Far from frozen

*Creative Strategies of Young People
in Disadvantaged Circumstances*

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in Disadvantaged Circumstances*

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All pictures used in this book were collected during the research process of the GOETE project. All of them were
taken or are drawn by students from Ancona (Italy), Duisburg (Germany), Helsinki (Finland) and Rennes (France)

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More information to the project and more interesting material can be found under:

www.goete.eu

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqLsN7LjBg8&feature=youtu.be

1. Introduction[1]

> *"School education not only represents an important means of socialising individuals and passing on the values, skills, knowledge and attitudes required for democracy, citizenship, intercultural dialogue and personal development, but also plays an essential role in the acquisition of the key competences needed for successful integration into economic life."*[2]

This quote from a recent EU document may be seen as representing a consensus which apparently is shared by different actors and perspectives across Europe. However, the perspective of the 'individuals' referred to rather impersonally in this quote is rarely seriously taken into consideration. On the contrary, pupils and students are often blamed for their lack of competencies, for choosing the 'wrong' subjects that do not match economic needs and/or for leaving education too early. To some extent, public debates can be interpreted in the way that there might be a problem with education, but only with regard to the students and their learning processes. But what do children and young people themselves think about education?

> *"We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control. No dark sarcasm in the classroom. Teachers leave them kids alone."*[3]

Do Pink Floyd's lyrics from the early 1980s still represent the experiences, feelings and views of pupils and students? This book concerns precisely this question. It aims at portraying and illustrating the views on education of young European's. It is based on a collection of essays that students were asked to write as part of an international research project funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme: "Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE)".[4]

The GOETE project has carried out research on how educational trajectories of children and young people evolve. Who takes educational decisions that affect their present and future lives? How does the individual agency of children and young people interact with that of their parents, teachers, other educational professionals as well as other societal actors? And how does the interaction of educational structures and individual agency affect educational trajectories?

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[1] Reading note: prior to publication on the project website the text will be subject to further proofreading.
[2] Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/school_en.htm).
[3] Pink Floyd – Another Brick in the Wall, Pt. 2 (1979)
[4] See www.goete.eu for more information

Research was undertaken in France, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2013. Apart from questionnaires and interviews with different actors involved in young people's education one part of data collection asked students in their last year of compulsory school to write essays on their journeys through school education, the opportunities that have opened or closed for them, their feelings about the relevance of education for their lives, and their hopes and concerns for the future. The essays capture a fascinating cross-section of experiences that are highly personal but which also share many concerns relating to the process of growing up in contemporary Europe.

This book wants to provide a view on young people less by writing about them rather than by providing a frame for their own voices to tell us what they think about their education and their lives in general. Young people are, due to their specific living conditions and social positions, compelled to develop own survival strategies and views of the world, which are often categorised through the lenses of teachers, policy makers, researchers or parents – in short, adults – often neglecting young people's subjective feelings of advantage or disadvantage, their creative and individual charge of experiencing the world and their own attitude towards life.

Another reason why it is so important to give young people a voice – especially when thinking about reforming education – is that many professionals working in the field of education do not have sufficient contact with young people. Educational decisions are made about young people, often without asking them what their needs are. And when they are asked many young people do not believe that responding can make a difference or they feel overburdened. Often, this results in suggestions that comply with dominant social and policy assumptions rather than with the views – needs and interests – of young people. One of the difficulties for professionals and policy makers in taking into account students' views on education is the necessity to adequately interpret and translate them into policies. But this is exactly what is needed to make policies, in particular education policies that are relevant for young people.

Adequately listening, interpretation and translation is even more necessary as education is a relational and interactive process. Young people are usually excluded from the negotiation processes from which important decisions emerge. But they feel the consequences of decisions and changes – their assets but especially their drawbacks – in the very first place. So here the question is again: how to give young people a voice?

The GOETE project is concerned with the question of how decisions in the transitions of young people into, within and out of lower secondary education are made. This means to ask who gets access to what kind of education and under what conditions? How do students get along with the demands of education, not only the demands of learning but also the demands of adapting to the social life in school? And, last not least, what makes education relevant for whom and who has the power of imposing the own interpretation of education on the others?

The question as to the relevance of education points to the power to define what education means, what education is good for – and for whom. That is why we have chosen young people's future aspirations in relation to education as the main focus of this book of essays. This theme provides insights into experiences, challenges, problems, hopes and dreams of young people. The

essays that are presented in this book illustrate many of these future expectations and at the same time mirror present conditions and anxieties.

The book can be understood as a "positive message" in times, in which young people in Europe are either seen as victims of the social, economic and cultural crises or as irrational for rejecting to take responsibility for their education and future lives. The volume provides quite a different picture from the perspective of young people, but an optimistic one. This view shows young people as actively engaged and concerned, creative and reflexive as much as worried and angry. Against this background they invent and adopt different strategies to find their ways through education which often is experienced as alienating and to head towards an education which is meaningful in the context of their own lives. The essays in this book are reproduced as they have been written – yet translated into English – and therefore represent real voices.

The book addresses a broad audience. In order to reach out to all who are in one way or the other concerned with young people's education – teachers, school principals, policy makers, employers, journalists, social workers, counsellors, parents and of course young people themselves – we have tried to make the students' perspective as accessible as possible. We hope that the book succeeds in stimulating debate among teachers and educators, policy makers and parents and last not least among students themselves, thus contributing to changing educational policies.

Corroborating this approach, a video film has also been produced based on films produced with and by young people involved in the research. The video is titled "Me, My Education and I" and deals with young people's own school experiences and expectations for the future. It can be watched online under http://youtu.be/cqLsN7LjBg8.

The book is structured as follows: Chapter 2 is a brief overview over recent scholarly attempts to understand young people's lives. Although it is intended to be accessible for any kind of reader, it is written in an academic style. The core of the book consists of chapters 3 to 5 which contain the essays written by the young people. These are ordered according to thematic sections, and are interpreted and commented by the researchers involved in editing the collection. A first section deals with the life plans, educational transitions and aspirations of young people; this is followed by a section concerned with parents' roles in terms of their support, their pressure and their being role models; the last thematic section the student essays are presented in terms of their lived experiences and everyday life in school. The concluding Chapter 6 is aimed at highlighting the messages included in the essays for those (policy makers, teachers and other professionals) who have the power to make education more accessible for all young people, to make sure that all young people have the same possibilities to cope with education and to share the power of defining what is relevant education with the young people themselves.

We hope that this collection finds a broad audience. We invite and encourage readers to send their comments, critique or additions to studentvoices@goete.eu.

Mirjana Ule, Alenka Svab, John Litau & Andreas Walther
Ljubljana and Frankfurt am Main, May 2013

2. Perspectives and dilemmas of growing-up in contemporary European societies[1]

Today childhood and youth are crucially flanked by three institutional domains: *education, leisure and family.* The social integration of young people and the stability of their life courses can only be guaranteed through a balanced participation in all these life spheres. Despite the many changes with regard to youth as a life phase in the recent decades, youth is first of all a period structured by schooling. The main change in growing up has been the increasing pressure on young people to obtain as much education as possible. Apart from formal certificates in education, the society also offers a parallel system of informal recognition in the spheres of consumption and leisure time activities, e.g., in sports, media and entertainment. Young people's biographical perspectives towards education therefore imply internalising its societal function in terms of preparation for the future but also the present experience of being oneself (not only) in education.

There is also an expanding market of educational out-of-school offers and of extra-curricular activities, which exert pressure on parents to start educating their children already in the preschool period. Likewise, children and young people are encouraged by the society to decide about their life and take far-reaching life decisions very early on, such as those concerning their educational paths. This means an acceleration of childhood and youth. At the same time youth and schooling are prolonged. The prolongation of youth means an increasing number of years during which young people are getting prepared for adulthood; during which they are working on their competencies and during

> Increasing pressure on young people to succeed on the education market

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[1]   The research literature on which this chapter is based is listed at the end of this document for those who are interested in further reading.

which parents and educational institutions are 'investing' in their education and their 'human capital'. Terms like investment and human capital indicate a critical development in the so-called knowledge societies: youth and education seem to have become commodities. At least they are more and more treated as goods on an emerging market.

Less direct transitions to adulthood: more choice but also more risks and unequal resources and possibilities

These developments are accompanied by a de-standardisation of the life course. This means growing up has become more and more unpredictable and characterised by the simultaneity of dependence and independence of young people from parents, school, work, and other social institutions. This means, young people's transitions are more individualised but still strongly depend on constraints and inequalities with regard to different places, education opportunities, and labour market trends. This trend which has been defined as *structured individualisation* means that personal will and desires are embedded in and framed by social structures (education, the labour market, social structures).

Children and young people in contemporary European societies find themselves in contradictory positions that require early mental and behavioural adjustment: prolonged education and economic dependence are in sharp contrast with the demands for early choices and for taking over responsibilities. Challenges coming from the "outside world" are contradictory in a similar way. For example, information technologies and the media offer elements of multiculturalism and global internationalism and thus inform young people about new cultures and lifestyles. This information flow expands young people's knowledge, their horizons and frees them from being caught up in particular national traditionalisms. This flow can easily cause new distress and insecurities, particularly when no binding criteria exist to help young people evaluate their own experiences when faced with apparently unlimited multiplicity and arbitrariness of global transnationalism.

In most European countries anxiety regarding the future of young people has raised questions as to how early young people should enter the labour market and as to which strategies are the most appropriate to accomplish this. There are questions as to whether decisions on the duration of youth, education and entry to the labour market should be left to young people and their parents or whether institutions and countries should interfere. Should young people be enabled to remain young for as long as possible or – the opposite – should the society strive to shorten youth and enhance young people's more rapid inclusion in different spheres of adult world? In fact, in the context of economic situation and institutions of contemporary European societies, any individual's premature leaps into adulthood are often punished by bringing them poorer material and cultural status.

When should and how can young people enter the labour market?

Entry to the world of work still represents the inevitable and constitutive factor of the transition from youth to adulthood. It is only in the view of popular concepts of youth that labour seems to be virtually absent. For young people, the transition from school to employment signifies

the crucial transition from youth to adulthood. By entering the labour market they can make long-term plans regarding their life, career and family. Until they become economically independent they still live a prolonged childhood and depend on their families and wider society. Thus, the increasingly demanding transition to work affects young people the most.

These questions mainly regard education and employment policies. However, while through the mass scale and prolonged education of young people the social relevance of education has increased, the social power of young people has not increased. For many young people, further education is more a reflection of their diminished opportunities in the labour market than the outcome of their increased educational opportunities. While it is true that the general education level of young people has risen, the growing requirements for qualified labour force yet again offer the most opportunities to the young from middle and high social classes. Research evidence show that these young people obtain higher final grades in their primary and secondary education and enrol in more prestigious schools compared to their peers from lower social classes. Even greater differences are visible when the educational outcomes of young people from middle and higher social strata are compared with those of young people from marginalised social groups such as ethnic minorities (e.g., the Roma) or migrants.

> Young people have little power to influence their future lives; especially if from lower classes, ethnic minorities and with a migration background

After concluding their education, young people today rarely find work which corresponds to their qualifications and they are usually, at the beginning, paid the least. Low costs of their labour and their fresh knowledge is rewarding only to employers, not to young people. This causes the marginalisation of the young people in the labour market, excluding them from the mainstream adult society and, in turn, from the sources of power. Without their own economic and political representatives they also have fewer possibilities to assert their rights and privileges, and consequently have a lower social status. Therefore, growing up at the present time is a complex social process that reflects fundamental social contradictions.

The changed life circumstances of today are hyper-complex, difficult to understand, and hard to manage for young people; the increasing uncertainty of transitions to adulthood is the common denominator of young people across Europe. Numerous research studies carried out in Europe point to an increasing extent and weight of young people's problems and escalating risks related to solving them. Also, the range of the causes of these problems has been changing, where they are becoming increasingly difficult to identify since they form a part of a dispersed network of global circumstances which individuals can hardly influence. Apart from standard factors such as social and ethnic origin and gender, there has been a mounting relevance of non-standard factors such as cultural capital, communication competencies, and emotional stability.

For a minority of young people, stemming mostly from the middle and higher social classes, these changes have opened possibilities for success, career, material standard and a youth culture which would have been unimaginable before. This minority has monopolistic access to elite universities, to upgrading their study outcomes, to careers already in their youth, and later to prosperous

employment positions, all of which enhance the security and welfare of their future lives. On the other hand, a growing number of young people are facing insecure working conditions, such as precarious employment in fixed-term contracts, part-time work, prolonged dependence on their families, the institutionalisation of lower incomes and highly increased costs for the provision of at least a sensible level of independence.

Moreover, despite the increased participation in education, young people are still under continuous pressure related to their social class understood as the effect of certain production relations. Different positions and capabilities of people to use economic and political resources in society are determined by specific ways in which property and labour are being institutionalised. The economic, cultural and social resources available to children and young people most often follow from their parents' experience with class differences and by their position in the production relations. This position becomes translated into evident differences between young people, depending on the location and quality of their residence, education, employment and career opportunities. Also other social differences, e.g., in gender and ethnicity, are created and reproduced in specific ways by inter-class power relations, where marginalisation is the result of a combination of all of these forms of inequality.

> Educational problems are less due to individual deficits but reflect the structures of an unequal society

State and public support systems do not always function in accordance with the needs and worries of all young people. Education, professional training and employment policies contain the danger of normalising differences in transitions between numerous individual cases and even between individual transition paths. This means they produce unwanted paradoxical effects of social exclusion instead of inclusion. The loss of security which is inextricably bound to institutional paths of transition means that the risk of wrong strategies may also arise when a young person follows well-established institutional paths, for example, when completing schooling while education and training do not meet actual demands and needs of the labour market. There is only a small step from uncertainty about how to achieve social inclusion to the question as to what social inclusion means in the first place. In both academic and everyday reflections on social inclusion the latter is often equated with inclusion in the labour market. Nevertheless, in contemporary society, young adults can perceive themselves as included in many other ways, not only within the boundaries of commonly understood inclusion. At the same time, many feel excluded although they are working – but in precarious jobs.

> Despite limited possibilities of choice young people and their parents are increasingly made responsible for their choices

The combination of pressure towards individual responsibility and experiences of actual powerlessness and vulnerability produces strong feelings of risks and dangers as being omnipresent. That is why young people perceive risks as their individual crises rather than as the effects of processes which lie outside their personal domain: the loss of employment is oftentimes

considered to be a personal responsibility, failure at school a result of lack of engagement or abilities, and youth deviance a lack of a strong family education and values.

When young people today are making their life choices, they respond to contradictory conditions of growing up by adopting risk-reduction strategies. In addition, one may assume that many take an instrumental approach towards the school, while at the same time they also feel alienated and act accordingly; or they might even turn into resignation if they feel that complying with educational demands will not pay off.

With growing competitiveness and selectivity in entering (prestigious) schools and obtaining (adequate) employment, emotional support within the family and informal social networks are virtually decisive. The importance of privacy and informal networks are not only a matter of ideology, but offer individuals real opportunities to create their own living conditions.

Rather than breaking through this framework, youth cultures, the media and new technologies also remain within the limits of considering individual possibilities and risks. Constraints do not arise from young people not being allowed to problematize these limits or from a lack of possibilities to do so, but because these limits are not always visible. Everything seems to be open and passive of criticism. Young people are still opinion leaders or an important carrier of innovation in many spheres of life, standing at the forefront in the areas of new knowledge, technologies, and everyday culture. They are forming coalitions with institutions of the cultural sphere and industry, the media, and new technologies, which are diminishing the legitimacy of adults' power in obtaining and using cultural capital.

Therefore, the family, the school, the media and culture give young people mainly the psycho-social 'equipment' they need to face their individual opportunities and risks but not a wider and more extensive critical reflection of the circumstances. Thus, rather than being an expressed tendency towards greater individuality (as the popular mantra of the advocates of individualisation goes) or young people's egocentrism and narcissism (in the opinion of the critics of youth), young people's withdrawing into their particular, individual 'patchwork' worlds has mainly proven to be their response to their truly narrower life opportunities.

> Policies focus on adapting young people to survival in competitive education and labour markets. Instead, they should set limits to competition as main social mechanism and reduce inequalities and pressure on young people.

Young people, who are looking for their own paths to the uncertain adulthood, can be considered as 'experts' in managing uncertainty and living with it. Their subjective experience, learning processes and coping strategies, along with their demands for participation in society should be recognised in the general principle of social inclusion, even and in particular when these experiences deviate from the norms and visions of adult society. It is undoubtedly justified to demand that future generations have equal opportunities as past generations in order to independently shape their lives. In Europe, these questions are in urgent need to be addressed more seriously in the future.

3. Life plans, educational transitions and aspirations

The interest to explore the transitions and changes of growing up has increased especially in the last few decades. We can say this is due to great changes in the biographical experience and life plans of young people. These changes are again a consequence of the changes in the fundamental institutions of growing up; changes in educational paths, in the changed patterns of family life, in the changed distribution of power among generations.

My life is split in two (Ancona, Italy)

Even some decades ago the course of life followed a predictable and generally accepted linear pattern of growing up. Today most researchers agree that the succession of life periods – the pre-school period or the period of children's games, school period, the period of vocational training, the employment period and creating one's own family – which even a few decades ago seemed to be the natural rhythm of growing up and transitions into adulthood, is now more an idealization than reality. The relationship between age, social roles and participation in institutions are changing and becoming less and less standardized. This is expressed also in the new ways of thinking about life course, life rhythms and transitions. These new ways are mainly the result of substantial changes on the job market, education and social policy, which regulate the biography from the beginning of education to retirement.

Nevertheless, young people still have to plan, think and dream about their future. The following essays are illustrations and examples of how school children from different European environments manage the present, think about the future and take the responsibility for their educational trajectories.

"My name is (Anonymous), I'm 16 years old and in my last year at school. Being in year 11 is so different from the other schools years before. There is so much more pressure as it's the last year of school and it's coming up to my GCSE's, the most important exams of my life! I've always enjoyed school with the subjects and the extracurricular activities I do such as netball, never really been one to hate school, but all these exams and revising I can tell there is going to be a lot of upcoming stress.

Education has always been important to me as I've been brought up that if you have a good education you are almost guaranteed a good life, and of course being a child the future is the best thing to look forward too. I never really had any idea what I wanted to do; I have changed my mind on a few ideas but never have had a set thing on what I wanted to do as a job when I was older. People always said to me that I would be a good teacher, lawyer or solicitor and these have been the main 3 that have stuck to my mind.

I went to a careers advisor at our school and she gave me path ways that could lead to these, I told her my favourite subjects and she thought up of ways I could get to these jobs through the subjects I took. I thought it was helpful, but I'm still not 100% on what I would like to be.

I would like to know everything to foresee, what to do (Ancona, Italy)

I think not knowing what you want to do when you are older can have some disadvantages because you might get to the point where you think you have taken the wrong subjects because if you knew what you wanted to do you would take the subjects needed for it. But I have just been told that if I take the subjects I enjoy then it should lead me to find my own thing. I think generally if you enjoy a subject you are quite good at it. I went for a wide range of subjects for my options that I think would be useful to me I took: Business, German, ICT and Geography. I thought taking a language at school was silly at first, because at our school is compulsory, but looking at what subjects you need for most jobs, they say a language is good, so I'm hopeful that it will come in useful in the future.

I generally love helping people, but I'm quite a strong minded assertive person, so I guess that's why people have said that teaching and law would be good for me, but It's never really got me really interested in doing it. But I'm convinced I want to go to university because I personally think the best things come out of university, my plans is to go to sixth form and study 4 subjects which I kind of know what I'm taking for that but still a bit uncertain, and then go to a university far away from where I live. I remember when I was a little younger and I wanted to go to University virtually next to where I lived, and then my mum said 'You're better off going somewhere far to live it up and experience new things' but I'm convinced she just said that to get rid of me!

The only thing I worry about is that I get to the end of sixth form and don't know where to go from there, as in not know what I'd like to do from there and just be stuck. But hopefully that won't happen as I've been told many times that 'it's never too late!' I'm hoping that I will get to sixth form and go on to study one of the newer subjects that you can't take a GCSE and it just clicks and I know what I want to be when I'm older, but I doubt that will happen because I think it will take me a while to find something I really want to do and will enjoy."

Girl 1, England

The above essay of an English girl illustrates the main dilemmas and key points of young students in their thinking about future life, their aspirations, and about how future education contributes to realizing those aspirations. This essay is about the realization of many young people that successful and proper educational transitions are of key importance for their life plans. The coming educational transition and choice of school first of all upsets many students. For most of them this is the first time they need to take a decision about their future educational path, which makes them think about what they want to do and become in their life. Further on they realize that a good education is a necessary condition for a good job and a good life, but they are at the same time afraid that they would choose the wrong school or unsuitable study subjects, and this fear only enhances the stress.

I feel confused. Who am I? (Ancona, Italy)

They find themselves in a dilemma: for instance whether to follow their own ideas and wishes about what they would like to do and be when they grow up, to rely on the experience they have had so far during schooling, or perhaps to follow the influences and advice from their surroundings. One of the crucial factors in young people's thinking about educational transitions is certainly their positive (or negative) experience with education so far. Many believe that choosing to study something they enjoy in and are successful at will lead them in the "right direction", i.e., lead them to what they think is a reasonable and desired employment perspective and

satisfaction in life. In such perception, education is seen as a trustworthy key factor which shapes young people's identities. Finally, additional bases for their choices are advices and opinions of significant others, especially parents, career advisors and friends.

The girl in the above essay takes a quite refined stance towards the mentioned dilemmas and key points, which shows her considerable psychosocial maturity. Although she is stressed by the end of her current schooling and by the difficult exams that will determine her future education, she trusts herself, because up until now she has been successful in school and liked to study. Even though she does not have a clear idea about what she would like to do in her life, she realizes that only a good education can help better her choices. She listens to the advices of others, but does not follow them blindly, because she would rather follow herself and the development of her potentials in the future. She is only afraid that at the end of her studies she would not know what to do in the future, but she is firm in her decision to go to a university (even though it might be far from home).

The following essay by a Polish girl tells a similar story, but it stresses even more the long-term meaning of such educational path which qualifies individual for autonomous and competent functioning as an adult.

"I am just completing education in lower secondary school and I can say it was a very important stage of my life because I had to take important decisions the last of which was the choice of the next school. Facing up to this decision was unavoidable and the consequences will be discernible in the span of subsequent years. This decision has a tremendous importance and has an impact on our future. In the course of subsequent stages of education appropriate to intellectual abilities of a certain age, everyone is able to function in an active way in the society and learn and understand the world we live in.

Education is a kind of introduction and training to the world of adulthood which is shaped by the development of our life track. If we are willing to fathom into the recesses of knowledge offered within the system of education in Poland, we will be well prepared to our future roles in life, for instance – a good mother, clerk at the post office, loving wife.

If I am to find the right simile, Education is like packing own backpack and preparing oneself to a journey. It is our task to put everything we need into the backpack. If something is missing, some problems may arise for instance, if we forgot a toothbrush we will neglect dental hygiene and tooth decay may develop and our teeth may be aching and we might suffer from it.

It can be also interpreted in the following way: if I did not pay enough attention to English classes but I wrote in my resume 'good command of English' I risk being fired in case of the employer finds me insufficiently educated for the post I applied for.

Education is also the way to happiness. As I mentioned before about the roles of people in life – and education enables their further functioning. Everyone can choose the own role and if one's choice was accurate and one found oneself satisfied in the role then one becomes happy. If one is happy one will be a good citizen who will rear wonderful kids and will make sure the kids are happy too. In the course of years and ages the spirit of the society will be forged and patriotic attitudes will be thriving.

To cap it all, education is a way of personal development, happiness, prospects of better life, rearing own children in the patriotic ideology and dreamed professional career. It is also better future, science, discoveries, better world and people. In the end the only rhetorical question left: it is worth to study?"

Girl 8, Poland

I like to be unique, I fear to disappoint (Ancona, Italy)

We can assume that the refined consciousness of an individual about the long-term consequences of educational decisions and achievements is the basis for constructing a life plan. A life plan is of key importance for building a person's identity. The comparison of education and packing a backpack for a journey is really excellent, where it is especially important not to forget the 'essentials'. In the case of this girl the essential is for example good English language skills. Her question in the end of the essay is then only rhetorical. The girl is ready to work hard in her future education. On the other hand, some students mention general unawareness of young people that only serious study efforts can lead to success, as in the excerpt of a Polish boy's essay below:

"...For sure, all are aware that people at my age are not willing to study and many people are convinced that the youth are not aware of the fact that it is hard to achieve anything without hard work. I am aware of it, and I am already oriented toward what I want to do in my future. I took a risk of choosing a vocational school specializing in economics because I think this is a profession that may set me. After the vocational school I will try to be admitted to university what should help me to get a good job afterwards. I want to have a good job, start a family, have a car and a house and all that I can only achieve by studying hard..."

Excerpt from Boy 2, Poland

Young people do have plans about their future and they also have various future images of themselves. In the following essay a Slovenian girl persists with her plan despite the obstacles and her difficult experience with education so far. Yet, she is ready to face an important life test of being capable to manage herself in order to achieve her dreams and realize her plans.

How do I manage to show the claws if I am so undefinable? (Ancona, Italy)

"I have certain goals in my life, which I wish to realize. After finishing primary school I will first enrol to Biotechnical gymnasium, which I think is a very good school, since it has an emphasis on the natural science subjects that interest me. Above all I like the way of work in the gymnasium, since it allows changes, which are rare in primary schools. When I finish gymnasium I plan to enrol to a 3 years program of floriculture, which you can upgrade with two more years. Flowers are my joy and I wish to work with them all my life. Someday I would like to open my own florist shop, because I dream about it since I was little. I think you always have to follow "your dreams" and also realize them someday. Maybe I am most worried about work, since at this time, employments are low. I am also concerned about the attitudes of people in the future, both in gymnasium as well as in the job, since I have bad experience from 1st and 2nd grade, where I couldn't stand up for myself and they have taken my self-confidence away. People can be cruel and sometimes precisely a word kills everything that is good in a person. I expect that my parents will stand by my side, like they did so far, and that they will help me to achieve my desired goals. A test makes a person stronger and certainly prepares him for life, when he has to manage by himself."

Girl 2, Slovenia

Something else is clear from this essay, namely the desire of young people to get a job they will enjoy, instead of just make good money, achieve their material goals or comply with the expectations of significant others. There are more essays similar to this one, and they are a clear sign of post-material value orientation of young people, where self-realization is more important than material goods. It is not only about the privileged intellectual activities, but also ordinary activities such as being a florist in this case. The post-material orientation is not a general trait of the young people and even when it is there, it does not mean a rejection of the material values; rather, young people are upgrading material values with other, more general and humanistic values. This often leads to a strange mixture of realistic wishes and idealized notions about their work in the future. An example of this mixture is expressed in the following essay by an Italian girl:

I feel ashamed to express what I feel (Ancona, Italy)

"Today, growing up and watching the world, I have thought how will be my future... I'd like to become a famous journalist. I'd like to have two babies, a detached house for example in the xx (name of the district) I'd like to have a husband who respects me and my children. Most of all, I'd like to take my grandmother with me, I wouldn't like to leave her alone, because she hasn't ever left me alone. I'd like to propose myself as a candidate and to go into politics to change something in this city. I'd like to take out children from the road and give them a bed and that the racism and the differences, between white and black people, no longer exist, and I'd like to make a society.

I'd like to open a fashion factory and to employ all poor people that I know. I'd like to go to Africa and to do the charity but the money, may be, could finish and for this I should open a factory also in Africa and a market where the wives can go to buy something: the wives should make the housewives, the babies should go to school and the husbands should go to work.

I'd like to go to Africa every month to see how the factory proceeds."

Girl 2, Italy

The more you judge me, the more I rebel (Ancona, Italy)

What is interesting in her case is the integration of her own future with the future of the local community and society. Young people adjust on the basis of well-observed real problems of people, mainly children in the local environment: children living on the streets, racism, and poverty. Maybe the intergenerational solidarity that this girl, who lived in a poor district in the south of Italy, felt in her grandmother's relationship with her, has led to her generalized solidarity with similarly underprivileged children in the neighbourhood, and consequently to her non-trivial aspirations to "make a society".

Educational decision-making and choices of young people

Let us begin our deliberation on educational decision-making of young people (as emerged in the essays we have gathered for this book), with an essay of a Finnish girl about her decisions on future education.

> *"I started thinking in the beginning of the 9th grade what I will become when I grow up. The decision was hard, because I wanted to graduate to so many professions. I decided anyways to apply to the xx (name of the school). Behind the decision was that my father has his own firm and I wanted to be a part of it so I applied to (name of branch) branch and I wish very much that I will manage in the entrance tests. J In the application I also put the xx (name of school) the tenth grade, because in there was the opportunity to apply for language support, languages are taught as a main subject. I applied to that school because my English is not very good because my skills in language from primary school are inadequate.*
>
> *I very much hope that I will get accepted to xx (name of the school) or to the 10th grade, because the 10th grade would help improve my numbers and give me more time to think if the xx (name of the school) is the right place. I have also thought about double exam, but my mother said that it might turn up to be too hard. I nevertheless think about it and do not listen to my mother in this case, because I am the one studying there and not her. And after vocational school I am going to the University of Applied Sciences so a double exam would help me get there."*
>
> **Girl 3, Finland**

Helsinki, Finland

For young people who face important decisions in their life it is hard to synchronize their wishes, expectations of the environment and realistic possibilities. The Finnish girl, who wrote the above essay, definitely had a wish to continue her education, but she felt secure in the area in which her father works. Therefore she chose vocational training which will allow her to get a job in her father's company. Despite her and her mother's doubts, the girl has clearly decided to make up for her lack of education by a more demanding future education, and somehow make it to the university. We can assume that she is not avoiding difficult choices or taking the easy way out, even though she is aware of her limits.

From this short essay we can deduce a few key factors that influence educational decision-making or future employment paths of the students. The own dreams meet the

expectations (demands) of the environment, especially parents, the reality, i.e., with their own psychosocial dispositions for further studies, and economic possibilities/pressure. Perhaps it is the hardest to take a certain choice that seems inevitable, as your own choice. This situation is expressed in the following essay by a German girl:

"Now, I've been sitting on this school bench for 9 years already. How the times move fast. Of course, the elementary school is the initial phase, when you have to learn and get used to standing up early in the morning. For me, elementary school was pretty simple and pleasant. After the 4th grade it was decided according to my grade average whether I attend the Middle School or the Gymnasium. The decision has made me feel really low. Everyone wants to achieve something in life and, if this is already set as an example in the family the more so, and my parents would be much prouder, if I would have been able to attend the Gymnasium. But now my parents have accepted it, but the most important thing, is that I have myself come to terms with it. And I am now quite satisfied the way it is now. Perhaps a few better grades would be not bad, for my self-esteem would rise then. As they say: "no pain, no gain!" Now I'm already 5 years in Middle School, my class is somewhat crazy, but the best. There were many new faces, but also many that I know even from primary school.

This year I attend the 9th grade and it is not long till graduation. After graduating… I am still very indecisive. There is so much that I would like to do, but all at once is not possible. I could imagine very well spending a year in Voluntary Social Service. I'm still young and everything is still open. Let's see what happens, perhaps I can even graduate from high school? Who knows?"

Girl 2, Germany

This girl is well aware of the disharmony between her wishes, the expectations of her parents, and reality: her insufficient points to enrol to a grammar school. Due to too low average grade her only option is vocational school. It is interesting that she does not speak of her disappointment, but impersonally about how "everyone wants to achieve something in life" and how it is good to be an "example in the family". This impersonal aspect shows her deep hurt rather than her content with the situation. But it is important that despite the feelings of guilty conscience for not being able to fulfil her expectations and expectations of her parents, she has accepted the given choice as her deliberate decision and is thinking about how to make the best use of her future schooling. Even though she has no plans for her future career path, her thinking about engaging in a volunteer work shows that she

Helsinki, Finland

does not follow stereotypes but is looking for interesting alternatives.

Many young people who face important decisions about their further education are aware of the importance of this decision for their future life. They value their decisions according to the possible consequences this decision has for them personally, as well as for their environment. The problem emerges if young people do not have a clear idea about themselves and cannot decide what to do with their further education and their lives. That is when they often project their ambivalence on to the school and develop a very apathetic attitude towards it. The next essay by a German student illustrates this well.

> *"As a young boy, you have no idea about anything at all; you get older, come to the school and get schooled. You learn things from whom you initially not knew they existed. Therefore school is good and if there would be no education, there would be nothing in this world. No electricity, no cars, no kitchen utensils, simply nothing. Therefore is education good. My school experiences were initially nice, but they were getting worse with the time. More and more violence, more and more insults. I am now almost 16 years old and it has become considerably better.*
>
> *And when I think about the end of my high school, then I am on the one hand happy, but on the other hand I don't know what I should do, I don't have a goal in mind and I guess it is not just me who feels like that. Already for a long time my dream is to be a DJ and drummer. And I also really have what it takes, that is why I am neglecting my school, because I think school is very unnecessary for what I want to be. But without school I wouldn't perhaps be that far.*
>
> *So I think compulsory school is quite good, because without it some people would be nothing.*
>
> *A perfect school would be a school where everybody would like to come to and everybody has fun. Today's schools are almost all boring."*
>
> **Boy 1, Germany**

The declarations of young people in such essays show that educational decision-making is quite formal, in accordance with the institutional logic and rarely in accord with the principles of rational decision-making. Students do not weigh the options in terms of benefits and losses, or clearly evaluate different alternatives. They mainly decide spontaneously, also impulsively and certainly under the pressure of circumstances, for example about whether to accept certain possibilities that they see as the best as their own personal choice. More than a conscious decision for one of the alternatives, this is about whether to really decide, or to drift with the tide of circumstances. Young people leave their possibilities open in case they change their minds in the future. The essays do not give the impression of fatefulness or finality of the decisions concerning educational transitions, although many young people are aware of possible long-term consequences of their decisions. The influence of broader "structural factors" (parents, social position, economic conditions, gender belonging, etc.) on the decision-making of young people is in most cases not clearly evident from the narrations. It poses more as an implicit assumption in the situation or the context of decision making, and not as an explicit constraint or coercion into a certain decision.

Individualism and self-responsibility

Upset rebel (Ancona, Italy)

Individualization of life courses is one of the central concepts developed in the last decade by social scientists to explain structural changes in the lives of people in the new modernity. With it they try to elucidate the new form of socialization of individuals, the forming of an identity, and subject structures. Individualization is visible in non-conformity with the set social definitions, social roles, employment profiles; individuals are more willing to take care of their life and social security without depending on the state and other institutions. This is also people's response to partial decomposition of the extensive security systems of a welfare state that had been mitigating the consequences of economic and social problems of people and their replacement by private institutions and self-organizing of individuals. Individualization of life courses demands an increased readiness to make risky choices in everyday life, and the ability of people to "take care of themselves".

The tendency towards individualization is the most obvious among the young generation, since the forming of lasting lifestyles and value orientation starts in youth. Individualization shows as a tendency towards a defined self-image, towards self-realization, towards the development of individual features and towards being true to oneself. Young come across many external and internal obstacles and barriers, but still they do not give up their aims.

Education, especially transitions within educational trajectories, is an institutional frame as well as a field to prove one's own worth and potentials for self-realization. But such behaviour of young people is usually far from our romantic ideas of finding a virtual self, which stands in opposition to reality, and also far from the concepts of individualization, according to which the young people

would freely patch their self-identities from various "identity supplies", offered by the modern media, communication forms, popular culture and educational possibilities. Instead, the young find the virtual in reality itself. They transform educational and vocational options they are given, according to real circumstances and limits, into what they consider suitable forms of realizing their wishes, interests and ideals. It seems that in this endeavour girls are more aware and more successful than boys. It is not by chance that most essays on this subject were written by girls.

"My name is (Anonymous) and I am 15 years old and in year 11, the final year. There is so much pressure on me and everyone else to do well in year 10 and 11 as these are two of the most important years of our lives. I have been to multiple schools as my dad is a soldier but I wouldn't change the experiences for anything. I have been to school in places like Rome where I was able to experience a private school. This was a very good opportunity as I have been to school with children of different races which made me able to speak a good variety of languages from a young age. Every school I have been too has been great and this has given me an amazing school life. Not a lot of people I know can say they have been to school with the captain of Italy's son. I have taken part in a variety of extracurricular activities including geography club. This gave me a chance to extend my knowledge I already had of other cultures further. I really enjoy school, but with all the work and exams coming up I know that it is going to be very stressful.

I have always wanted to do well at school because for quite a few years I have wanted to be either a politician or police officer. I have been told of the work that is required to get such a good job like this and it makes me work even harder so that I am able to achieve it. At the time that I chose my GCSE options I was aware of what I already wanted to be so I have chosen the corrects subjects which would give me the best possibility of getting a job like I want in the future. I want a career in this area because I find it genuinely interesting and everyday would be different. So you could never get bored and this is a problem with me in classroom lessons, I need to be fully cooperative and interested so I don't daydream and I stay on task. The subjects I chose for my GCSE's were: History, Geography, French and Art. I believe that history and geography were a good choice for me as they both connect into law and politics and then art shows my creative side. French is seen as a good subject to take as universities and colleges find these hard GCSE's so if I do well in them, this will show my capability.

I am a very confident, loud person but I do have a soft side to be although I like to keep myself to myself. If I believe in something, I won't give up and this is a reason why people believe that I would be a good politician or police officer.

Ancona, Italy

When I am at sixth form I want to study: Law, Government and politics, English literature and Psychology. Then in the future I would like to go to Durham University which is a redbrick university for law. As I would then study into law further. I have a lot of family around this area and it would benefit me the most as it is a redbrick university. I genuinely can't wait for the whole experience of university and meeting new people. I have always wanted to go to university because I have believed for a long time that it opens up many pathways for the future and it will give you a better job.

After sixth form I worry that I would have changed my mind about studying further law but as I am so interested now I am going to continue with my choices as I won't know until I try. If I don't try I can see myself regretting it in the future.

At the moment for people like me it is hard, as the grade boundaries are higher so we have to be concentrating so much as well as trying to have a social life outside of school. Although I seem to balance it well I know that I could put that bit of extra effort in to achieve better grades. Getting into universities is so hard as well with the price and students not having the right grades. I just hope at sixth form I will do really well so I can then get into the university I want and have the job I want. As I really want to be in law enforcement and people have said this job would suit me. My mum and dad have always supported me with anything I have wanted to do and my dad has always said 'as long as you try your hardest you will get to where you need in life'. I will always stand by my dad in this quote as I look up to him and what he has done for the country and my family. It makes me want to do well so in the future I can provide for my family and make them proud like he does for me."

Girl 2, England

The main emphasis of the essay is the tendency towards self-realization. The girl is obviously very determined to become a police officer or a politician, and is willing to arrange her educational path accordingly. That is why she plans to pass all the necessary exams to get into college and then enrol to the university, where at the moment she is interested in law. Even though her thinking seems very realistic and shows her determination to face problems in her future educational path, her main motive may be found in sentences such as: "*I like to keep myself to myself. If I believe in something, I won't give up and this is a reason why people believe that I would be a good politician or police officer.*" The phrase "good politician or police officer" shows her self-trust.

A similar relentlessness to be true to oneself can also be found in the short essay by a Slovenian girl below, but with an additional point, namely to merge her own wants about "*being my own person, thinking and taking my own decisions…*" with the wishes of her parents. This seems contradictory, but it is not, if we take into account that the girl sees her parents' opinion merely as "help" in her decision-making, that is, as an important advice, not as an order.

"I don't think about the future (5-15 years), I never plan what I will do, whatever present and future brings be, I will reconcile myself with it. The only thing I think

about is if I will be accepted to the secondary school. What I wish the most is to be my own person, thinking and taking my own decisions without someone, who would tell me to take the direction they want. I am lucky that my parents support me in everything I will decide. I am most afraid about what kind of company I will have, to stay the same as I am now. I listen to what friends are telling me, but I don't always consider their opinions, sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. Opinions of my parents are always helpful. I have taken into account the opinion of my father and mother and enrolled to the pharmaceutical school – this was also my wish."

Girl 3, Slovenia

Not all young people are as decisive and successful in their endeavour towards self-formation and finding themselves. More than the external, e.g., social obstacles, they are faced with their own lacks, but this experience motivates them to try harder, to "take matters into their own hands". The following essay by a German girl speaks of self-determination to find "her true self" and defeat her "weaker self". We assume she is talking about the lack of concentration and perseverance in studying.

"I am a pupil at the age of 15!

My future is already exactly planned, I already keep my aim in mind and I'll have to knuckle down not to slide, because I somehow teeter on the brink, but if I work on it and really sit down, then this is also to manage.

It is quite difficult because I am constantly distracted. I spent a lot of time on the street, come home late and usually don't have the time and inclination to sit down and work.

This is the big downside!

Many say: "If I want it, I can do it!"

Yes, this is may be true, but since my weaker self is too big for this, so I cannot do that alone and unfortunately no one can give me the help that I need, so I need to handle this alone. If I make it this far, then I can continue this! This is my opinion and I will keep it!

I cannot tell more about it now, because I do not want to write any details, these are the most important points and I think that's enough to say about my future.

So my feedback is no matter how, no matter what, no matter with whom, etc., dollars to doughnuts, I'll achieve my aim!"

Girl 7, Germany

Although the girl shows a great endeavour to constructively solve her own problems, it seems she has no proper help and is left to herself. She insistently suggests to herself that she is capable of overcoming her weaknesses if only she will try hard enough. We know that this is often not enough – this is why this essay is an ambivalent case of a tendency towards a positive self-image, which breaks down into an existential crisis. Still it seems that this girl is ready to embrace potential failures in her planed-out path as a part of her continuous striving for a positive self-image, but certainly not as a final ingredient of her self-image.

The emphasis on the idea that an individual is creator of his/her own future and fortune is widespread among young people in general but it was extremely emphasised in essays from Poland where self-responsibility is most explicitly linked to education and career opportunities. The following two essays from Poland highlight this link. The author of the first essay also expresses her critical view toward peers whom she sees as irresponsible not putting much effort into education which is seen as the only possible path toward successful career which is then further seen as necessary condition for "happy" life. This criticism, found in Polish essays (girls and boys alike), points to the strong influence of ideology of individualism present in viewpoints of students.

I want to feel alive together with the others, I am afraid remaining alone (Ancona, Italy)

> *"I am a student of the ninth grade – the last grade in lower secondary school. This year I am completing education in this school and commence further education. Good grades are important to me because my future depends on them.*
>
> *Most of my peers ignore their duties not knowing how much it will affect their career planning. Education is the beginning of our life and in my opinion, it is fundamental material for building our way to our goals which most of us want to achieve. Nowadays, good results in school and high level of education are necessary to get a good job and employers tend to choose employees with at least general education or even higher education even in the case of least wanted professions. A man with entrepreneurship skills and well educated*

has more chances of getting a job than someone who is not resolved and demonstrates little creativity. There are many people who cannot define their strengths and talents and they do not see prospects in their lives and they often give up and stop their education and then they find themselves unemployed eventually.

Personally, I think that there is not such a person who would manage to learn what one wants. The willingness is the key, and then a lot of time should be devoted as well. I have my life goal that I intend to. After graduation from upper secondary school I want to go to university and find a job in my profession and start a family. It is worth to have a well-defined track and pursue own dreams. I wish all your dreams come true."

Girl 10, Poland

In the following essay taking responsibility into one's own hand is not only linked to the current effort for making better future but also to the past "mistakes". Girl 5 from Poland feels responsible for not learning enough in elementary school and even thinks that her future life, especially career opportunities, will be very much influenced by this fact. Interestingly, here we cannot trace those aspects of culture of individualism which presuppose that an individual having not only responsibility but also a power to create his/her own life course, act as an agent who can make changes (and correct "mistakes") in the future.

"We keep asking ourselves if education is so important in our lives. In my opinion, it is important because studying leads to better education, what equals higher salaries and better jobs. I am a ninth grade student in lower secondary school and I have a certain stage of education behind. I know that I did not do well in elementary school, I did not do my homework and I did not go to school sometimes because in my elementary school was a good atmosphere. I met new friends in lower secondary school and they try to help me if I do not understand something or cannot do something as I should. The teachers there are really helpful and nice. After lower secondary school I proceed to vocational school where I will be trained in management of advertising. I have already decided that I will study hard from the very beginning, contrary to lower secondary school where and took studying seriously only at the end, but as they say?: better late than never. As of the fourth grade I have dreamed of becoming of interior designer. I searched for a school that would train me for such profession but it turned out there is not such school in Lublin and even if it were, my chance of being admitted would be really small since I do not have good grades in mathematics. Recently, I became aware that if I had learned from the very beginning my dream would have come true. I would like to go to university but I do not think I can make it. I have a younger brother who is in the third grade and I reiterate not to make the same mistake as I did."

Girl 5, Poland

Another important characteristic strikes out of these essays, namely that students have high aspirations for good job by which they mean mainly well-paid jobs and not (so much) jobs which give personal satisfaction beyond material aspects.

Existential dilemmas – fears and dreams

Ancona, Italy

Ambivalent or marginal cases of the search for a positive self-image and self-individualization appear when young people find themselves in a certain void regarding their self-image; either because of the negative experience with education so far and grim educational perspectives for the future, or because of the presumed absurdity of their effort, or even the perceived absurdity of education in general, in light of the critical circumstances of the contemporary world. To exemplify this stance, here are essays of two students, who face the negative options in their future and the future of society in different ways.

> *"Hmm... I don't know where to begin. I always try to look positively about my future, I believe in my dreams and until there is still a slight chance of realizing these dreams, I don't intend to give up. For my dreams, I intend to make 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. Besides, my parents support me in this and always stand by my side. However, although I look positively to the future, I am worried about the conditions in the country. Already now I hear about how many people don't have jobs, how many financial difficulties there is... Also close to me, I see people, who are under severe stress and on a verge of a nervous breakdown... But I don't want to be negative and pessimistic. I always try to draw the very best out of things. I take my great grandfather as a role model, who had a very*

tough life, had lost a leg, but had always been cheery and positive. I also want to be this way. Be positive despite difficult circumstances."

Girl 6, Slovenia

This essay expresses a careful pessimism concerning the future. The girl insists on staying optimistic. Her personal choice to be a physiotherapist does not seem threatened by the grim predictions for the future of society she lives in. The essay also shows the importance of positive role models in the formation of an optimistic attitude towards her and societal present and future. If there are no such role models, what often remains is only "pushing away" of everyday bleakness and constantly forgetting the futility of such behaviour.

Some young people confront threats to their and society's future much more consciously, and are thus at the same time confronting the threats to their ideas of future work and life. Nevertheless, this consciousness might fundamentally threaten educational and career transitions of these young people, since it uncovers their potential absurdity.

"I can hardly see a bearable future, people destroy the Earth, they kill each other and are getting colder and colder and are focused on themselves.

Why should I want to see me in a future, when they do not see a future either; a future in which I would like to have children or even want to live with my wife when I'm 60 years old?

But our politicians are mainly interested in the point that we are doing well in Germany now, but in 30-40 years our children or their children will ask why we haven't done anything."

Boy 3, Germany

The questions posed by this boy may sound naive and "promotional". But if we consider that they come from a 16-year-old who has only just begun seriously thinking about himself and the world, then we cannot brush them away as some silent excuse for a permanent lack of one's personal educational or professional perspective, on the expense of the general defects of the society. The boy is simply asking himself about the meaning of searching for his own place in the future, if this future is radically endangered by the destructive processes in Germany and around the world. We as adults have to answer these questions, since we are responsible for the continuation of such processes; not the young people who are forced to accept the current situation for granted, as something normal.

Idealization of future life: being ordinary or rich and famous?

The above existential questions and expressions of fear and insecurity about one's own and society's future were not very frequent in the essays. More often we found idealized perceptions and dreams about the future, as for example in the following essays:

"In ten years I may have a fun job and maybe a wife or a girlfriend. And I think I might go and live in a different country, but if I stay here in The Netherlands and have a good job, then I'll stay here. And then I'll also have a nice, large house, I'll move in with someone and when we know each other really well and long enough then I want a really big fun wedding. Then I want to go to some faraway country for a honeymoon. After high school I am going to do level ¾ of the Police Academy and that takes four years. When I am done I am going to study more to get higher up in my profession. Because then you can do more and you get more money.

I am going to achieve this by studying longer and focus at school and be more serious about it. And if I have a girlfriend then I can only about a marriage when I get into it (?). If I have my diplomas then I can work with the police. But for that I first have to do a test to see if I am suitable for the police and if I am admitted then my dream will come true. Then I am officially a real police officer."

Boy 2, Netherlands

Similar elements of stereotypical idealization of the future were found in many narrations. Let us look at some more examples:

"In 10 years I will be married newly; my vocational training will be already finished and I will work as a midwife. I will live a lucky marriage and save some money with my husband for our children we are going to get later.

Since then I will have reached my aims, have my degree, my Abitur, my vocational training, my marriage!"

Girl 9, Germany

"In 10 years I will slowly start a family und be involved in social action. In vocational respect I hope to be a teacher and to assist children on their way to become adolescent. On private respect I will slowly concentrate on my family that a want to start and to have a lucky life.

I will have passed my Fachabitur and will have finished my studies."

Girl 12, Germany   *Ancona, Italy*

These and similar essays tell about how young people are defensive, rather than expansive in their dreams about the future. In their idea of the future they are more inclined towards simulation of different stereotypes of normality than to innovations, despite the very versatile starting points. It seems that young people are saying: "I am not special and I don't want to be special. I am just trying to take things as they are, but everything can change any moment."

It is interesting that many researchers in Europe report a growing tendency of the young people to be "ordinary"; young people wanting a "normal life", to "normally finish their education", to have an "ordinary job", an "ordinary family", etc. They rarely have unusual ideas or unusual desires.

The desire to be ordinary can be a sign of changed socioeconomic circumstances. Maybe ordinariness or normality became an almost unreachable aim. It could be a refuge from the terror of the individualization. At the same time, it is an expression of individualistic self-preservation in the sense: "My individual solution of my life problems is overall no better and no worse than the solutions of others." This enables the possibility of "acknowledging diversity", and forming connections among people despite their individual differences.

On the other hand, some students are not striving to be ordinary, but quite the opposite; in some essays we can clearly trace idealization of the future as such and more concretely idealization of how students see their future life. The following three stories told by a girl and a boy from the Netherlands and a boy from Poland are such examples.

> *"In ten years I will have two children, a boy and a girl. I will have a BMW as a car and a big yacht, a rich boyfriend and a happy life. I will be married, have my own hair salon and a large villa. I will have an indoor pool with roof full of stars, a garden which goes around five houses, and a wonderful sauna and Turkish steam bath. I am famous, and will know all famous Dutch people. I am happy with the same boyfriend I have now, but he will then be by husband. I have beautiful 'pornoblond' hair, blue eyes, and a walk-in closet full of shoes and high heels. I have two small dogs and 1 big dog, and my best girlfriends are still Lynn, Assuntina and Gladys."*
>
> **Girl 2, Netherlands**

The essay by a Dutch girl rests on idealistic representation of good standard of living (having one's own villa with swimming pool), happy and satisfying life (being famous, happily married), combined by very traditional, patriarchal understanding of gender roles. Although on the one hand, there is a certain level of agency expressed in this essay (having her own hair salon), the general message contains dependency on an intimate male partner (usually marriage is part of the plan) who would provide in a classical breadwinner way all the necessary conditions for a happy life. Besides the passivity and dependency, the elements of patriarchal gender ideology can be seen at the visual level (she describes the way she plans to look like) as the so-called beauty myth.

The essay by Boy 3 from the Netherlands, on the other hand, expresses a different type of idealisation, one that is proactive, based on an idea of career success that is a result of one's own endeavours. Nevertheless, the boys' visions of future life also contain stereotypical

representations of "good" life (with materialistic values, life as enjoyment) and traditional patterns of family life and marriage. Although, in comparison with girls, boys more seldomly speak of children and parenthood, these life events are included in their plans in some way.

Interestingly, the essays point to the commonly expressed importance of the current friendship network. Boys and girls see their current friends as close and important also in their future life.

> *"At this moment I am still busy with my 'MAVO' diploma. At the same time I am busy with my football career. I am doing everything to get my 'MAVO' diploma. I play football with Ajax and I like it there because I am in a team together with my friend Jordi. My football career is going very well. We are in second place now are doing everything to become champions. It is also my hobby now because I like playing football. After I get my 'MAVO' diploma I am going to spend more time on my football career. And then I am going to play more and more football so that I get better. And going to games and watching other players. When I go to my football club I often speak with other players so that I learn more about them. After that it's time to get ready and start training for the matches.*
>
> *As a team we train a lot because we want to become champions and we do everything for it, and sometimes we also have a laugh. So it's actually really good fun in my team. When I have done all that and everything goes well and I earn a lot, then I am going to look for a beautiful woman whom I can live with so that I also have something else next to just football. Then when I have a girlfriend I am going to move to Italy and buy a beautiful large villa. With a Jacuzzi and enjoying my life. At this moment, me and my wife have been living there for 2 years. And Jordi is a good friend and we have good times when he comes over with his girlfriend. My wife also wants a cat, so we're going to look for that too. And I keep playing football for Ajax and make lots of money."*
>
> **Boy 3, Netherlands**

None of these essays talk about education as a condition to happy life. However, the following essay by a boy from Poland expresses idealization that is based on idea of education as a key to "happy" life.

> *"Education plays important role in both mine and others' life. Education is really important because one without it cannot find a job, hence one would not have money for everyday life. It has been the first stage of education in my life I mean I am completing elementary education and this is not enough to get a good job. Education equals knowledge which is essential in life – without it no one can cope with own life. Education brings happiness in life. I have plans for the future, I want to graduate from university and go abroad what is impossible without education. I would like also to start my own family.*
>
> *I dream of having a big wonderful house and driving a fast expensive car but first I have to work hard for it. Reluctance and sloth are the factors that might*

thwart my plans of career so I decided to work more and get down to studying."

Boy 4, Poland

Here, idealisation of future life (that is also based on materialistic values) is combined with self-responsibility that was uniquely expressed by students from Poland, namely that life success (regardless what the students mean by that) is an exclusive responsibility of an individual.

Collage by a student from Duisburg, Germany

Gender stereotypization of roles and vocations

Gender stereotypization is present in many essays and has many different faces. Most clearly, there is a gender stereotypization of vocations as female students usually express plans or wishes to study for vocations considered as typical female vocations and male students for typical male vocations. Furthermore, female students as a rule mention vocations that are in various ways related to care for others. Most frequently (through ideology of compulsory motherhood) these include care for children (paediatrician, baby sitter in kindergarten, teacher, etc.). In the following essay a girl from Italy talks about this.

"Hi, my name is Diana and I'm 13 years old. I'm attending to the second year of the lower secondary school called Pestalozzi. I'm a very good pupil and when I am grown-up I'd like to be a paediatric nurse; this idea is born by the passion that I have for the babies. I like very much playing with them for fun, because is a wonderful thing to see a happy child with a smile. To take a baby just born in my own arms and to wash them I think it must be a beautiful experience. To do this job I will have to go to the university. All people that I know tell me that this path will be very hard, but despite that, I'd like to try, because if I do not, it would be as not to defend my ideas and give up.

Never stop dreaming, and I will do it; I always go forward and I will never give up!

At the end of the lower secondary school I'm going to enrol at the Gymnasium and at the end of the fifth year I will choose the best university for me.

In any case, there is another year before that and I might change my idea. But now I'd like to do this. However, changing issue, I hope that the future will reserve me many beautiful surprises."

Girl 1, Italy

Other stereotypical female vocations mentioned in the essays by girls from various countries include typical "care" vocations that in different ways mean care for others. This corresponds to widespread cultural idea that care for others is a female activity. In the binary construction of gender roles, men are consequently seen as not (as) capable (as women) of caring activities. This is implicitly present also in the students' essays as male students do not mention such vocations.

"My name is (Anonymous) and I'm 12 years old. In the future I'd like to go to a photography school where I will learn many things, how to draw or to be a fashion designer. I would like to do this job because it would permit me to travel a lot. And I think that this school won't be so difficult because the difficulties depend on how much you like it.

Or, as an alternative, I'd like to become a hairdresser because it will permit me to meet many people, even if I think that this job will be hard enough, but if I have the possibility, then, I'm going to do it.

Or I'd like to become a stewardess because travelling is nice, but I have a little fear of flying.

I like all these things and I think I will do one of these."

Girl 5, Italy

On the other hand, male students talk about successful professional career in various sports (often football) or other typical male vocation (usually technical vocations). In the following essay, a boy from Finland talks about his wish to become an electrical engineer.

"I applied to electrical engineering. I have always enjoyed electrical jobs and done a couple of amplifiers myself. As second alternative I chose the car branch, which is also interesting. In the ideal school studying would be more laid back and sport exercises freer.

The school food is alright and it helps coping in school. There could be more dessert for sure.

I have always found the car branch and electrical engineering interesting. It has always been obvious that I'm applying to electrical engineering and it is my own choice."

Boy 3, Finland

Collage by a student from Stuttgart, Germany

A boy from Italy writes about his dream of becoming a football player, but he explicitly writes also about his (traditional) role as a male breadwinner for his future family. The latter is otherwise not typical in the majority of other essays by male students and is in this way more of an exception, while female students as a rule also mention their role as caring mothers and wives.

"When I will be adult I'd like to become a football player or to be a good worker to maintain my future family. But I hope to become a football player and to play with my friends, e.g.: Ciccio, you, Kekko, Federico, Ale, Dany and Giovy.

With the money that I will earn I'm going to buy some motorbike e.g.: R1, R6, Hyabusa, CBR 1000 RR, Kawasaki Z 750, etc., and some cars: Ferrari, Porsche, BMW, Mercedes, Maserati, etc. My parents could go to the sport stadium gratis, I could bring them some t-shirts and I would let them enter by midfield and I would permit them to know important people. I would give my money to the poor and sick people who are in the hospitals. And I would also give my money to my family and my parents so they could do everything they want. And I would do a great flower bunch so to leave all with the open mouth! And I would bring many flowers to the dead people.

P.S.: I'd like that all people can have a decent job to maintain their own family, give them food and to buy new clothes."
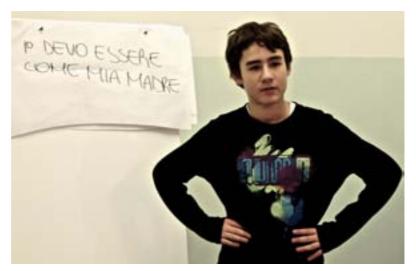
Boy 4, Italy

4. Role of parents

Students' essays confirm other research data about the continuing importance of parents supporting students in dealing with educational demands. 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. Parental help, being emotional and instrumental, is especially "activated most in recessive and unstable periods". As uncertainty in individual trajectories and instability grows, an increasing 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 is distinctive of young people today in general but also for educational coping and decision making.

Parents as support

Parental support is most explicitly recognised through students' voices from Slovenia. Their role ranges from support in everyday coping with educational demands up to support in decision making regarding future educational steps. Parental support can be traced in explicit expressions, for instance, students explicitly admit that

I have to be like my mother (Ancona, Italy)

parents are very important and that they offer a lot of support, but also in more implicit ways through descriptions what is the role of parents in educational issues. The following two examples by female students from Slovenia express the importance of parents.

"The ninth grade is something special. When you first come to the primary school, it seems big, full of students and teachers. But soon I will find out what is it like in the secondary school. I don't have big expectations and I hope it will be a lot of fun. In five years I hope I will continue in education. I would like to become a veterinarian. I hope I will finish the university studies and become excellent in it. In 15 years I see myself as very good in my profession, in my own apartment, with a dog and a cat. I also hope I will have many horses, since I would like to have my own equestrian club. Most of all, I wish I will be successful in life. My parents support me very much in my decisions. I think I will come across of many barriers in life, but I am good in overcoming them, so I am not too afraid. I don't want to know precisely what is there for me in the future, since I have one more dreams. I want to travel around the world and to explore yet undiscovered places. I also wish to be an archaeologist."

Girl 7, Slovenia

I feel grown up but my parents would like me to be still a small girl (Ancona, Italy)

"In the near future I would like to finish secondary school and enrol in university (I don't know which one yet, I hope to find this out in secondary school). In the meanwhile I would like to earn money (student work, for example) in order to become independent after I turn 18. Then I would like to get a well-paid job and get married. With my husband I would start building a house close to Ljubljana (I don't want to live in Ljubljana, because it's too polluted and there is too much traffic and people). When the house would be built I would have children (3, if I would have one, he would be spoiled and he would also be bored, while 4 is too much, because in our family there are 4 children and mum and dad work all the time and have no time for themselves). I would also like to travel, that is why I am going to Želimje, because there is a lot of travelling there, there is also a good company and it is a religious school. Maybe I will even get so much money that I will be able to pay a cleaning lady. Then my children would have more free time than I have. I would also like to continue with practicing judo or some other sport, and I would still like to continue with drawing. Maybe I can also get some money with my talents. I am most afraid that I will not get a job and then I will have no money and none of my plans can come true and everything will be senseless then. I am most looking forward that I might get a good job and that I can then provide everything for my family, even things I don't have. My parents support me as much as they can, but I support myself the most. And the thought that I am doing all these

in order to achieve something in life. And that at least one of the politicians is fighting against pension reform (hurrah for Erjavec!). Are they crazy!?! Do they think I will only work until I die!?! No, I won't, at least for 20 years I wish to enjoy in retirement. And maybe I will study so hard that I will invent a medicine against cancer. But this is already too much. I don't feel like studying so much."

Girl 4, Slovenia

Nevertheless, both students also express a certain level of agency as they both talk about parental support that (presumably) does not limit their decisions and they both have clearly defined life plans. Decisions seem to be made by themselves and are not (at least in majority of cases) result of explicit parental pressures.

Parents as pressure

In contrast to the picture above, there are cases in which parental pressure on students' educational decisions is very clear. A girl from Germany (her essay was already mentioned above) describes a situation where parents were not satisfied with the fact that she did not make it to the gymnasium. Consequently, a girl had a bad consciousness regarding this fact.

"Everyone wants to achieve something in life and, if this is already set as an example in the family the more so, and my parents would be much prouder, if I would have been able to attend the Gymnasium. But now my parents have accepted it, but the most important thing, is that I have myself come to terms with it."

Girl 2, Germany

In the following essay another girl from Germany also talks about parental support which is seen on the one hand as welcome and also necessary for her own success (she can make it with the support of the parents) but on the other hand as a burden.

"I think school is DENSE. But now in 9th grade I realize that it is important. For later. My parents helped me very much, there were also times when I thought to myself: "Lick me in the ass", there are the times even now! But with the support of my parents and my sister I can manage everything. Unfortunately it is and my school time again runs through ups and downs. For some it is normal, but also to me? I don't think so. What

My parents see me the way I see myself (Ancona, Italy)

is normal, for Gods' sake normal about being hated, mocked, and teased from all sides? I simply want to get out of the school! But when I am again thinking of my later career I get headaches, I curb this thoughts very often. I simply don't want to think about it. But there's no way around it for me! When I try to think about it I need someone to talk to, otherwise I cannot deal with it. I must then get rid of these thoughts, but immediately. What I want to do later is always what I think of the most. Always same question: what for? But is it actually a good question. What now? How do find it out? In the school. Again, there is the word "School". How I hate the word. But it is no good to think like this. My parents have tried for almost 9 years, that I go to school, to teach me that! And now that has burned itself into my head. And I also still have 1 year school ahead of me and I will eventually find something that I would like to do later. Certainly!:D."

Girl 1, Germany

Parental support also has another dimension, namely that it is in a way expected by students that parents will support them and this is not questioned or even thought about it. Also, Girl 1 from Germany points to one of the stories about those who do not have clearly defined and designed an educational and biographical plan – a contrast to those who do in the correspondence with reflexive project of the self. It seems that those "without plans" even more explicitly express the need to rely on important others and in this sense parents come first. The essay above also points to another important constellation between students, parents and the school that can explain the role of parents in educational decision making. In many essays there is mistrust in school (and to some extent the education in general) expressed and it seems that the role parents play in educational coping and decision making go hand in hand with this sort of mistrust in the school system.

Parents as role models

In some essays parental influence is indirect and can be seen in the way how students make their vocational decisions. In many cases parents are important role models and students decide for the same vocation as one of the parents. This is especially typical for male students.

"Hi, my name is Christian and I'm attending to the second year of the lower secondary school called Pestalozzi. I have attended to this school (integrated institute) for seven years: 5 years of primary school and 2 years of lower secondary school; all these years helped me to think to my future job and to that I'm going to do when I will be adult. I think I will do the fisherman because my father and my grandfather are fishermen and I'd like to follow them and I have always liked the sea.

But if I won't do the fisherman, I'd like to do a car's pilot because I would have always liked to drive racing cars.

*For me it would be nice to do any job because I would like to grow up my
sons in the best possible way and to gift them any entertainments, because
I understand my father when he can't buy me anything."*

Boy 1, Italy

A boy from Finland wrote about this in a similar way (his uncle is here as a role model) although
here it is also seen that parents have an important role in advising (and influencing) their children
regarding their future vocation.

*"I'm going to continue to the vocational institute in Turku to be an electrician,
because this field really interests me. My father's and relatives' opinions
influenced on my decision a lot. I would have been accepted to general upper
secondary education because of my final grades on the leaving certificate, but
my father thinks general upper secondary is totally useless. I'm also quite tired
of the school like teaching in basic education. I ended up choosing to study to
be an electrician instead of other branches in technology because it is useful,
interesting, pure work and in this field there will probably be plenty of job
opportunities. Also my uncle, who is an electrical engineer, has spoken well of the
field. I'm aware that the work might be dead dangerous, so one has to be sharp
and careful and avoid electrical shocks."*

Boy 2, Finland

Many of the student's essays demonstrated how crucial is the role of parents in students'
education in the sense of coping with educational demands and in the sense of educational
decision making, although the level of their involvement varies between the countries included in the research. Parental role as a supportive is most explicitly expressed in the essays by students from Slovenia but is present also in other essays.

I am perfect but they find always something to complain about (Ancona, Italy)

Besides the support, at least two other forms of parental influence can be traced in the essays. Some essays show that parents can be seen as a *role model* for decision making regarding future education and vocation, but they can also exercise *pressure and control* over students regarding coping with educational demands or (more commonly) regarding decision making about education.

5. Students' lived experiences and everyday life in school

In the previous chapters, there has been evidence that young people accept the central role of education for securing future life chances as well as the respective demands imposed on them. The everyday life experiences in average school days however reveal also other relevancies of education beyond its value for the labour market and later career opportunities. These other relevancies refer to the present of young people's lives and they become especially visible where later returns are uncertain and at risk. They give evidence of the price that young people pay at school in terms of lack of recognition and in terms of alienation which young people display in their essays. The essays show however the high relevance students ascribe to education in general. But besides that to many students school is also something very important in terms of their self-understanding, their future aspirations, their role in the society and their feeling of happiness. For all that education is interpreted as a key dimension in life that is worth to invest into not only in terms of labour market aspirations.

Ancona, Italy

My name is (Anonymous) and I go to the lower secondary school in Lublin and I am seventeen years old. You may wonder what the heck I have been still doing in lower secondary school at the age of 17? Shouldn't I be already in a post lower secondary school? It is simple I have not been promoted. Instead of being in my so much dreamt vocational school training for a hairdresser I am still in lower secondary school and I repeat the ninth grade. In the last year I went to the lower secondary school no. 18 but after having fallen behind I have been expelled and transferred to the school within the catchment system – in the district of Bronowice. Please, do not think that I am a dimwit or that kind, no! Simply, sloth took control over me.

It's been 10 years already since I started education and during this whole time I work for my future. After so many years passed I can say that education has one of the most important role in our lives and only we, ourselves can decide what we are going to do with it and how much time do we spend studying every day so the future depends only on us.

In my point of view, education is not only books and doing home works but also our character and attitude. I consider an educated man as someone who not only has high level of intelligence but also is well-mannered and behaves in complies with moral standards. What do we need our knowledge for if we cannot behave appropriately to the situation?

Education is necessary to obtain a good profession because by dint of good learning results in school people perceive us differently. I think that employer is more eager to hire an educated man rather that somebody without any education.

In one week time the will be the end of the school year. After the completing of this school I intend to go to vocational school which trains in hair dressing. After the vocational school I want to take an A-level (matura) and go to university to study psychology. As I mentioned above, my future depends only on me because every man is the architect of his own fortune."

Girl 2, Poland

This Polish girl is apparently aware of the deciding importance of education and hard work in preparation for educational transitions, but at the same time she is aware of her weaknesses that have caused some educational failures in the past. A key realization she has come to is clearly expressed in: "*In my point of view, education is not only books and doing home works but also our character and attitude. I consider an educated man as someone who not only has high level of intelligence but also is well-mannered and behaves in complies with moral standards.*" She refers to the real value of education as formation of a person, who behaves ethically in different situations because of her own morality, not because of heteronomous norms. This excerpt also shows the multi-facetedness and discrepancy of the understanding of the relevance of education

students have to deal with. It is this type of self-legitimation of everyday school life that may be seen as a part of the students' subjective rationale why it is necessary and important to spend at least half the day in school.

The relevance of education is interpreted even more existential terms – in terms of self-cultivation or development – by a boy from Poland to whom education simply leads to a better life.

> *"Education is a substantial part of my life, some element of my development which will enable me to be affluent in the future. Sometimes education happens to be a torture and does not enable to meet one's desires. Education leads me to better life. It forges my character, teaches, develops, and adjusts to living in the future on my own."*
>
> **Excerpt from Boy 1, Poland**

The interesting about this essay excerpt is that it puts light on the perpetual future orientation and reasoning of education no matter if this is instrumental in terms of labour market orientation or more idealistic (such as in this case) in terms of individual development. Even more interesting is the observation that no matter the reasons education and school life requires sacrifice, especially when education becomes a torture or does not fit to individual expectations, aspirations, etc.

Another girl from Poland who compares education with packing a backpack and whose essay was presented already above (see p. 13) puts all dimensions of the relevance of education together and simply stresses her wish of being happy in life for what she understands education as being the key and way to it.

> *"Education is also the way to happiness. As I mentioned before about the roles of people in life – and education enables their further functioning. Everyone can choose own role and if one's choice was accurate and one found oneself satisfied in the role hence one becomes happy. If one is happy one will be a good citizen who will rear wonderful kids and will make sure the kids are happy too. In the course of years and ages the spirit of the society will be forged and patriotic attitudes will be thriving.*
>
> *To cap it all, education is a way of personal development, happiness, prospects of better life, rearing own children in the patriotic ideology and dreamed professional career. It is also better future, science, discoveries, better world and people. In the end the only rhetorical question left: it is worth to study?"*
>
> **Excerpt from Girl 8, Poland**

In this essay one can see the interconnection young people make of the relevance of education in school and how in their view this affects their life in general after school. So school education is respected as a means of being happy and to have the opportunity to become a good citizen by personal development.

However, the lived experiences of students in school also follow other relevancies that are much more connected to their everyday life and they have to deal with while following their dreams and ideals.

Ancona, Italy

School as a place of different relevancies

School and school life for European young people is one of the most important life spheres. Already the time they (have to) invest in school and all the respective experiences is immense. They spend at least half of every weekday in school, have to prepare school days or need to perform follow up course work. But going to school is not only a daily routine, school is also a meeting place for young people, where one can find and meet friends and peers, where one can have fun, learn something or fall in love. All the things that are most important being young are cumulated in one building as is explained by a girl from Poland in one excerpt of her essay.

"Currently, I am a student of the 9th grade in the lower secondary school in Lublin and I have made up my mind about the next school. I know already at this stage how important education is and what role it has in one's life. Education is the foundation for our future actions. Of course eternal devotion to studying is not the best choice but neglecting learning because of sloth should be condemned. Education takes a substantial part of our lives and this time should be utilized effectively. Of course, I am aware that many of my peers do not demonstrate any interest in studying but they do not understand that is the element their future depends on. I often wonder why we do not appreciate what we are given for granted – possibility of obtaining knowledge completely free of charge – own willingness is enough.

Taking into account cases of my friends I can say that it is often too late when students become aware of the importance of education. It most often happens when one has to choose the next stage school or career path which leads to success.

Persons, who do not take education seriously and consider it as something unnecessary probably, will not achieve anything in their lives.

Whenever I say the word 'education' a school comes to my mind, a school where first friendships are made, first time when we fall in love. It is a place of meetings anyway and studying most of all.

Education leads to the peak in many spheres. An electrician had to learn how to replace a conduit and an actor had to learn how to express himself.

It should be one's priority at every stage of life to obtain knowledge. One can obtain skills despite the age.

Young people are convinced that they do not need education and they often leave it without any deeper consideration and it is often too late when they realize what they did therefore I consider education very important not only at my age but at any other as well."

Girl 3, Poland

This girl associates a school building when she thinks about education. That way education becomes something very haptic. To her, school is a location and a place for social interaction primarily. "*Whenever I say the word 'education' a school comes to my mind, a school where first friendships are made, first time when we fall in love. It is a place of meetings anyway and studying most of all.*" The fact that school is also a central place or location for the everyday life of young people is also shown in essays in which students express how their ideal school should be. They wish a nice school building with a nice facade, good outside environment and a cosy atmosphere inside. This clearly voices the wish to have the possibility to enjoy the time they spend in school. It is also quite comprehensible that they also wish a functioning, comfortable,

well-equipped and nice school where they have the best possibilities to learn and spend their time. Exemplarily, this wish is explained in an essay from a Finnish boy on his conception of an ideal school.

"My ideal school would consist of more free and independent studying, e.g., it wouldn't be mandatory to attend all lessons if one feels that one manages in tests with independent studying. My ideal school would also be very wealthy and the school building would be new and full with all sorts of modern technique for studying. It would also be great if the books and notebooks could be replaced by for example laptops. The classrooms would be cosy and not only white boring paint and uncomfortable chairs everywhere. The school days and lessons would be shorter so one would be able to concentrate the whole time during lessons.

The food in school would be of better quality and the quantity larger. During breaks it wouldn't be mandatory to go outside and the common rooms in the hallways would be cosier. Also the outdoor surroundings could be nicer and students would be allowed to exit the school area during the school day. In the ideal school teachers would be very professional in their subject and the quality of teaching would be good."

Boy 4, Finland

The food that is provided in school and that was mentioned in the essay is a good example for the understanding of school as a place of well-being that also need to be designed and conceptualised accordingly. Food and eating are essential parts of everyone's daily routines and it is not only essential for life but also for a good learning atmosphere. That way it is a pre-condition of learning as explained by a girl from Finland in her essay.

"The food in this school can be described with one word; shit. The quality of the food is low and not many people are nourished well with it. The school food has a great influence on student's coping and the quality of learning. If the food is inedible and bad the student does not eat the food and replaces it with something sweet or feels hungry during the rest of the day. Without a decent meal the child's energy level decreases, with the consequence of tiredness and incapability to learn.

It is high time to invest in the school food. The producer of the food can be blamed for the lack of young people's learning capacities. Who would really want to eat "surprise potatoes" which are black inside, pea soup which doesn't even leave a trace on the plate, cheesy oven baked fish, in which, after a hard search,

indefinable gobs can be found, which apparently are supposed to represent the fish, salad which is full with dill, to drink warm milk, or by the way to find pieces of bone in the food."

Girl 1, Finland

It is somewhat fascinating how this girl puts the producer of the school food in charge of their school success. That means students expect a functioning learning atmosphere in school. They accept their responsibilities to go to school, to learn and to make something out of their lives but in their essays they also remind the society to take their efforts seriously by providing better conditions of school life. This can especially be seen as important when referring to the negative demands of school with which students are faced with every day.

The negative demands of school in everyday life

So far it was more emphasised how positive education and especially school as a place is usually interpreted in terms of young peoples' everyday life. However, school experience for many young people can also be something cruel, negative, and annoying. This is especially the case when young people do not experience success and thereby are not encouraged to believe in the promises that education can secure good life chances:

Especially, learning can be experienced as a agony or torture such as could be seen in the interview of boy 1 from Poland above (see p. 36). School can be even an object of 'hate' as can be seen in the essay of a German boy:

Ancona, Italy

"School is shit and boring. So, what's the point of it? Most teachers are incompetent for this profession. Usually, one is labelled very quickly. Either one is a model student or a problem child, if one has screwed things up, once. So what for is this useful?"

Boy 4, Germany

In this essay, the selectivity of school education becomes visible in the subjective expression of injustice and alienation. This German boy emphasises that he perceives (some) teachers as not competent for their occupation and for providing good lessons. He feels misunderstood and prejudiced by teachers similar to the essay of girl 3 from Poland (see p. 38).

Having a closer look on the negative aspects of lived experiences and everyday life in school, one have to emphasize that for many students school is often a place of bullying and harassment. Students that are affected by bullying in school obviously can not enjoy their everyday life in school. Even when this is an experience they have to deal with for a short time, it has enormous influence on their perception of school life and learning in school for their whole future as can be seen in an excerpt of an essay of a girl from Slovenia.

> *"I am also concerned about the attitudes of people in the future, both in gymnasium as well as in the job, since I have bad experience from 1st and 2nd grade, where I couldn't stand up for myself and they have taken my self-confidence away. People can be cruel and sometimes precisely a word kills everything that is good in a person."*
>
> ***Excerpt from Girl 2, Slovenia***

Ancona, Italy

Other students experience school as highly unfair and competitive. As is expressed in an excerpt of the essay by a boy from the UK, competition in school can be already very hard and social differences find expression not only in the clothes students are wearing, for example, but much more in the future aspirations and social, cultural and economic resources for their possible realisation.

> *"At first, I wanted to go to university, but I didn't want to get into any debt. I think the cost of university is what puts people off. I don't find it fair that university depends on how rich you are, or if you can afford it. It should be about how clever you are and how determined you can be. (...) Also, I also feel in competition with the people in my year because we all have to try our hardest to success or get a job."*
>
> ***Excerpt from Boy 1, UK***

On the other hand, one can read in the student essays, that for some of the young people education is not valued enough by the society. In terms of motivation, learning to achieve

something in the future is highly questionable. It simply does not seem to make sense to learn if people in low-skilled jobs have higher salaries than university graduates. Consequently, demands imposed by education – and the price one has to pay in order to meet them – are experienced as 'torture'. For this Polish student, school should be much more fun, a quality that he seems to find in going out and drinking in his spare time:

"Currently, I am a ninth grade student in lower secondary school. Recently, we have been revising information from the previous years of education. I consider education as important issue – I mean studying in school. Nowadays, everybody tries to convince students that education is a must and the student needs to do everything to go to university. But what do we need studying for? I think it is a waste of time since there are people who only graduated from vocational school and still they make more money than people who graduated from universities. Mostly, it depends on one's fate how much one will earn in the future. Additionally, personality might be helpful – smart people cope better in life. Therefore I consider studies as a waste of time and obtaining a piece of paper after wasting enough of time of own life. The paper just says that a certain person graduated from ... such and such university in such and such studies. The current state of technology provides a lot of opportunities – even one can counterfeit a university diploma. Additionally, I think if one wants to earn real money one needs to run own company instead of being an employee who earns less than an average income. If one is a manager one can rule the company and give proper salaries to the workers. I dear to say that education is not so important issue - most of information obtained in school is not necessary. A caretaker does not need to use cosine to calculate. In my opinion, only elementary school should be obligatory and then lower secondary school which prepares for studying in a certain school – vocational schools, upper secondary schools of general education and basic vocational schools and universities in the end. I dare to say that because I wasted a lot of my time learning about things I will never need them for. I think that education is like training. Also Training means acquiring knowledge. There are obligatory schools although one can obtain knowledge from one's parents, as it is practice in Africa, where a father tells his children how to hunt animals and children learn it. I think that such way of training should be implemented instead of schools or provide students with choice – school or informal training. Of course, I would opt for the second method.

What does education lead to? I think it all comes down to acquiring information and getting a piece of paper that says something about graduation. I am aware that people should learn but people are too lazy to do that. Studying should be a pleasure not a torture. For instance, children in Africa learn from their parents. Such learning is enjoyable because they are furnished with rifles and they learn how to hunt while us Poles, we have to write home works and learn till we are tired of it. So I think that education is a boredom, boredom, and boredom. School should provide fun instead of obligation. I would like to mention one sentence

I found inscribed in a bus 'drinking is the life, working is a stupidity! Partially, this sentence is true, but only partially. Of course I do not want to support alcoholism but some of alcoholics have really nice life. I do not like the first part of this sentence because I think it is a lie, but I like the second part of it. Of course, I am not talking only about myself but I mean the others as well. It is good for me but I would like to change it a little bit. Most of people follow this sentence but I do not. The rest are people who become businessmen.

I dream of becoming a computer programmer and I have a goal of helping students to change the conditions they are taught in. I might become a political figure in the future and then I will change the span of obligatory education for the span I like – and the majority will like it. I hope things will go better then and I will manage to come to wealth as a programmer. Currently, I opt for practice and I will stick to it."

Boy 5, Poland

The relevance of education to many young people is not put into question. However lessons and especially learning is something many young people can not enjoy. Their everyday life is characterized by inner conflicts and lack of motivation. Additionally in society often young peoples' attitudes towards school and their working/learning ethics are referred to in terms of just being lazy and sluggish. Even worse, many times laziness is being interpreted as lack of intelligence

(i.e., by society or teachers). What can be seen in the essays is that young people realise these types of preconceptions and some even share them, yet interpreting them in a different – more positive – way. For girl 3 from Poland (see p. 37), for example, lazy students usually are not able to relate the relevance of education to their lived experiences and everyday life. The way they live their lives - and this can be observed across European countries – education is something that goes without saying, something taken for granted. However, although the relevance of education is high, the awareness that one needs to invest in education is not always present. At least, the picture of young people who do not accept this demand is widely distributed; also among students themselves who refer to it in order to distinguish themselves from others and gain an advantage in the competition for careers and life chances. Additionally one need to be aware of the fact that being lazy is something very characteristic of being young. It is not equalize with missing intelligence but probably more as a coping strategy of dealing with overwhelming daily demands of growing up in contemporary society.

The relevance of everyday life outside the school

As could be seen partly in some of the essays above, school is not the only aspect and place of everyday life of students even when it comes to issues related to education. For many of them it is probably even the most unimportant aspect in their life. It is clear that young people have many other interests and problems in life that has to do almost nothing with school or where they are trying to balance the demands they are dealing with in school. As expressed by a girl from Germany, young people are not students in the first place, but young people.

> *"School, my schooldays, suggestions for improvement? ... A serious issue, there is way too much to say about it! Where do I start?*
>
> *First about myself: I am 15 years old and a normal (?) teenager. I have already been at 6 schools and there I have experienced many things. I would also say the perfect school exists. I have experienced it, of course the students there are moaning as well about homework… but without that, it would be boring. A school, from primary school combining Hauptschule and Realschule until Gymnasium![1] There one is prepared for teamwork, and not taught to be an individualist; there they make common trips and projects; there they teach working together, no matter whether one can stand each other or not. But the most important thing is: pupils are children, teenagers. They have stress at home with their friends or at school. At that time there were teams in the school, teams of teachers that accompanied you from 5th to 13th form. There we had reference persons. Always! The teachers were not always changing. You could learn to trust and build a relationship with people! If even the last hope dies, the last rest of the mind dies!"*
>
> **Girl 6, Germany**

This girl from Germany reflects in her essay the fact that students are children or teenagers what could be seen as their main characteristic of being a student. For many young people being a teenager implies coping with different types of difficulties according to their biological and socio-emotional development. What happens outside school is as important to them as things that are directly connected to school contexts. Problems with family and peers are highly relevant here. Dealing with everyday stress might be very difficult being a teenager since one might be confronted with many different problems not only at the same time but also for the first time. Lack of experience makes many things harder – at least emotionally – and need to be recognized when working with and supporting young people.

For a boy from Germany who pretends to understand the relevance of education (and that he describes mainly in it's instrumental meaning) education still does not mean a lot to him. So he

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[1]   In Germany, secondary education is divided into three different tracks or types of education leading to different certificates. Only the certificate of Gymnasium provides access to University. Leavers from Hauptschule and Realschule are expected to continue with vocational training.

Ancona, Italy

often play truant for single lesson. What seems to move him more is the fact that often he is hungry in school.

"Education is good for the future so that we do not run around like stupid people do and do not get anything about life. It is better if can resort to the education that we have learned here in school and in our own free time. This is better than a life without education, work and money.

The school is very good but waste of time for many students. School is good because there one is taught the German language, different knowledge, achievement, order and other languages. For me this means only crap, for this does not interest me at all.

I often skip the first two hours of school. Then get back from the third until the sixth lesson and after this skip again because I am not up for it. I am often hungry, this is one reason why I ditch school."

Boy 6, Germany

Coming hungry to school could be a hint towards this boy's living conditions and/or family socio-economic background. At least in his background there seems to be no or not enough well developed mechanisms that help and support him sufficient enough to master the demands of school life. Instead he has to concentrate on other – for him much more important – things that are not directly connected to school issues and other young people don't have to worry about at all.

The perspectives of the previous two essays are partly combined in one from a British boy who tries to explain his interpretation of life at the moment he wrote his essay. His main argument is that he is young and wants to enjoy life. As all his peers he would like to have fun. Knowing that, he understands that he needs money and have to look for a side job to be able to make the experiences and to have fun the way he want to. At the same time he understands that this is not automatically in line with the demands of school.

"But I am a 15 year old so I still like to go out and have fun with my friends. We all want money to go out with, so we all want Saturday jobs. I know my limits though and know when I should study and just sit down and do some homework or coursework."

Excerpt from Boy 1, UK

In this essay the relevance of everyday life outside the school also becomes visible in the part-time jobs young people are practicing on weekends. The money earned is very important to them to be able to afford leisure time activities and to develop a sense of responsibility. At the same time, it is kind of threat for their school performance.

Many young people seem to feel overwhelmed of the demands of school especially because these demands have such big influence on the rest of their everyday life as expressed by a girl from the UK.

> *"At the moment for people like me it is hard, as the grade boundaries are higher so we have to be concentrating so much as well as trying to have a social life outside of school. Although I seem to balance it well I know that I could put that bit of extra effort in to achieve better grades. Getting into universities is so hard as well with the price and students not having the right grades."*
>
> ### *Excerpt from Girl 2, UK*

Although this girl accepts the high demands of school she also mentions that she is also constantly trying to have a social life outside of school. So here again it becomes visible how difficult this is for young people to build a link between their lives and experiences in and outside school.

Rennes, France

In addition to it, in young peoples' lives in general and in out-of-school contexts in particular, music and creativity seem to play a very important role. This so much important aspect is usually very little represented in school contexts. The following essay by a girl from Germany shows so clearly the two worlds she feels to live in, where the burden and demands of school are interpreted as so heavy that only music and her friends with whom she spends her spare time can provide a relief for her.

> *"Even though I am surrounded by people or I am celebrating with friends or I am lying in my boyfriends' arms, I feel myself lonely and empty.*
>
> *Music is my remedy for worries, fear and grief… I live for music and music keeps me alive… on a good concert I'm finally free and I can be myself and I am filled with pure joy and happiness. Every day the same… wake up early, go to school, read a book and listen to music… Finally Friday… loud music… laughs… Party… Live and forget the grey everyday life… On Monday I am again the usual Zombie… go to school… I can't do this no longer, I don't want this no longer,*

I can't stand this no longer. I am stressed everywhere… School… Family…Friends… Relationship… Weekend… Party… Concert… put on the usual mask and play the role of cheery, childish, crazy girl."

Girl 5, Germany

Creative aspects of education such as music and arts seem to be highly questioned by young people and they often express their wish to better implement these highly relevant aspects of their lives more in schools. This may even be connected to future aspirations as to be seen in the excerpt of an essay of another German boy.

"Later I would like to do something with movies (e.g., actor or director, perhaps both). When I think at the end of my schooldays, Hollywood crosses my mind.

(…) If children could decide for themselves which subjects they like to have in school (e.g. more art, math, cinema or music) that would be better, because everything would be useful for me."

Excerpt from Boy 5, Germany

6. Conclusions

The main aim of this book was to get acquainted with the experiences, feelings and views of pupils and students that usually are overlooked in debates on educational issues such as learning requirements and abilities, educational contexts and (in)equalities, classroom management, educational structuring or educational policy. In these public and professional discussions students' voices themselves usually are not noticed or keep being overheard. But their views and experiences are key to understand the current situation and needs of future education and to make sure that all young people have the same possibilities to cope with education.

This book emphasised different aspects of education that the students have written about in their essays. At least for the students involved in the project, these appear to be the most relevant aspects of education, educational transitions and future perspectives.

When it comes to life plans and transitions, most young people usually have dreams and more or less precise plans for their future. The presented essays in this book are very interesting illustrations and examples of how children and young people from different European environments manage the present, think about the future and take the responsibility for their educational trajectories. Most of them realise very early that a good education is a necessary condition for a good job and a good life, but they are at the same time stressed by the fear to make wrong choices regarding schools or subjects.

In the decisions the young people have to make regarding their educational transitions and future their own dreams have to be reconciled with the expectations and demands of the civil society, the economy, and their family. Inasmuch as students find little support for this, it depends very much on their own psychosocial dispositions and educational performance if they succeed in doing so. Although many young people who face important decisions regarding further education are aware of the importance of this decisions for their future life, the essays show that educational decision-making is quite formal, following the institutional logic rather than balancing different – often contradictory – aspects. That means young people take self-responsibility and transform educational and vocational options they are given, according to real circumstances and limits, into what they consider suitable forms of realizing their wishes, interests and ideals.

The essays express young peoples' existential dilemmas and fears regarding their future. They also express forms of coping with perceived threats of their future, yet in a more implicit way. In some essays it becomes visible that some young people present themselves rather defensive than expansive in their dreams about their future. In their imaginations of the future they seem to be more inclined towards reproducing stereotypes of normality than to innovations, despite the diversity of starting points. Other students seem not to be striving for the ordinary; in some essays

we can trace desires in terms of becoming famous and rich. In both cases we can recognize a type of idealization of the future imagined by students.

Another important dimension that came into sight in the essays is the important role that parents play for students especially in times before, during and after transitions. As uncertainty in individual trajectories and instability grows, the rising relevance of family support can be expected. One of the main findings of the GOETE project is that family and friends seem to be the most relevant actors in supporting young people. The role of parents ranges from support in coping with educational demands in everyday life to support in decision-making regarding future educational steps. In some essays parental influence is indirect and can be seen in the way how students make their vocational decisions. In other cases parents act as important role models and students decide for the same vocation as their parents. But parents' influence is also to be seen in their pressure and control over students regarding coping with educational demands or (more commonly) regarding decision-making about education.

A last dimension that was highlighted in this book and seems to be important in students views regarding their education are their everyday life experiences and their (lack of) influence on their school life. The everyday life experiences in average school days reveal a lot more other relevancies of education than its value for the labour market and later career opportunities. School is not only a daily routine, school is also a meeting place for young people, where one can find and meet friends and peers, where one can have fun, fall in love – or learn something. Each time students express their ideas how an ideal school should be in the essays, we are confronted with wishes for a nice school building with a nice facade, good external environment and a cosy atmosphere inside. This clearly speaks for the wish to have the possibility to enjoy the time they spend in school and to be oneself – instead of being reduced to the student role. This aspect seems to be of high relevance as many young people experience school as something cruel, negative and annoying. The reasons for this are multifaceted including experiences of learning as agony or torture as much as of bullying and harassment. Other students experience school as highly unfair and competitive.

It is obvious that young people have many other interests and problems in life which have to do almost nothing with school but which raise particular demands. Students have to reconcile and balance these demands with demands emerging from school. For students in their teens dealing with everyday life stress is not only difficult because one might be confronted with many different problems not only at the same time but also for the first time. Especially in this respect, leisure activities, having fun with the friends and youth cultural life styles related to music, fashion or partying play a very important role. As clearly emerges from the essays, being young in contemporary knowledge societies is a task in itself and it is striking how persistent, open and creative young people are in dealing with it.

This picture contradicts the image that many policy makers, representatives of the school system and also employers have of young people. Consequently, policies related to education and growing up should consult young people themselves what they can do to make their lives easier and better rather than even increasing the pressure on them to achieve higher qualifications and become more employable.

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What do children and young people think about education? Possible answers to this question are elaborated in this book, which portrays and illustrates how young people from different European countries view and experience education. The book is based on a collection of essays that students were asked to write as part of an international research project funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme. The project "Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE)" ana-lysed who is involved in making decisions that concern the school careers of young people. The essays capture a fascinating cross-section of experiences that are highly personal. At the same time they share many concerns related to the process of growing up in contemporary Europe.

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