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### **EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA**

During the past 50 years, youth studies have proven to be a good indicator of the relevance of new societal trends. Not only is the social, cultural and political process of youth attaining their independence in the 20th century a direct consequence of political modernisation, it is also its mirror. While science offers theoretical proof of changes in the social order, it has been youth that has provided empirical proof of these changes in past decades (Parsons, 1963; Keniston, 1971; Ziehe, 1991; Beck, 1997).

The position young people today face across Europe and in Slovenia is largely characterised by two main changes and processes in contemporary society. The first is ever longer economic dependence on one's family of origin, coupled with unemployment pressures and a prolonged educational process. The second factor is the lack of autonomous peer groups and socially active youth subcultures, meaning that young people are left without a specific generational or subcultural identity and self-confidence. These factors are forcing young people to rely on their own resourcefulness and "personal projects" when having to make far-reaching decisions (du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006; Walther et al., 2006). These changes are due in part to circumstances which transcend national borders such as the restructuring of the labour market and growing demand for a new, highly specialised, flexible and educated labour force, as well as social policy measures which have almost everywhere extended the period in which young people depend on their families.

In Slovenia we are today dealing with an always "thinner" segment of young people who are literally from birth onwards accompanied by a mix of worries for the future and all types of investments by their parents. Differences among young people are increasing. The particular ways in which the redistribution of property has been occurring over the past two decades have also considerably increased the differences in the starting positions of young people, who are becoming ever more dependent on family capital, support and familial social networks (Helve and Bynner, 2007). Yet, it is not solely demographic trends that are responsible for the reduced share and value of young people in comparison to other population groups. Another important factor of the social exclusion of youth is the narrowing of the "space for youth," which has come to be limited to the spheres of privacy and leisure time. The private world of young people, along with the help

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and support of their parents, offers them shelter and a place to withdraw from the pressures of the increasingly complicated and unclear everyday world of adults.

The majority of changes took place over a relatively short period of time, leading to the weakening of the “old, stable frames of reference” that used to ensure a fairly reliable and predictable transition to adulthood; these transitions have now become uncertain and vague. New information technologies and media offer elements of multiculturalism and global internationalism; they constantly inform young people of new consumer trends and lifestyles. All of this results in a widening of young people’s worlds and liberates them from traditional cultural ties and patterns. But, conversely, this same world is particularising and individualising their common problems and only offering substitutes and not solutions to real life dilemmas and problems. These processes affect young people the most since they are in the transition process to adulthood and are, on one hand, responsible for all important decisions in life involving a variety of choices and the risks which accompany those choices while, on the other, they are not yet economically or socially independent. The changed life circumstances of youth in the late modern period are thus hyper-complex, hard to perceive and unmanageable for young people (Mizen, 2004). State and public support systems do not always operate in accordance with the needs and concerns of all young people. Strategies of systemic inclusion have lost their legitimacy.

The loss of security, once inseparably connected to institutional paths and transitions, means that the risk of mistaken strategies can appear even when a young person follows tried and tested institutional paths, for example by finishing their schooling, only to find out that their education and training does not suit actual labour market needs. It is only a small step from uncertainty regarding the achievement of social inclusion to the question of what it even is. The same factors can affect the course of life in a restrictive or a liberating way (Ule et al., 2000). Besides the standard factors such as social and national origin and gender, the importance of nonstandard factors such as socio-cultural capital, communicative skills and emotional stability is growing.

This development has a distinctive dark side; (young) people are becoming increasingly overwhelmed by social conflicts and contradictions, and are feeling them more directly, without the protection of the “social buffers” provided by intermediate institutions of earlier periods of modernisation such as peers, subcultures, class consciousness and belonging. Most young people’s response to these hyper-complex life situations involves an implosion into the personal life and a policy of reducing risk in life choices. The changed attitude towards the public and the private is a common culturological phenomenon characteristic of all modern youth. When competitiveness

and selective admission to (prestigious) schools and (suitable) employment become increasingly stronger, family emotional support and family social networks are crucially important.

In the struggle for at least temporary success in this strongly unequal encounter of young people with the hyper-complex systems of capital and social power, participation in decision-making and social influence is critical. In democratic societies the institution of citizenship takes care of this. The concept of citizenship has become an analytical instrument for understanding the position of exclusion and marginalisation in recent decades. In accordance with modern concepts, we distinguish among political, civil, social and intimate citizenship. If young people as a heterogeneous social group have anything in common, it is precisely this impeded or prohibited access to full citizenship (Jones and Wallace, 1994; Renner, 2002). In conditions in which the social exclusion of youth is systemic and not random, when the education system is an imperative for young people at least into their twenties while at the same time it controls, selects and rejects, when responsibility for their biography must be borne increasingly earlier in childhood, and when already children must be mature enough for important decisions, this impeded access or exclusion of young people from rights of citizenship implies arrogance and cynicism, and is destructive for citizenship identity and the sense of belonging.

It is also in direct contradiction with the demand of late modernity that each individual should be reflexively in charge of their own biographical project as early as possible, which requires socio-political responsibility and accountability; this is impossible to achieve if the individual lacks the necessary citizenship rights and obligations. For this reason, it is meaningless to talk about how young people should again become social subjects and how we can help them in addressing their problems and risks until there is a change in the conditions that keep young people in a position of social, economic and political dependence when today, perhaps even more than in traditional societies, social immaturity and prolonged dependency are being imposed upon them.

Young people respond differently to these changes, in line with their possibilities and local circumstances. While those who do not have economic or socio-cultural capital end up as drop-outs, most young people work their way by coping with varying degrees of severity of these problems; prolonged economic dependence combined with ever earlier psychosocial independence and the fragmentation of referential frameworks that could enable them to assess their own experiences against the backdrop of the wider context. Consequently, young people see the social world as incomprehensible, unpredictable and full of risks. The new feature is that they perceive these risks as individual crises rather than the effects of

processes outside the reach of their influence. The loss of one's job therefore appears as an individual failure, failure at school as a lack of effort or skills, and youthful deviations as a lack of a firm family upbringing or values. But these are incomplete stories, even though they are offered as the only likely ones.

This is the framework in which the social and political reconstruction of youth in Slovenia and elsewhere in transitional countries has taken place. And this is the general context in which this thematic issue is placed, where we present the first Slovenian results of the international research entitled *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe: Access, coping and relevance of education for young people in European knowledge societies (GOETE project) in a comparative perspective* (seventh framework "Education in a European knowledge society"). The GOETE project is concerned with understanding how educational systems deal with the changing relationship between education and social integration in the so-called knowledge societies (Walther et al., 2010). It analyses young people's educational trajectories in eight European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK). Applying a *life course* perspective and combining it with a *governance* perspective, it asks how young people's access to different stages of education is regulated, how coping with forms and demands of education and lifelong learning is facilitated through formal and informal support, and if and how far education is relevant for the future lives of young people. Which actors and administrative levels are involved? How is communication and co-operation between schools, the economy, and civil society organised? Are the voices of individual students and their parents heard and how are their views taken up in decision-making? What are the directions of the current discourses and reforms regarding school entry and progression, organisation of support, teaching and curriculum development or the funding of education?

On a scientific level, the comparison of the regulation of educational trajectories involves re-conceptualising the social aspects of learning and education in the conditions of late modern knowledge societies. It reflects the need for formal education to be embedded in social life worlds, enabled by social support, and complemented by informal and non-formal learning. On a practice and policy level, it will provide information about alternative means of providing children and young people with access to education; of supporting them in coping with education and ensuring the relevance of education by communication and co-operation between the school, labour market, other educational actors, students and parents (Walther et al., 2010). The research objectives of the GOETE project imply a comparative perspective for three reasons:

- to identify general factors of the relationship between education, the life

course and social integration as well as converging trends of educational governance in distinction from contextual specificities;

- to ascertain the constellations and factors of governance that are favourable to broader access to education, to support mechanisms that help students effectively in coping with educational demands and to communication procedures that allow for a reconciliation between different systemic and subjective criteria of educational relevance; and
- to allow for processes of mutual learning in the modernisation of educational governance.

The focus lies on the social aspects of education: does education still contribute to social integration and is it still socially integrated? This implies, first, asking whether individuals have *access* to education across different life phases and especially during life course transitions; second, whether individuals can *cope* with educational demands and procedures; and, third, whether education is *relevant* in providing systemically and biographically necessary skills, knowledge and competencies.

The research study covers the period from the transition to lower secondary education to the transition to upper secondary education/vocational education and training, i.e. the age group between 15 and 16 years. The mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative analysis) study involves surveys with students, parents and school principals, case studies of local school spaces, expert interviews with policymakers and stakeholders.

In the following four articles, dealing with the issues of the life-course, access to, coping with and relevance of education, we present and interpret the results of qualitative research we have carried out in spring 2011 in three Slovenian primary schools located in three cities: Ljubljana, Koper and Murska Sobota. The research methods employed were semi-structured interviews, focus groups and unstructured observations. Altogether, we have carried out 97 interviews and focus groups with 9th grade students, their parents, teachers, principals, internal school experts and other relevant local experts who are involved or have a special insight into the educational process of primary school students.<sup>1</sup> In the last article of this thematic issue we present and reflect upon some of the data obtained by the quantitative research carried out in autumn 2010 in 20 primary schools located in the same Slovenian regions. The methodology employed was a standardised questionnaire for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents.

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<sup>1</sup> *The empirical material is presented by using quotations from the interviews and focus groups that were transcribed and coded. Citation sources are marked in the following manner: e.g. "KP-students-interview-Maja", meaning the interview that was carried out in Koper with a student whose fictitious name is Maja. The abbreviations for the two other cities are "LJ" for Ljubljana and "MS" for Murska Sobota. All names of the participants in the qualitative study are fictitious.*

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