

RELY ON YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY: HOW 9TH GRADE STUDENTS IN SLOVENIA COPE WITH EDUCATIONAL DEMANDS

Abstract. The article analyses the strategies of coping with educational demands used by 9th grade students in Slovenia. Three aspects of coping are dealt with in particular: coping with everyday demands and problems at school; coping with problems and dilemmas in the transition from elementary to secondary school; and formal and informal forms of support available to disadvantaged students. While support on the part of the school system reflects a high level of inclusivity and a personal approach to solving potential problems, students' perceptions and strategies reveal a sense of individual responsibility and focus more on help from families. Families therefore play a key role not only in decision-making but also in organising help and support for students.

Keywords: coping, students, parents, support, disadvantaged students, familialisation

Introduction

Previous research on youth in Slovenia shows that young people believe education is extremely relevant. According to the surveys "Youth 1998" and "Youth 2000", a great majority of students regard school success as very or relatively important (Mencin Čeplak, in Ule at al., 2000: 124; 2002: 175). The underlying idea is that education enables opportunities to transit from one social class to another (Mencin Čeplak, in Ule at al., 2002: 181) and education is also perceived to be the main condition for finding a job and therefore for one's future financial and social security and life success. In this sense, young people also take on the burden of educational failure and express a fear about not being successful (Mencin Čeplak, in Ule et al., 2000: 125).

Data also show the continuing importance of parents supporting students in dealing with educational demands (Ule, in Ule at al., 1996).

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Parental support is becoming ever more important to students as “the relationships of control and obedience are supplemented by the relationships of help, encouraging and confidentiality” (Ule and Mihelj, 1995: 76). Parental help, being emotional and instrumental, is especially “activated most in recessive and unstable periods” (Rener, in Ule et al., 1996: 146). As uncertainty in individual trajectories and instability grows, the relevance of family support can be expected. Family and friends seem to be the most relevant actors for supporting young people.

These characteristics form part of a general trend or shift towards the private sphere or familialisation that was already detected in a series of youth research in Slovenia back in the 1990s (Ule, 1995; Rener, in Ule et al., 1996; Ule et al., 2000). Young people highly value the private sphere and the family, and so-called “generational peace” has been documented as a form of inter-generational symbiosis between young people and parents, which also means an absence of the generational conflicts that characterised previous generations of young people (Ule, in Ule et al., 2000; Ule, 2008). In this sense, family represents important support for dealing with various sorts of challenges and demands.

The research entitled “Youth 1998” (Ule et al., 2000), carried out among students of the last year of elementary school, started with the research question of whether this sort of familialisation that was already clearly seen in the 1990s is some sort of step backwards compared with previous generations or whether it “perhaps urgent, although a transitory phenomenon of young people adjusting to an uncertain reality and to events they cannot influence, while the reality strongly influences their future” (Ule, in Ule et al., 2000: 12). At that time, the biggest source of uncertainty was attributed to Slovenia’s societal and economic transition, although the “Youth 1998” research already emphasised that changes in growing up cannot be simply attributed to the specific transitional processes in Slovenia, also because similar trends had been observed in Western countries as well (Ule, in Ule et al., 2000: 11). Research on youth in Slovenia from the 1990s has therefore shown that young people in Slovenia are becoming increasingly sensitive to threatening their life chances and that difficulties in their transition into the adult world and especially into the world of paid work are increasing and multiplying (Ule, in Ule et al., 2000: 11).

However, this trend is not exclusive to Slovenia. The familialisation of youth is explained as part of a general trend of the continuation and intensification of reflexive individualisation processes and demands of the reflexive project of the self that is characteristic of Western countries in general (Beck, Beck Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1995). Nevertheless, Slovenia differs from (at least some) other Western countries in yet another characteristic, namely its well-developed family and kinship networks which

provide indispensable support for family members for coping with everyday demands and problems. In the case of young people, we have a contradictory situation that was also confirmed by our study: students on one hand emphasise self-responsibility for educational and life success while, on the other, they rely very much on family (especially parental) support and are consequently influenced to a large extent by the family not only when it comes to supporting them but also in controlling their life decisions.¹

The article presents results from a qualitative research carried out among 9th grade students in Slovenia within the international research programme Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (Goete) (see Ule, editorial introduction to this thematic block), focusing on coping with educational demands. Special attention is paid to coping with educational demands in everyday life in general and decision-making regarding one's future educational path in particular, along with the role of parents and other actors in supporting students with coping (school experts, external experts). First, the article discusses coping with problems regarding education and the question of support in general (who do they rely on in case of school problems, how do they perceive responsibility for success at school etc.) and, second, the focus is on disadvantaged groups and their coping strategies regarding educational demands. Here we focus on the system of formal support options (school with experts and external experts) and the forms and strategies used by students themselves and their families. In the concluding chapter we discuss the results and their relevance for a broader understanding of young people's position in terms of coping with educational demands in the light of wider social changes and contexts.

Coping with educational demands

The results are divided into two sections. First, we present issues regarding coping with problems in general, stressing the contradictory situation of reflexive individualism, seen above all in students' emphasised self-responsibility for school achievements and (future) life success, and the important role of family support in dealing with problems. In the second section we analyse the results regarding coping with the problems of disadvantaged students, stressing the views and perceptions of students, parents as well as teachers and school experts. We reveal primary school strategies of help to disadvantaged students and the perceptions of students and their parents regarding the help options available.

¹ For a detailed sociological analysis of youth, social vulnerability and the role of the family, see Renner in Ule et al., 2000.

Coping with problems at school: who to rely on?

In this section we present results regarding how students in general cope with problems at school and who the important persons are they can rely on if they have problems at school. The results show a double and at first sight contradictory situation. On one hand, the students express a great deal of individualism while, on the other, they rely very much on the family, especially their parents and siblings, together with their friends.

Self-responsibility and individual abilities

Reflexive individualism (Beck, Beck Gernsheim, 2002) as a social context that significantly influences young people's lives can above all be seen in the expressed and emphasised self-responsibility. When coping with the (everyday) demands of education, students often express the view that they are themselves responsible for their school achievements and also for their achievements in life. It seems they have internalised the notions of (reflexive) individualism and that this is the social and cultural context in which they live.

Individualism in terms of self-responsibility is seen in coping with everyday achievements, such as good grades, learning difficulties and similar. Here learning as the main responsibility is expressed by the great majority of students.

The school is not difficult for those who are doing ok because they are those who study more than others. /.../ Everything depends on their abilities and studying ... It depends on how much have you worked in these years (KP-students-interview-Zvezdica).

Yes, it depends on me. If I learn, I know ... (MS-students-interview-Ronaldo).

Students also mention their own responsibility for their future success in life:

Well, it depends on the individual person; I mean the student is the one who decides [who is responsible] about the future (KP-students-interview-Maja).

The student alone is responsible. She/he has to decide [about the secondary school], because he/she does this school for him/herself and not for, I don't know, for his/her mummy. He/she will live with this school (LJ-students-interview-Metka).

Well, it's your entire fault [if you don't succeed in enrolling in the school you wanted]. If you choose such school and you cannot enrol because you don't have enough points – you should know it before and that you have to work to get enough points (LJ-students-interview-Nejc).

For some students, self-responsibility is also related to the question of trust:

/.../ somehow I trust myself most; I think that this is who I want to be (MS-students-interview-Klara).

Responsibility for one's own success is also perceived by the parents:

Yes, this [success] depends on coevals, school, but the mostly on oneself. It's true, if you want to achieve something you have to make an effort. You really have to work hard because nothing comes just like that (KP-parents-interview-mother-Tamara).

In order to be successful, one has to be responsible first. He has to have motivation. If someone doesn't have the will to learn, then nobody can do it instead of him. The most he can do is to help himself. If this doesn't suit him, then he can do it in his own way. But, of course, he is responsible (KP-parents-interview-father-Tone).

In accordance with the values of individualism, school experts and teachers also stress the role of knowledge, hard work and other individual abilities of a student as being the most important for future success in life:

In discussions with children I emphasise above all that not everything is at school, that what is important is savvy, communication abilities, /.../ because my experience is that an important virtue at work is to be shrewd. You have to have the ability to ask, to find information (KP-experts-interview-pedagogue).

Knowledge is the basics, I think; that they know how to be inventive in a certain situation, meaning that you have to be adjustable. If the labour market now demands this, then you have to be able to direct yourself in this. So that you strive for certain knowledge and so you don't get stuck with your diploma at a certain point (LJ-teachers-focus group-history).

Yes, they must have the ability to learn, to find themselves in a new situation and to adjust (MS-teachers-focus group-mathematics).

In contrast, some teachers and school experts hold (although they were in the minority) the opposite view and are more protective of students. In this case, responsibility is mainly attributed to external social factors:

Children cannot be responsible for their failure, I think; at least not yet in elementary school /.../ There is certainly a big role of parents, teachers and children, but not children solely (LJ-teachers-interview-teaching foreign students the Slovenian language).

The role of parents and friends

In contradiction with the emphasised self-responsibility in coping with school demands and life achievements in general, our findings also show that parents are perceived as and are also in fact important agents when it comes to coping with problems and decision-making regarding schooling. Parents are the first students rely on or would rely on in the case of problems at school:

I would tell my parents [in the case she's in trouble] and then we would solve things together /.../ I can rely on them (KP-students-interview-Maja).

Parents are the most important so I would turn to them (LJ-students-interview-Silvija).

I would tell my parents and then we would solve the thing together ... (KP-students-interview-Maja).

Friends and siblings also form an important part of the students' support networks:

I would go to a friend or to my mother (MS-students-interview-Ronaldo).

[I would turn] to friends /.../ well, and then also to my sister (MS-students-interview-Jasmina).

Sometimes, teachers are also perceived as those on whom one can rely on when in trouble:

Well, [I would turn to] class teacher. I can talk to her openly, as I would talk to my mother, you can tell her everything. Even if it has nothing to do with school you can trust her if you're not doing well, if you're in trouble (MS-students-interview-Ajša-Turkish girl).

However, this does not imply trust in school personnel in general as at the same time there is a low level of trust in school experts. They are not perceived as trustful in this respect:

I didn't have a problem at this school, but if I had one I would turn to my parents. I wouldn't turn to somebody at school because I don't trust the psychologist; she makes me nervous; this is it (LJ-students-interview-Amir).

/.../ With those at school, absolutely not. My sister (LJ-students-focus group 1-Kim).

Interestingly, parents are not only perceived as those the students trust the most but also as those who are expected to support children:

Parents are responsible for decisions in this regard (KP-students-interview-Zvezdica).

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

Parents also have in practice an important influence on children as far as coping with problems as well as decision-making regarding further education is concerned. First of all, they play an important role in terms of control and pressures regarding school achievements. Teachers and school experts perceive this as both a problem and an obstacle on the path to students' independence:

/.../ My instruction to parents here is that they should leave a child alone and let him/her show what he/she is capable of... Because some parents even in the last grade work with a child every day. /.../ So many children, especially those whose parents teach them, control them, pay for their private lessons, come to school with a certain reservation; especially when they have an oral or written exam, because they are afraid, but not because they will get grade 4 or 3, but because they will disappoint their parents, their instructors. /.../ Some [children] are under very big pressure as today only the best grade counts, anything else is not worth a lot, even grade 4 is no good anymore. (LJ-teachers-interview-teaching foreign students the Slovenian language).

Parents also have control over decision-making regarding secondary school. Their views and interests have an important role in students'

decisions regarding secondary school, which was expressed in the students' statements as well as the statements of teachers and school experts. The latter were also very critical of such parental control over students:

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. /.../ We had a discussion one day and we came to this conclusion [that this school is not ok for her]. ... I was thinking a lot and then decided that they [her parents] are right about that (KP-students-interview-Zvezdica).

Yes, my mum advised me to go on to pharmaceutical school because she is a nurse and she told me this, and I agreed (LJ-students-interview-Jennifer).

Well, [the parents who aim very high when it comes to choosing secondary school] always very high, don't they /.../ Gymnasiums for sure and technical schools; only 3 or 4 students enrolled in vocational schools out of 42 (KP-experts-interview-pedagogue).

Parents also have high expectations regarding their child-student's schooling and life achievements:

Expectations are very high. And they [the children] are afraid that they won't meet them. And they come to ask me if they are e.g. able to go to a gymnasium. They are looking for such answers (KP-experts-interview-librarian).

I still see that the majority of 9th grade students mainly choose grammar schools; it's not that I discourage them to enrol there, but I advise them and their parents not to force themselves at any price because there is a big drop-out precisely among them. I think that precisely parents are often responsible because they cannot accept the idea that their child will not go to grammar school. I personally think and try to make them understand that today you can also be successful in other ways. (LJ-teachers-interview-teaching foreign students the Slovenian language).

Disadvantaged groups and coping with educational issues and problems

The Slovenian primary school system usually has a well-organised network of internal experts who deals with several needs, problems and issues regarding students. Although the school system also has well-developed

support for coping with educational demands, it seems that in this respect the school with its experts and students with their parents are standing on two opposite riverbanks. Parents and students are satisfied with the possible opportunities for help but they would not like to use them. Among the options for help, the assistance of teachers with extra lessons is the most accepted, while counselling experts are often not sufficiently trusted².

Coping with the demands of the education system is an especially relevant topic when we focus on disadvantaged students. According to the data gathered in the research and especially in the opinion of the experts and teachers, several groups of students were recognised as disadvantaged. These were students with learning disabilities, immigrants³, Roma students, and students from families with a lower socio-economic status, students from families that do not offer support to their children to help them cope with demands of the education system and students with special needs. Students are mainly disadvantaged by a combination of factors (Walther, 2010) that influence their ability to cope with the demands of the education system. A combination of factors or circumstances that influence a student's opportunities to cope with educational demands was also stressed by the participants in the research who pointed out the relevance of family problems as a key factor in the disadvantages of students.

Internal help options offered by primary schools

Primary schools in Slovenia usually have a network of internal experts who also work with disadvantaged students. These are social pedagogues, special pedagogues, pedagogues, psychologists, social workers and, where a school has several Roma students, also a Roma mentor and/or Roma assistant. The structure of the experts varies according to the structure and needs of the student population. Primary schools usually organise different strategies for improving opportunities (of disadvantaged students) to cope with educational demands that focus on school success inside the school system – from individual lessons, team-work in small groups to additional lessons in subjects where students have problems (the most common are extra Slovenian and mathematics lessons) and, when possible, volunteer help in the case of learning problems:

² This finding is again in line with previous research. According to the Youth 2000 research, young people do not trust counselling experts (Rener, in Ule *et al.*, 2002: 95)

³ Immigrant students are those who have come to Slovenia recently. They are chiefly students from families who have been united after a period of living separately (the mother and children live in the state of origin, while at first the father lives in Slovenia on his own. Finally, the mother and children come to join the father (who is usually employed in Slovenia).

Individual learning help, the possibility to attain the Ministry decision, student volunteers come and offer learning help, an option to make agreements with teachers, additional lessons, complementary lessons, they can talk with the psychologists if there are any problems, also among peers. He was aware of this and he used this help... (LJ-parents-interview-mother-teacher).

Formal help options are highly elaborated but limited in practice by the national quota⁴ that is established at the beginning of the school year. The available extra hours of experts' help and the help of the teacher are mainly based on the number of students with specific learning problems (such as immigrants):

You know, we have resources, but their extent is limited. This year we have so many immigrant children, but for the whole school year we only have about one hundred hours [of paid extra help]. So, when the quota is used, that's it. /.../ So, it would be great if the amount of individual and group hours of extra help were greater /.../ I know that the state cannot take care of everything. But I think it should not save money on children. I don't think this is the proper strategy... (LJ-experts-interview-principal).

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All school help options have to be accepted by parents voluntarily and parents have to give their written consent to accepting such help offered by the school:

/.../ All of these help options are available. Then the parents decide if they will accept it or not. Because all help options, except for ordinary lessons, are carried out by consent. We have the parents' written consent. If we do not have it, we can offer help to the child but it is not necessary that they will come (KP-experts-interview-principal).

In the case of a lower socio-economic position, the school offers different help options – notebooks and other school requisites (as mentioned in the case of Roma students in Prekmurje), payment for external interest activities, free school meals, payment for school activities (such as school summer/winter camps), school trips and other financial support:

⁴ When talking about extra teachers or experts' help, the available hours are usually determined at the beginning of the school year by the Ministry in view of the number of students in need of extra help. Because such needs usually exceed the determined amount of help, the school has to reorganise its work to provide the required help during the whole school year.

For example, if they don't have the Internet at home, they have access at school... We also support them with free meals, lunches, free textbooks from the school textbook fund, there's a school fund for covering the costs of school trips and school summer/winter camps. We do this in an unnoticeable way so that a child and the class do not know anything about it. We only talk to the parents. So that a child does not feel that he/she is different, that we have supported him/her, that we have treated him/her differently (LJ-teachers-interview-teaching foreign students the Slovenian language).

In many cases the need for help is first identified by the class teachers. They often endeavour to organise help in an unnoticeable way so that students do not feel like they are different from their school mates⁵. Families with a lower socio-economic position do not want to be regarded as poor so many cases of economic disadvantage can be hidden if they are not recognised by the school staff.

External help options

External help options refer to different student needs that cannot be met by the school. The external institutions schools usually co-operate with are: the local social work centre, the Counselling Centre Ljubljana, health institutions, municipalities, NGOs focusing on children's welfare (such as *Zveza prijateljev mladine Slovenije*) and other institutions that are available in the local environment. Mainly school experts talk about the external help options for a disadvantaged student to cope with school demands in cases when the internal help options have already been exhausted:

/.../ For matters that are demanding and exceed our frameworks we search for external help. We direct parents to the diagnostic or experts help outside school; because our help is sometimes not sufficient and ... it is good to let things out of the system. Sometimes parents search for this help on their own. They go to the Counselling Centre, the psycho-hygienic dispensary for children with emotional, learning problems, anxieties or a social problem. We have all kinds of problems: long-term illness, fears regarding school. And the Social Work Centre which covers financial help for families. And also for cases when all the agreements and endeavours with parents are not supported. So we need someone to accompany from the outside (KP-experts-interview-social pedagogue).

⁵ While parents, friends and siblings are regarded as the most important people they can rely on in case of (school) problems, among school staff it is class teachers who the students would rely on (students usually do not have close, trusting relationships with internal experts).

When the school finds its own resources or knowledge for help strategies are too narrow, it requests help from the abovementioned institutions and works together on the case on the basis of teamwork. School experts emphasise that co-operation with external institutions is mainly good, but depends on the individuals involved. Co-operation is evaluated as satisfactory especially where co-operation is part of regular practice when the experts included know precisely what are the expectations and possibilities of other actors who are involved.

A new relevant issue: Children with special needs

In the teachers' and experts' points of view, children with special needs are one group of students that are often recognised as disadvantaged. We are talking about the special category of children who were categorised under the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act as having special needs. That law was adopted in 2000⁶. The system of assigning the status begins in primary school (or can also begin at the time of inclusion in kindergarten but must be confirmed a by new procedure in primary school again), when teachers and experts recognise a student has special problems – such as they he/she cannot follow the subject etc. First, the school tries to help the students with internal help such as additional lessons. Where the organised help is insufficient the school counselling expert does specific psychological tests. If the specific deficit is confirmed, parents can decide to put in an application along with all necessary opinions of teachers, the class teacher and experts (pedagogue, psychologist, psychiatrist and other health experts etc.). Finally, if the student is recognised as a child with special needs the additional help of teachers and/or experts in order to reduce the specific deficit is specified in an order.

Data from the Ministry of Education and Sport show that in the 2009/2010 school year, 4.5 % of students in Slovenian primary schools had special needs (Opara et al., 2010: 61). The categories of students with special needs are: students with learning disabilities; students with behavioural, emotional and social problems, visual impairments and blindness, deafness and hearing impairment, speech disorder, long-term ill children, children with a physical disability, or children with autism. Some of the stated categories need an adjusted implementation of the programme, and/or extra teachers and/or experts' help. On the basis of a decision by the Ministry, the school commission prepares an individual programme of help that encompasses the

⁶ In Slovenia endeavours to include children with special needs in ordinary school programmes have a 15-year tradition (Opara et al., 2010). However, the legislative options have only been implemented slowly so schools have been confronted with a growing number of children with special needs in the last few school years.

proposed help. Because the number of students with special needs is growing since the law has only been implemented in practice recently, teachers sometimes have problems with all the adjustments that should be made for individual students while there is not enough time to work with the individual, especially when week-long obligations for subjects are limited to just one or two hours and teachers have no quality contact with a student with special needs:

./.../ They have all kinds of papers, orders. They have opportunities that we didn't have in the past. I sometimes think they have too many opportunities. Sometimes it seems to me that each student requires a different kind of teaching. I do not know anymore who is privileged and who isn't. Because if I have 25 students in the class, at least half of them have something./.../ It is hard to concentrate on 25 varieties in 45 minutes. To give marks in different kinds of ways, to give different writing orders, these are huge differentiations. So this is an enormous burden for us (KP-teachers-interview-class teacher-arts).

Students with special needs decisions are basics for an individual programme of school work with students. In practice this sometimes requires teachers to do a lot of adjusting to the specific needs of students. Consequently, in class there are usually more students who need different types of help and adjustments for learning, but the time limitations of teachers make it difficult to achieve the suggested teaching approach. So teachers feel like they are overburdened with responsibilities due to the presence of so many different needs. In addition, in some cases they also stress they do not have proper knowledge to work with some students with special needs:

Now, when we had a student with autism in the school we had to study literature on our own. Not that we would feel so resistant, but you do not know how you have to act in a specific situation if you do not have any experience or you manage as you can (MS-teachers-focus group-Slovenian).

The categorisation of students as students with special needs not only has an impact on the growing number of children regarded as having special needs as stressed by the teachers, but it also brings a new concept of understanding children's needs. While some of them are regarded as usual or universal, the others are recognised as special. Consequently, having special needs means special treatment that brings the possibility of being partly excluded from the life of an ordinary peer group.

Parents' co-operation in students meeting school demands

Either disadvantaged or not, the parental role and parental support is very important when it comes to meeting school demands. The experts and teachers included in the survey stressed two types of co-operation with parents. Most parents usually attend special parent-teacher hours a few times per school year, besides some parents are very interested in becoming acquainted with how things are going in the school. These are mainly the parents of successful students, yet the parents of students who have problems with grades or other (such as behavioural) problems are not always interested. When problems emerge teachers usually call the parents or send a written invitation to come to the school to talk about the situation:

/.../ We invite all the parents of students from 6th to 9th grade. Some of them come, some we do not see in four years. Some come to appear only once. /.../ Those who wouldn't hear praise, they do not like to come. It is logical. They are desperate, they recognise that they cannot control them at home... (KP-teachers-interview-class teacher-history).

/.../ I have the experience that unfortunately the parents of those students who we do not have problems with are coming. These parents come very often or are very interested. Those who would have to come, they withdraw in a way and we have to call them or invite them (LJ-teachers-focus group-Slovenian).

The parents included in the survey stated they are acquainted with school happenings. They are used to going to parent-teacher hours and to talking with (class) teachers or school experts when necessary.

I would say that I am quite in touch with the class teacher. For the parent-teacher interview and in the past I went to school very often, nowadays I just call. /... / My daughter dabbles a lot, very, very much. From A she has come to E. /.../ I do not know what to say. They call me quite often. I feel terrible when the social worker's number is displayed on my phone because I know that there is something wrong with her again... (MS-parents-interview-mother-Katja).

/.../ I have to commend the communication with the school, especially with the class teacher/.../ there is nothing not to be discussed, settled. She informs me if there is something wrong; I call her each week to briefly discuss because at the age of puberty you never know whether they are saying the truth or not. /.../ This I may miss when he leaves primary

school. Because you know how it is in secondary school, no one is doing it this way... (MS-parents-interview-mother-Ana).

Accordingly, when the parents have an interest, they describe the communication with the school as relevant and are usually satisfied with that communication.

Family strategies for improving coping

Family strategies for improving coping are not always based on school options. As parents of disadvantaged students stated, students do not always use the possibilities of school help (extra lessons etc.). The family often uses its own resources instead, which they obtain either within the family (help of parents, siblings, relatives) or outside the family – such as extra private lessons for improving their children's success in learning:

So I get someone. But not because the school would not have offered it, but this is usually pre-hours or at the end of the school day and then they are already tired or in the morning they are unwilling to go and they won't say it (MS-parents-interview-mother-Jožica).

/.../ and when he is absent from school we have a private teacher with whom he works on the school material... (LJ-parents-interview-mother-Jelena) [due to health problems her son often stays away from school, otherwise he is an outstanding student].

Private lessons are mainly used when parents feel they cannot help their children with learning because they lack knowledge:

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

It's hard for me because my parents did not go to school here, they were in another country, and then it's more difficult for me because nobody is able to explain to me, so I have to rely on myself or I also go to additional lessons (LJ-students-interview-Metka).

School help options are not widely accepted, especially by students. When we asked them who they rely on in the case of school or family problems they stressed that this would not be the school experts. They are generally aware they can turn to them, but in practice they do not:

To those in school, 100% not./.../ The psychologist only yells at you even more then, as if you had done something wrong, rather than helping... (LJ-students-focus group 1-Kim).

I do not know, I think it is not the way they talk about it. /.../In school there are, in my opinion, not many options [to rely on someone in case of problems] (KP-students-interview-Jan).

What about solidarity?

Many research participants exposed the lack of solidarity among the students. Disadvantaged students feel as if nobody is willing to help. Solidarity is generally weak. As the students, parents, teachers and experts put it, students are becoming more individualistic and only caring about their own welfare:

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

But this peer help... Here it is hard to break the ice. Individualism is so strong..., when they are writing tests, they still have these barriers to prevent someone copying /.../ (KP-experts-interview-pedagogue).

/.../ even when he is sometimes absent, when he is really ill, he has to make many phone calls for someone to bring him notebooks /.../. And this is really critical (LJ-parents-interview-mother-Sonja).

The lack of solidarity is understood as a consequence of the individualism and competition among students. Besides, it can be understood as a sign of the exclusion of (disadvantaged) students.

Concluding discussion

One of the main findings regarding how students cope with problems in education is the contradictory situation in which on one side students express a great deal of self-responsibility for their educational and life course decisions and actions while, on the other side, there is the strong influence of the family in the sense that parents play an important role not only in coping with demands but also in students' lives in general. While the

former can be understood as (at least one aspect of) reflexive individualism, that is characteristic of Western countries in late modernity (Beck, Beck Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1995), the role of the family, especially the parents, can probably be explained as a new form of adaptation to late modern circumstances where no other alternatives are available.

Students are not the only ones who express self-responsibility and other characteristics of individualism. Individualism as a value is also present in the perceptions of the parents as well as the teachers and school experts. Teachers rarely see structural factors as those which influence individual student life, but instead emphasise individual responsibility, individual characteristics and abilities as being crucial for "success in life" (being able to adjust, to be smart etc.). This puts the responsibility solely on individuals and does not question the broader social and economic contexts. This not only means that children are directly socialised in the culture of individualism (self-responsibility), but above all it means the passivisation of young people whose role is only supposed to be to be able to adjust to whatever conditions that come along.

While previous research on youth in Slovenia has already shown the importance of the family (and family support) along with some characteristics of individualism (Ule et al. 2000), individualism in the form of clearly expressed self-responsibility for one's own life course and above all life success has never been stressed to such an extent as in this study (also see other articles in this thematic block). The research "Youth 1998" (Ule et al., 2000) already posed a question about the reasons for the familialisation of youth that was on the rise throughout the 1990s, and wondered if this is a phenomenon of young people adjusting to an uncertain reality and events they cannot influence (Ule, in Ule et al., 2000: 12), and now it is clear that the answer is positive. Another of the consequences of the familialisation of youth is the fact that they rely and depend on their parents for coping with educational (and other) demands and it seems that this is predominantly a result of the broader uncertainties of late modern social and economic conditions and the demands of an individualistic culture. In this sense, the at first glance contradictory individualistic approach of young people "to rely on oneself" and the familialistic approach of "relying on one's parents" seem to exist alongside each other and are actually two sides of the same story. Parents' protective stance is probably (at least partly) a response to the demands of a highly individualised society and its demands on individuals. As already observed in the "Youth 1998" research, parental support is based on perceptions regarding the vocational and educational career of children that are at a very early stage "an object of calculative judgments and communication" between parents and children (Rener, in Ule et al., 2000: 110). Our study shows that both students and parents are very clearly aware

of this situation and, above all, that students seem to be very well socialised in the culture of individualism.

At first blush, with their strong family support young people in Slovenia seem to be better off than young people in other Western countries; however, when taking other contexts (e.g. increased control over decision-making) into account, this support also seems to be (if nothing else) limiting. Parental support is at the same time also controlling and limits young people's autonomy. This creates yet another contradiction as parents trying to support young people to cope with the demands of late modernity simultaneously also prevent them preparing to (independently) cope with these demands in their future life course. Instead of encouraging young people's autonomy, this parental strategy makes young people even more dependent. This is also confirmed by our study as individualism is only present in some aspects, e.g. in self-responsibility, while (the expected) individual's autonomy (from parents and other actors) is rarely present in the students' statements.

The individualistic and familialistic orientation leads to another characteristic identified in our study, namely the lack of solidarity among students in school. It seems that the school is not an environment where students are encouraged to co-operate and help each other, as especially seen in competitiveness and the lack of willingness to help and support class mates. Students from disadvantaged groups are especially missing such support. This is particularly important in further discussions as the school seems to be an ideal social environment that in the everyday life of young people could function as a counterpoint to the over-emphasised parental support and influence, offering students a way out from parental control on their way to personal autonomy and, at the same time, by promoting peer co-operation and solidarity it could be a sort of buffer zone that can alleviate the negative effects of individualism and prepare students to cope with them successfully.

Our study indicates that the situation is the opposite. Instead, we face a deep gap between the school and its strategies for coping with the educational (and life) demands of students on one side, and students and parents on the other who do not trust the school and strive to find their own strategies for coping with such demands and problems. Paradoxically, schools in Slovenia have a highly developed system of options of help inside and outside primary schools and, in this respect, it could be said that the Slovenian primary school system supports personalised education (Walther and Pohl, 2005) and inclusive education (Opara et al., 2010) that endeavours to meet the different needs of students. In both the context of categories of children with special needs and those recognised as disadvantaged on different grounds, school counselling networks endeavour to mitigate the factors influencing their problems of coping with school demands. Preventive

school support (free school requisites for Roma students in Prekmurje, school trips and school camps and additional interest activities free of charge etc.) and formal school support (state-subsidised meals, additional teachers or experts' help for children with special needs, Slovenian lessons for immigrant students etc.) indicates that the system of primary school education endeavours to be highly inclusive. But in practice neither students nor parents see these options as helpful. Students sometimes just do not feel as if they have many options for help – they feel like they are being left alone. And here we again return to the beginning: to the highly individualistic perceptions regarding who is responsible (for school success). The coping strategies of students and their families related to the demands of the education system are often directed to sources outside primary school – to the informal help of siblings, relatives, acquaintances and private lessons that are supposed to improve marks and finally opportunities to enrol in the desired secondary programme. It seems that students (and their parents) are caught in a vicious circle from which they are unable to find a way out.

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