to learn very, very hard in the next two years in gymnasium, and then also in third and fourth year. Then I have to persuade mum and dad that I can go study somewhere, and then continue with that and realise my dreams"* (MS-ex-students-Patricija).

Thus, the future for many students seems to rely heavily on their individual actions, choices, diligence and willpower. To say they are unaware of the difficult socio-economic situation and current labour market crisis would be a serious underestimation of many of them

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15 These are the students who resort to one or both of the two strategies described in the previous section about educational choices ('postponement of decisions' and 'more is better').

since they display a relatively high level of awareness of economic and social happenings. This is most likely precisely because they have just been facing one of the most important transitions of their lives, enrolment in secondary school, where for the first time they had to reflect on their future paths and make such an important choice and were also exposed to information about prosperous schools and professions. Nevertheless, when it comes to actual planning and choices, they still most often choose and plan individually, according to their own wishes, interests, feelings of accomplishment, self-realisation and fulfilment. In the absence of collective strategies, such choices, especially when they are not clearly linked to defined wishes, can present a considerable burden for choosing prudently, informatively and wisely as framed and demanded by the contemporary ideology of choice.

CONCLUSIONS: EDUCATION & THE FUTURE

Young people today are precisely the social group in which the contemporary risks and uncertainties are most distinctively expressed; on one hand, these risks are related to the 'ideology of choice' and the appeal to creatively express their 'true selves' and their dreams and to take responsibility for their actions, even if they are beyond their own control and influence (Beck 1986; Bauman, 2001; Salecl, 2010), while on the other hand they emerge from the contemporary socio-economic conditions, most of all from the uncertain and precarious labour market prospects (Leccardi 2005; 2006; MacDonald, 2009; Ule, 2008; 2010; Ule and Živoder, 2012).

This is reflected in their thinking and planning about the future. Namely, many of the young people who participated in our research have two things in common. First, they strongly identify with individualisation and the ideology of choice as they see their future through the lenses of their wishes and happiness, they wish to 'become somebody', they hope they will have jobs which they enjoy and where they can realise their own potential; having a job 'only for the money' seems an unacceptable option to many young students. Second, many of them are in a state of fundamental uncertainty precisely about their own wishes; they do not know what they desire, who they want to become, yet they are strongly convinced that they have to 'be true to their wishes, true selves'. Since for many of them their wishes and interest are still an 'enigma', they resort to such strategies that allow them to 'buy some time' in order to get to know themselves, become educated and work in the field of their interests, fulfil their potential, realise their dreams and be happy.

That is why they mostly think and plan about the near future (upper secondary school), while their paths and plans concerning the somewhat more distant future often cannot be a part of their reasoning or is manifested more or less through 'traditional' or socially expected and constructed wishes, such as vague wishes and ex-

pectations about having a husband or a wife, children, nice and well-paid jobs and material goods. A large part of their planning takes place through the common belief that it is precisely education and, more specifically, educational qualifications with their 'promise' of auspicious, safe or interesting jobs that is the most correct and most certain path towards a prosperous, comfortable and secure future.

We could say that, in general, the students who participated in the research demonstrate relatively strong optimism with regard to their future lives. However, these optimistic attitudes seem to be more linked to unclear hopes and wishes and a derivative of a certain time distance towards 'full adulthood' and accordingly their future than with clearly defined plans or a realistic assessment of opportunities. Thus, for young students who are about to or just have entered upper secondary programmes the future seems to be some sort of 'reservoir of potentiality' in which their wishes, dreams as well as worries, fears and uncertainties are gathered; nevertheless, in the eyes of the young people included in the research the positive aspects of their subjective future outlook certainly prevail. The future is thus denoted by a promise of something which has yet to arrive, a certain goal, the realisation of dreams, of themselves, i.e. of a different kind of today.

In a certain way, this relative optimism regarding the future might seem a little surprising given the contemporary social, economic and political conditions and prospects, and especially given the current economic recession with high youth unemployment rates and the many tertiary graduates without employment. Moreover, this recession is giving rise to even more precariousness, uncertainty and risks and, perhaps most importantly, a space for an increase in socio-economic differences and a diminishing of the welfare state. However, it should be noted that these kinds of positive attitudes of young people today are certainly a consequence of previous welfare state policies in Slovenia, which among other issues were aimed at ensuring equal educational opportunities for all and are to some extent still a legacy of our common societal past.

If we compare the educational possibilities of our students in terms of open and equal access to the education system with those from some other European countries, we can quickly detect some striking differences. For instance, in Germany, where the education system is highly selective, differentiated and stratified (Allmendinger, 1989), routes between different educational programmes and towards higher educational levels are not very permeable, children have to make crucial educational choices (in line with their possibilities and opportunities) which in most cases are irreversible, already at the age of 10–12. Moreover, *"In a highly stratified, selective school system, children are separated into different schools or programs according to their ability, socioeconomic and cultural-ethnical backgrounds and interests.*

There is little or no mobility between schools or programs, which differ greatly in curricula" (Cuconato and Walther, 2013, 41). In such systems, there is a strong tendency towards the reproduction of socio-economic differences through educational inequalities.

Young people should be able to dream about their future, to think that 'anything is possible' and certainly should not need to worry about a lack of employment opportunities or poverty (especially at the age of 14 or 15, such as the students included in the research) due to social, economic and political circumstances, faults of the political and social order or even an unfair or inaccessible education system. They should be able to hope to obtain jobs that will give them feelings of accomplishment and self-realisation regardless of their background or the scope of their families' connections and acquaintances. And it is both a task and a duty of today's Slovenian adult society and its political and economic elites not to squander the possibility of the young to dream and to at least maintain if not improve the same opportunities to educate themselves and to work as they themselves had.

"Young people are fitter to invent than to judge; fitter for execution than for counsel; and more fit for new projects than for settled business."
— Francis Bacon

IZOBRAŽEVALNE IZBIRE IN ORIENTACIJE ZA PRIHODNOST UČENCEV IN UČENK V SLOVENIJI

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POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje povezavo med izobraževalnimi izbirami učencev in učenk in njihovimi orientacijami za prihodnost v okviru sodobnih družbenih pogojev, ki jih bistveno označuje ideologija izbire in samo-realizacije na eni strani ter vse globlja politično-ekonomska kriza, pomanjkanje priložnosti ter vse večja negotovost na drugi strani. Analiza temelji na kvantitativnih in kvalitativnih podatkih, ki so bili pridobljeni v anketi, esejih in intervjujih z učenci 9. razredov osnovne šole v Sloveniji med letoma 2010 in 2011. Rezultati raziskave so pokazali, da v razmerah naraščajoče individualizacije družbenih tveganj, čedalje večje nepredvidljivosti in vse manjše standardizacije življenjskih potekov, učenci večinoma razumejo izobrazbo kot izjemno relevantno za svoja življenja in pogosto kot najbolj obetavno in varno pot do svoje prihodnosti. Vendar pa za učence izobrazba ni pomembna le skozi instrumentalne razloge, npr. dostopa do trga dela, ampak so zelo pomembni tudi bolj subjektivni razlogi, kot je npr. opravljati zanimiv poklic, ki daje občutek samo-realizacije. V smislu prihodnjih življenjskih potekov takšne vrste osebnih aspiracij in pričakovanj precej povečujejo občutenje individualne odgovornosti za prihodnost, ki ga pogosto spremlja skromen vpogled v širše družbene in ekonomske določujoče faktorje. Članek identificira in razpravlja o petih ključnih dejavnikih, ki uokvirjajo in vplivajo na izobraževalne izbire učencev ob koncu osnovnega izobraževanja: poklicne želje, relevantnost izobrazbe, zaposlitveni obeti, ovire in omejitve, viri in podpora. Ti dejavniki so umeščeni in prepleteni s t.i. obeti za prihodnost, to je subjektivnim pogledom vsakega učenca in učenke na svojo prihodnost. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da večina učencev načrtuje in razmišlja le o najbolj neposredni prihodnosti (čas srednješolskega izobraževanja), medtem ko je bolj oddaljena prihodnost le grobo skicirana skozi bolj ali manj nerazločne upe, sanje ali celo strahove in skrbi. Na splošno učenci, vključeni v raziskavo, izkazujejo relativno visok optimizem do svoje prihodnosti. Vendar pa se zdi, da je ta optimizem bolj povezan z nejasnimi upi in željami ter časovno distanco do »polne odraslosti« in s tem do svoje prihodnosti, kot pa z dejanskimi natančnimi načrti ali realistično oceno priložnosti.

Ključne besede: izobraževalna izbira, prihodnost, učenci/učenke, življenjski potek, poklicna želja, aspiracije, samo-odgovornost, tveganja, nepredvidljivost

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