SNAPSHOTS OF POLICY-MAKING IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT*

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Change in education is a structured development. In Slovenia as a newly established country, it was a challenging, enriching, conflicting and demanding endeavour. Looking back, sound changes as well as misconceptions and illusions can be viewed in a different light. With the benefit of hindsight, many of the misconceptions now appear as damaging – some even dangerous – in the long term. Yet some of them were needed and had their purpose.

Slovenia declared independence in 1991 and struggled to be recognised. But when, in May 1992, I became a member of the cabinet responsible for education, recognition was only one of many topics on the agenda. We somehow knew that in due course we would be recognised. Many other and often more pressing problems were mixed and intertwined: growing unemployment, striking workers, the loss of traditional markets in the former Yugoslavia, tens of thousands of refugees pouring in from the former Yugoslavia and future-oriented projects.

In the field of education, a group of relatively young researchers and university teachers had been invited to conceptualize and to take over the management of education at that time focused specifically on the quality of education.

Enthusiastic and with illusions about the pace, time and financial resources available, we started to inaugurate changes in education in Slovenia.

In the present essay’s limited space, I will present a few personal snapshots and reconsiderations related to these first years of education reform in Slovenia.

Snapshot 1: Conservative reforms

From the very beginning we avoided the word ‘reform’. For one thing, both citizens and us were afraid of yet another experiment in education. A fear of making new mistakes made us opt for a careful comparative step-by-step reform. One of the hypotheses (which proved to be true) was that the existing system formed a sound basis that we could develop further without overly radical change. The old regime had started Tocquevillean changes some years before that we could build on. Teachers, school heads, universities, chambers of trade and commerce began with a number of innovative projects. One of the most important "projects" of the opposition to the former political leadership was to re-establish formerly abolished grammar schools (Gymnasium).

Although reform efforts took place in an environment which demanded change1, the changes that were actually launched did not face a "lack of opponents to them, whether among politicians or teachers or parents themselves" (European Commission, 1996, p.7).

Snapshot 2: Well-informed illusions

Several demands beset us. Some were conflicting. And it is fair to say that we experienced a number of them as the lack of comparative knowledge and judgment. Some really stemmed from a lack of comparative knowledge and judgment. Yet today it seems obvious that changes in society – including “dramatic swings in political ideology and leadership, (...) eroding consensus about societal values” (Leithwood, 2002, p.8) – had raised expectations of the education system, which by many was considered to be far more than just one small part of the solution to many social and economic problems. Citizens had their misconceptions, we had ours too. One was that reform would run smoothly if it were well-informed, inclusive and financially supported. Our misconception was profoundly biased by an over-rationalistic and meritocratic concept of education which had, in the last few decades, reappeared in new clothes2: the notion that the global and increasingly complex society and markets require educated citizens who can continuously learn and fight for their place in the labour market.

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1 “Recent demands for changes in the education system in Slovenia had been expressed in evaluation studies at the end of the 1980s. However, the change of the social system meant that changes in the education system became a necessity. Thus at the start of the 1990s Slovenia joined the European trend towards reforms of education systems.” (Svetlik and Barle, 1999)

Snapshot 3: Hegemonic structure

Comparing reform in Slovenia with the reforms in the region – and even judging by the country’s results in the OECD PISA studies – we were relatively successful. The questions are: why and how?

Experts dealing with reforms would usually blame conceptual incoherence, impatience of the reformers, lack of money, and lack of involvement of teachers and parents for unsuccessful reforms that trigger reforms of the reforms. Of course, all these factors are important but they matter very little if there is no consensus about concepts, beliefs, values and interests – in other words, if a new hegemonic structure – is not in place. Without the latter, even the best informed step-by-step reform, with teachers invited to be genuine partners and with sufficient financial resources is deemed to be a failure. In Slovenia this new hegemonic structure was in place. We wanted to become part of a free Europe with a high standard of living. We saw education as an important tool to reach this goal. A combination of justified expectations and illusions – that were yet to be exposed as such – provided a solid foundation for the reforms. As the data comparing trust in institutions in the country demonstrate, huge enrolments in education thus producing hope for the future and relatively successful reforms brought education to a high position on the ladder of trust in Slovenia.

Table 1: The level of trust in institutions in Slovenia in 1991–2003 (frequency of “high level of trust” and “substantial trust”)

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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Enterprises</td>
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<td>Family</td>
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Snapshot 4: Reconsideration of the concepts

Reform as an intentional and far-reaching process started with the reconsideration of concepts. Following a variety of theories and philosophies, experts had different views even on some of the essential new issues, such as the introduction of compulsory education at the age of six. Svetlik and Barle (1999) suggest that “it was perhaps the euphoria following the changes in the social system that created the illusion that it would be possible to formulate a concept for reforms to the education system directly from various academic discussions and conferences involving a large number of experts, educators and parents.”

Looking back we can claim that numerous academic discussions and conferences with teachers, parents, and economic partners largely paid off and were a necessary part of reforms. But at the same time, strangely enough, our misconception or lack of recognition of the dependence of education on the structure of society allowed us to conceptualise, legislate and implement a number of solutions that were not easily accepted by all stakeholders in the country.

Knowing that the field of education is at the same time specific and – as is true for other spaces in society – a field for positioning and validating cultural and symbolic capital, we overestimated the common and general interest. The ideology of meritocracy and the universal value of knowledge became our ideology too. Today it is obvious that:

a) the time of transition was a time of relative openness;

b) the euphoria of a new beginning was an opportunity for all;

c) a condition of national common purpose existed in the general desire to join the European Union; and;

3 “For it is no use trying to conceal the fact that (…) education finds itself intellectually disoriented between a past which is dying and the future which is still undecided (…)” (Durkheim, 1977, p.8).

4 In the period of economic recession and unemployment that went from 1.3% in the time of socialism to more that 13% in the mid-1990s, opportunities for a younger generation brought back hopes for better future.

5 Summarised from Rus (2005, 346).

6 We are using here the concept of field in the Bourdieuan sense of the term.
d) a relatively unstructured political system and ideological divisions, together with political stability are to be credited for the relatively smooth and successful reform of education in Slovenia.

At the end of the day, this was more important than the inclusive management of the reform and the substantial increase of public resources invested in education that took place in the decade of reform7.

We began to reform education from the perception that it was the most important way towards the prosperity of individual citizens and the country. Even when the danger appeared that the ideology of the Catholic Church would simply replace the former Marxist ideology in state schools, and even when members of parliament pushed for radical external differentiation at the age of 12, we just followed the final goal: modern, inclusive and competitive education.

**Snapshot 5. Enthusiasm with conservatism**

Enthusiasm for change combined with some kind of conservatism probably made things easier. While some parts of the system changed profoundly (such as when state-financed private education was introduced), others stayed as untouched as cathedrals in a newly built city. This divergence points to the pragmatic philosophy of the reformers and to the fact that parts of the Slovenian education system had been adequately reformed in the years before independence. In general, despite the new codification of the entire education system in 1996, important parts of today's education system derived from the elements built into it before the transition from socialism to representative democracy. Even dissidents, those who fought for systemic change, were aware of the changes that had taken place in the last decade before independence8.

A typical example is the reintroduction of grammar schools – the *gymnasiums*. The socialist authorities considered grammar schools elitist and abolished them at the beginning of the 1980s9 and along with them, the traditional *matura* school-leaving examination. Academic circles developed resistance which resulted in one of the most productive examples of establishing new structures inside old ones.

In the late 1980s, before representative democracy, resistance resulted in the general liberalisation of the field of education. School control was substantially reduced and inspection no longer interfered with either the content or the methodology of school syllabuses. The criteria of political irreproachability and membership of the League of Communists as conditions for taking the position of head teacher disappeared. The victory of the new approach was reflected in a number of areas. One of these was that in education the preparations for the reintroduction of the grammar schools started. In 1990, the Council for Education of what was still the Socialist Republic of Slovenia decided to reintroduce grammar schools.

While grammar schools were left relatively untouched in the years following independence, primary schools received a lot of attention. The experimental stage of introducing nine-year comprehensive primary education started in 1999. An external baccalaureate was introduced in 1995; vocational education changed substantially and the dual system of vocational education, combining German and Danish experiences, was introduced. Adult education was restructured by combining public institutions and a market-oriented educational supply. Higher education, which grew very fast after independence (from approximately 33,000 students to more than 90,000) was restructured and programmes were renewed. Salaries of the teachers were increased substantially, teachers' education (both pre-service and in-service) changed significantly. Curriculum renewal from primary up to upper-secondary education took place between 1996 and 1999. During this period more than 75% of the teachers responded to the invitation of a national commission to participate in the proposal and revisions of the proposed subject curricula documents. This, indeed, was profound reform with elements of conservatism.

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7 The amount of public money invested in education increased from 0.7% of GDP to 6.1% between 1995 and 2005. A substantial part of this increase was for teachers' salaries.

8 In some respect Tocqueville's deliberation on the necessity of the French Revolution can be applied to the transition of Slovenia from socialism to representative democracy. The difference lies in the revolution in France having occurred despite the fact that the new was already contained in the old and that it would have surfaced even without radicalism and bloodshed, while Slovenia, with a great deal of luck and a bit of wisdom, succeeded in undergoing a "velvet" transition to a new system. See Tocqueville, 1967.

9 "The Board of Education (...) in February 1975 drafted the Theses on Careers-Oriented Education in the Field of Secondary Education." (Cimperle and Vovko, 1987, p.104). Within the concept of education which should be connected with industry and prepare students for a vocation, the abolition of grammar schools was the most discussed issue. The authorities at that time reproached grammar schools for their "elitist character, causing dualism in the secondary school system, which takes away the possibility of further education from vocational school students " (ibid.). Elements of careers-oriented education were introduced in the 1975/76 academic year for first-year grammar-school pupils. The abolition of grammar schools took place in the 1981/82 academic year after the adoption of the Careers Education Act in April 1980. For more on this issue see Milharčič-Hladnik and Šušteršič, 1986.
Snapshot 6: Accommodating Europe

We drafted a *White Paper on Education* while the modernisation of school systems in Europe was guided by the UNESCO paper of Jacques Delors, *Learning: the treasure within*, and the European Commission White Paper entitled *Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society*, both of which brought into play an additional interest in making comparisons.

Both reports stressed the significance of education for the future of humankind. The UNESCO Commission emphasised "its belief that education has a fundamental role to play in personal and social development" (Delors 1996, p.13). *Learning: the Treasure Within* focused on education as one of "the principal means available to foster a deeper and harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war" (ibid.). The European Commission’s *White Paper* stressed in particular the importance of education for Europe and its capacity to face the rest of the world. It stated: "[...] the countries of Europe today have no other option. If they are to hold their own and to continue to be a reference point in the world, they have to build on the progress brought about through closer economic ties by a more substantial investment in knowledge and skills* (Teaching and Learning, 1995, p.15).

Both elements – the first a reminder of the humanistic part of our being, and the second a warning to prepare for increased competition – are also woven into the *White Paper on Education in Slovenia* (1996). While not yet a Member State, we wanted our education to "enable inclusion in the European distribution of labour" (ibid, p.165). To accommodate the transfer of the newest European ideas, reform structures invited review teams (OECD) and experts from France, England, Scotland, Germany and Nordic countries for consultations. During this process we learnt that while we needed permanent structures for the international transfer of knowledge and good practice, only we ourselves could raise the quality, equity and efficiency of education in Slovenia.

Instead of a conclusion

From the perspective of the present I can see two major mistakes we made in reforming education in Slovenia.

First of all, in a time we considered as the end of history, we believed that Western rationalist concepts of society and education were universal. Secondly, the market, competition and work-orientation that aimed at inclusion in the European distribution of labour received undue attention.

Sticking only to the second, I have to admit that we didn’t understand the opposing and mutually constitutive nature of instrumental (work and vocation-centred) education on one hand, and non-instrumental (knowledge and joy-centred) education on the other. Following the European Union political mantra, which was formulated a few years later as *Europe as the most competitive knowledge-based economy*, we wrongly tried to reduce or even eliminate this inherent contradiction built into education.

By reducing education largely to a work and market-oriented concept, we limited it to an important but incomplete part of present and future realities. In the times of the *end of work* (Rifkin, 2004) we are trying to reduce learning and teaching to instrumental (useful), market-oriented forms. As such, it forces schools to struggle with additional unpopularity. As may seem strange, in this way not only non-instrumental but also instrumental education (i.e. the work-oriented part) lost its call and potential.

In the time ahead the contradicting and complementing elements of instrumental and non-instrumental education should combine into an education that accommodates the demands of the global markets while paying due respect for experience and knowledge that are essential for personal and social development.

Education that teaches us to compete – to leave behind, to win, to change the way we tackle problems – can only benefit from parallel concepts that understand ‘competition’ as a common search for the better. It will also benefit from persistence of our traditions as values which shelter us in liquid societies. Effect-oriented education is what is needed. But competitiveness can be enhanced by knowledge for the sake of knowing – knowledge that will help to explore different and equally important fields. This is something we did not understand.

We Europeans, when working in policy development with other countries, should thoroughly rethink our own Eurocentric approach to education and try to see its limits. Indeed, fashioning individualism and favouring market competitiveness at the centre of educational endeavours at the expense of critical thinking and joy in exploring and knowing has its limits. By changing our approach we would come closer to a just and fair system of education. Despite democratisation and increased enrolment rates at all levels of education, there is still too much social reproduction of inequalities through education in Slovenia today.

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