Marketization of Public Basic Education in Slovenia: Policy and Quality Discussion

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Abstract

In 1991, Slovenia gained independence. Since then, the country has undergone many changes in politics and economics, as well as in other areas, such as education. Political changes are reflected in parliamentary democracy, while changes in economy can be described as market driven. Slovenia also signed the accession treaty to the European Union in 2003.

The aim of this article is to discuss current education policy issues in the broader context of political changes after independence. Firstly, the political and economic context of changes will be discussed. Secondly, some issues from educational policies will be presented and framed within the 'audit culture' framework. Thirdly, the emerging 'quality movement' will be analysed and some conclusions and critical issues presented.

Political and economic context

In terms of market economy,

> Countries in transition have gone through fundamental restructuring of external economic relations. These changes were caused by three aspects of the transition process: the introduction of privatisation with full autonomy for producers, competent macro-economic policy led by government with credibility elected in the democratic elections, and finally by altered foreign trade flows as a result of improved economic practices and new conditions in regional markets.
>
> (Ruhl et al 1998, p. 7).

During the 'transition' period (a concept that could be discussed and contested), Slovenia had successfully run a functioning market economy (Slovenia Weekly, 1999) and met the requirements for accession to the European Union.

Since 2001 the work of the Ministry of the Economy has focused on **four different areas**:

- Competitiveness and enterprise development sector;
- Foreign economic relations;
- Internal market and
- Industrial projects (www.mg-rs.si/ministrstvo/index.php, http://www.mg-rs.si/english/index.php entered 10th September, 2003).

There is strong emphasis on increasing competitiveness, which is also embraced in the Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness Policy (Ministry of the Economy, www.gov.si entered 10th September 2003).

However, competitiveness does not pertain exclusively to the area of economics. It is reflected in the field of values and beliefs. Gregorcic (1999) refers to Tos (1999) and Turnsek, Uhan, and Gregorcic (1999) when describing changes in values and beliefs throughout the transition period. They discovered that "economic development leads to certain changes in a system of generally accepted social values and beliefs; they produce reverse effects, which in turn influence changes in the economic and political systems of those societies" (p. 21). Inglehart (1996) defined two different value orientations on the basis of various indicators. He divided value orientations into materialistic and post-materialistic. While materialistic value orientation is focused on economic effectiveness, post-materialist value orientation represents a shift from economic effectiveness to society, justice and other values. According to this classification, Slovenia became more post-materialistically oriented after 1995.

With respect to the political arena, the current (Autumn 2003) coalition consists of the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), the United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD), SLS + SKD Slovene People's Party and the Democratic Party of the Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS). All the Ministers of Education and Sport (later the Minister of Education, Science and Sport) - with the exceptions of the interim government in 2000, and the period of Executive council of the Republic of Slovenia from 1990 to 1992 - were members of LDS (www.gov.si/vrs/ang/government/coalition.html, entered 5th August 2003). Hence, Slovenia has a "post-independence" tradition of LDS members as the Ministers of Education.

In the pre-election period of the year 2000, some parties emphasised education, which was reflected in their programmes, while others lacked this focus on education. For example, LDS had an elaborated programme for education called 'Let knowledge work for us' (www.lds.si entered October, 2000) while the Slovene People's Party had no programme for education available on their Internet homepage.

One of the important features and clearly asserted principles underlying the LDS programme was to maintain the public school legally neutral and lay, and based on teacher professionalism - the principles that had already been embraced in The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (Krek, 1996). In the LDS programme, there was also an important point concerning the material standard and financing of education. The party stressed the importance of a well-maintained, well-financed, fairly autonomous and diverse educational system. It was then hardly surprising or coincidental that the Ministers of Education and Sport (Education, Science and Sport) were appointed from the ranks of the LDS. It was a rather logical choice among the programmes and opportunities offered.

In this political and economic context, Slovenian public education has also undergone major changes. However, the changes experienced in all areas of life were not all due to the independence. The issues of globalisation, internationalisation and interconnectedness are complex (Featherstone, 1990; Smith, 1990; Appadurai, 1990; Apple, 1995; Pal, 1997), and the Slovenian school reform (some might argue it has assumed the form of restructuring) can also be related to these changes. With respect to education, Dehli (1996) points out that despite their trans-national character, education policies do not issue from a single source. In the Slovenian context, the process of educational reform has been underway since the independence at different levels of education system. Yet, it is difficult to identify the source or the roots of the reform. Because of independence, the legislation had to be changed, adjusted to the new constitution and updated, which created an opportunity for the reform. At the same time, globalization, international comparisons and competitiveness in the area of education are also thought to have influenced change to a certain degree. There were multiple 'sources' of change, inextricably intertwined and complex in their nature.

Educational reform in Slovenia

As already mentioned, the position of the Minister of Education has been occupied by an LDS member for most of the time since the independence. What is more, the functions of the Minister were performed by one individual for most of the LDS's mandates to run education. He initiated the school reform and also brought it to implementation. Regarding elementary compulsory education, 42 primary schools started with the new curriculum and structure of schooling in 1999/2000. The number of these schools increased over the years and, in 2003/2004, all elementary schools have launched the 9-year education programme in the first grade.

The reform was set in motion by the White Paper on Education of the Republic of Slovenia. In 1995, it was first published (by Ministry of Education and Sport, 1995) in the Slovenian language, and in 1996 the English version followed (Krek, 1996).

> Far-reaching changes in Slovenia - especially the formation of the independent state, the implementation of a multi-party system and the adoption of the new constitution - mean that the education system should also be changed, in particular regarding the introduction of a European dimension. This process should be based on the common European heritage of political, cultural and moral values reflected in human rights, the rule of law, pluralistic democracy, tolerance, and solidarity. (Krek, 1996, Cover page)

> The principles and theoretical points of departure" (Krek Ed., 1996, p. 39) deal with equal opportunity, non-discrimination, the possibility of choice and the fostering of excellence. Possibilities for optimal development are rooted in the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia and the Convention on the Rights of Children. "In order to be able to establish these rights, we have to establish a democratic education system incorporating the principle of equal opportunity together with the requirement to make provisions for differences [...]: the right to choose and to be different. (Krek, 1996, p. 39).

> The state should establish the mechanisms for the implementation of pluralism and the possibility of choice at all levels, that is at the level of:

1. Preschool and school curricula;
2. School activities [...];
3. Teacher training [...];
4. The range of preschool institutions and schools;
5. Systematic provision of information to parents." .

> (Krek, 1996, p. 43)

The Slovenian public is entitled to supervise the quality of all pedagogical aspects of the education system. At the same time, the White Paper (Krek, 1996) stresses that

> a better insight into school life and work should be guaranteed to parents. Efficient mechanisms enabling their participation in decision-making should be established, while at the same time teachers' and scholars' professional parameters should be clearly defined [...]the evaluation of institutions (of the scientific and pedagogical work of educators, of all levels of specialisation, etc.) can assist parents and children in choosing further schooling**. (1996, pp. 45-46).

According to the same source, basic information about preschool institutions and schools should be available in writing, for example within local communities, in information centres and local libraries.

The White Paper on Education of the Republic of Slovenia does not bring about market mechanisms into elementary compulsory schooling in terms of open enrolment to public schools; however, it does address the opportunity to choose among different sorts of schools, such as home schooling, private schools and 'concession/subsidised schools'.

The goals and principles were exhaustively depicted in the two new Acts that came into force in 1996, ie the Organisation and Funding of Education Act (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1996a) and the Elementary School Act (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1996b). These Acts have been further elaborated by a number of Decrees. For the purpose of this paper, the Decree on Criteria About the Design of Public Network of Elementary Schools, Public Network of Elementary Schools and Institutions for Education and Schooling of Special Needs Students, and Public Network of Music Schools (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1998) is particularly important, as it can be related to the question of choice mentioned in the White Paper (Krek, 1996). And choice, according to Kenway and Epstein (1996) is an umbrella notion for the processes that are embraced in the concept of the marketization of education. These processes could be seen in the light of education consumption and related to demarcation between education, entertainment and advertising (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Emerging educational markets are also associated with the concepts of quality - What is perceived as a good school and how can schools gain competitive advantage on such markets?

Markets and quality

The notion of choice serves as 'umbrella concept' in discussing the marketization of education (Trnavcevic, 2001a; Trnavcevic and Zupanc Grom, 2000). It is often seen as a tool to increase accountability of schools to their publics and stakeholders (Chubb and Moe, 1990) but it also transforms parents/students (depends on the age of students) into choosers and customers in education markets (Trnavcevic, 2001a,b). From both points of view, that of accountability and customers, the choice is often grounded in some quality indicators which represent the basis for customers'/choosers' decision making. Choosers are schools and choosers are parents/students. Yet they choose what? Quality? On what basis?

Quality has become a 'slogan' for services, industry, and recently also for education. Participants in educational leadership courses often claim they offer 'good education' or an 'excellent quality' of education provision. When they talk about their missions they argue that the schools' mission is excellence. This is, of course, only one of many potential approaches to discussing quality. Quality may also be viewed as a means in educational markets that can be used to attract students or parents and to persuade stakeholders about its 'trustworthiness'. Quality is often understood as 'one for all', as a shared understanding of what good schools consist of or, in other words, what makes a good school. In the age of auditing and standardization, the race to achieve good marks and successful further studies, impressive final marks and the results of external exams (baccalaureat) are often considered the indicators of 'good' schools.

There are, however, other approaches to quality. Winch (1996) and Trnavcevic (2000b) refer to quality assurance, total quality management and quality control. Woods (1992), on the other hand, developed a model of consumer empowerment - a quality assurance model "in which the emphasis is on minimum standards and specification being laid down by authoritative bodies, often with statutory backing" (Woods, 1992, p. 210). In the era of 'audit explosion' (Power, 1994, Stronach, 2000) and the 'tyranny of transparency' (Strathern, 2000) framed within globalization and 'policy borrowing' (Halpin and Troyna, 1995) quality brings about specific 'sameness' into the national and international policy arenas but also specific 'diversity' in local contexts, at either national, municipal or school levels. 'Sameness' can be observed in standardization, while 'diversity' seems to be more complex. It can be discussed via

social segregation and/or through different opportunities for parents, students and their responsibility for 'right choices'.

Partly separated from national policies about compulsory public education, their principles and underpinning concepts, a school as the unit of compulsory public education is faced with specific, local challenges, expectations and needs. One of these changes is demographic. For example, in the period between 1975 and 1998 the number of births in Slovenia decreased from 29,786 newborn children to 17,856 newborns (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, Statistični letopis, 1999). Some schools, especially in larger cities where more than one school can be found in a small area, are confronted with considerable reductions in the number of classes, and there is a potential threat of closure. These schools try to attract students from other catchment areas in order to 'survive'.

Yet a specific paradox can be observed. Although such undersubscribed schools are expected to enrol anybody in order to 'fill the space', this is not always the case (Trnavcevic, 2001). Some schools aspire to attract the best students, regardless of their catchment areas, by following certain internal criteria. Wells, Lopez, Scott and Holme (1999), Whitty and Power (1997), Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) and Trnavcevic (2001a) argue that schools, when in a position to choose, usually decide for those students who are academically successful and generally considered to be 'non-problematic'.

In accordance with the Decree (1998), the Ministry of Education and Sport has designed a network of public schools (the expression public school covers also the notion of a state school. The focus is on a distinction between a private school and a public, state school. In Slovenian context, the school that meets the requirements of the state although privately founded can apply for state grants. In this text, public school is also meant as a state school). The catchment areas are still defined, but parents can now ask for their children to be enrolled in a school out of their home area. At the policy level, the Elementary School Act enables the existence of private schools, 'concession schools' (comparable to charter schools) and public schools. Currently, there are only two private elementary schools in Slovenia. These are the Montessori schools. The rest of elementary schools are public.

However, the Slovenian practice of compulsory elementary schools, especially in some large cities, indicates a movement toward an increasingly market-oriented approach to schooling (Trnavcevic, 2001a). A case study of two elementary downtown schools showed that parents had chosen schools out of their catchment areas, and schools did accept students from other catchment areas if they had extra places. One of the reasons for the schools in the study to admit students from 'outside' seemed to be a steady decline in enrolment from their own catchment areas.

> Parents have the right to enrol their child in a public elementary or private elementary school operating on the basis of a concession located in the school district of their permanent or temporary residence; the public elementary school or the private elementary school with a concession located in that school district is required to enrol the child if the parents so choose. Parents may enrol the child into another elementary school upon that school's consent. [...] During schooling, pupils may transfer to another school if that school gives its consent.
> (Elementary School Act, Ministry of Education, 1996, Article 48, p. 10).

The schools in the study did not have any specifically defined selection criteria, therefore the phenomenon of cream skimming was noticed (Trnavcevic, 2001). It seemed that catchment areas had lost their role of regulating 'equity in access', at least in the case of schools under study (Trnavcevic, 2002). Yet these schools also displayed some processes that have incrementally been changing the nature of education from a 'public good' (Grace, 1994) to a 'consumption good' that could be advertised and sold in education markets (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). In the absence of state or municipal interventions, the schools reached for marketing tools in order to attract students when their enrolment was in decline. One school in the study was particularly keen on market philosophy, and its principal felt that more market elements ought to be introduced to educational arena. The schools in the study differed in their views on education and also used marketing tools in different ways, but their practices reflected change in both, attitudes and the understanding of education. Some participants supported market concepts in education while others pointed to moral dilemmas and the concept of 'suspended morality'[1].

The 'regulated transfer' seems to work for some schools in the role of 'choice'. The concept of choice as 'free' (although it could be discussed whether, and if at all, free choice actually exists) is not straightforwardly reflected in open enrolment and the related school policies that ensure equity in access; to a certain extent, it is embraced

in the concept of 'regulated transfer'. In some cases, lack of a clear concept of 'open enrolment' leads to the absence of the kind of 'school policies' that ensure equity in access and address the issues of social stratification and similar. The question, however, is whether schools tend to ensure equity in access or 'skim the cream'[2]? In the education marketplace, the questions of what constitutes the 'cream' of students is often associated with academic results, which are, in turn, one of the important indicators of 'good schools'. Quality in the marketplace is seen as 'the end' in itself but it can also be understood as a means to achieve competitive advantage in the market.

In order to attract academically successful students, schools use promotional tools. Through various techniques of promotion (Gray, 1991, Kotler, 1994, Barnes, 1993) schools promote their quality. The promotional process is presumably based on the target group and the assumption of a clear 'market segmentation'. Therefore, the means used in this communication process correspond with certain segment/group in order to convey understandable messages (Kotler, 1994, Kotler & Armstrong, 1991, Barnes, 1993, Gray, 1991, Pardey, 1991). Trnavcevic (2000a) regards referral channels as essential means in school's promotional efforts. Quality can be promoted through the 'strong points' of the school, eg exceptional test results, students' achievements or competition achievements, or as a 'comprehensive' quality assessed through any of the existing systems of quality approaches, such as TQM (Murgatroyd and Morgan, 1993), ISO standards, BS 5750, or the so-called Glaser's concept of school. Parents play essential role in dissemination of 'perceived' quality of a school. All these concepts are not meant to be ends in themselves. They are aimed at gaining a competitive advantage on the educational market (Winch, 1996).

In Slovenia, the state and the Ministry of Education and Sport collaborated in designing the 1998-1999 Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance Project, which was further developed by a group of experts and published in 2001 (though not as final edited version).

Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance project in Slovenia

The idea behind the Project is based on similar processes going on elsewhere in the world, especially EU, USA and New Zealand (the Ministry of Education, 1999). According to the document 'Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance' (Ministry of

Education and Sport, 2001) Slovenia will join in these processes. The purpose of the Project is "to ensure conditions for developing the culture and standards of knowledge at the level that is comparable with the world, part of which we are" (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2001, p. 6). The aim obviously is to be comparable and competitive with other school systems. For that purpose, the system has to be checked, monitored and evaluated. The Project also aims at providing a national framework for assessing and assuring the quality of schools, but not at stating quality 'per se' or controlling the quality of results (p. 6). According to the Project, "the concept of self-evaluation as developed so far and described in the following chapters is still in the process of development and testing" (p. 6). Nevertheless, it can already be seen as one of the options that schools have in approaching quality. Although there is much said about the self-evaluation of schools throughout this Project, it is mostly up to schools whether they undertake the path of quality evaluation or not. Schools can use the tools (provided by the Project) independently or ask for 'external assistance' to evaluate the school's quality in some areas or as a whole.

The idea of the Project is not only to evaluate quality, but also to sustain and improve quality. At first sight, the Project could be regarded as a good set of tools and instruments that schools could use to evaluate their own work and sustain quality. Yet, when we look at the Project from the point of view of auditing, some questions are raised. Firstly, emerging educational markets, increased competition among urban schools, decline in birth rate and global decentralization trends associated with the increased autonomy of schools is likely to encourage schools to publicly promote their 'quality'. Again one could wonder, "What can be possibly wrong with the advertising/the promotion of quality?" The answer might be quite straightforward - "nothing" - but there are more complex issues at stake. For example: How and for what purpose would schools use the data obtained through the project? The collected data would be liable to become a good source for the promotion of the schools' achievements aimed at attracting specific 'target groups' - parents and students who 'fit' in with the culture of the particular school. While the resulting diversity of school cultures might be deemed a welcome enrichment of educational provision, the promotional part risks to be understood as a 'cream skimming' phenomenon.

Looking at the experiences of other countries, such as Canada and its province of Ontario, we can notice an important shift from internal quality assessment to the use of performance/quality indicators for 'table leagues' (Toronto Star, 22 April, 1999). This development is likely to boost competition, and competition is an important market feature. By accepting the measurement and assessment of quality and embracing the 'audit culture' (Stronach, 2000), schools could then push themselves toward a more market-oriented behaviour. The wealth of experience and research in other countries, such as the UK and Ontario, Canada, suggests that any country with league tables is under threat of eventually making them publicly accessible. Consequently, the intense pressure of parents might prompt the market elements to start affecting the legislation. In that case, the question of equality and equity, as formulated in the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1995) and the LDS programme, becomes pivotal.

Discussion: emerging issues

'Striving for quality' is a feature of New Right politics. The USA president George W. Bush announced a major quality change in education that is to be ensured by annual testing in literacy and mathematics. However, testing and measurement are becoming a worldwide phenomenon, presumably associated with global trends in education as well as with political parties. The contemporary movements in the Slovenian system of compulsory elementary schooling indicate a step toward a more market-based practice. The LDS programme and subsequently the Minister of Education, Science and Sport (who is focused on equal rights and a lay public school), are explicit about their view of the quality schooling that, in their opinion, incorporates the right proportion of parental involvement and professional standards. As yet there are no explicit measures of precaution in terms of using the data to push the schools into the market, any government could use all these projects and changes as an argument for introducing a more market-oriented model into schooling. It would actually suffice to rank the schools from good to bad, and the rest would be done by parents and the public. The rhetoric of equality and equity could then prove empty.

Also, power relations need to be addressed. In management, there is a strong 'belief' that markets operate under the assumptions of 'win-win' situations and informed choosers. Yet, there is a body of research discussing the power being on the side of

the school, which can choose students that fit into its culture and tradition (Lauder and Hughes, 1998), and on the side of economically wealthy, educated parents who can afford the costs, such as transportation and time. 'Power' is on the side of those who understand the benefits of school and the quality the school is offering. In this respect, it is difficult to say whether the issues of equality and equity would be considered, and how the gap between the written policy and actual practice could be bridged in reality. The gap between the goals declared in the White Paper (Krek, 1996) or legislation and actual practice would then remain, enabling the parliamentary parties - all wings - to negotiate educational policies and move them toward markets.

In the Slovenian context, it could be argued that some parents have always tried to choose the 'best' school for their child. Even the old socialist system was familiar with this kind of a practice. Today, however, we are faced with one major difference. The number of students is in decline because of the plummeting birth rate. Smaller generations are entering the school system and more free space is therefore left open at some elementary schools. This has a twofold effect. On the one hand, it is an opportunity for better educational provision as new classes consist of fewer students. On the other hand, it threatens to diminish the number of classes and cost teachers their jobs, eventually implying the closure of certain institutions. The Slovenian national quality system in education could hardly be perceived as neutral under these circumstances. The 'objectively' measured quality can be expected to enable comparisons and enhance competition - and competition is a matter of power, of winners and losers.

The question of left/right government under these circumstances becomes trivial but the actual implementation counts. Is there a third option, between the market and the state? Or, how much of the state and market involvement is needed to ensure equity and respond to changes in economics and demographics? In policy analyses, small indicators of change are often neglected. The USA can serve as such an example. In 1982, the demand for a better quality of schools in the USA actually led to development of educational markets. Quality often ranks highly on the political agenda of many parties. According to the New Right ideology, educational markets should have improved the allegedly falling quality of education and ended the schools' being rigid bureaucracies (Chubb and Moe, 1990). The perceived goal of higher

quality could hence be a reason to introduce market elements in practice before policy and legislation changes. The informal arrangements which are "created by the actors, in this case especially schools, who seek to change or modify the nature of the competition which confronts them" (Waslander and Thrupp, 1995, p.1) are therefore better indicators of the marketization processes than the formal properties being typically established by legislation. Trnavcevic's (2001) study indicated that the schools participating in the research did seek the means and ways to modify their operations which led to market elements being introduced into schooling, despite the non-market nature of legislation.

Finally, with respect to the present European and world context, it can be questioned whether Slovenia can and should avoid a more market-oriented approach to schooling. In any case, this remains a political decision, but the limitations of this market metaphor must be considered together with its implications for the national project of 'Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance'.

Notes

1 Campbell (1996) discusses 'suspended morality' in relation to a phenomenon where teachers and/or principals disagree on the imposed decisions, policy requirements or similar, yet they are expected to follow and fulfil them. Similar behaviour and moral dilemmas were found in the study of Trnavcevic (2001a) where an interviewee expressed a moral dilemma on the competition among schools, yet it was vital that her own school attracted and admitted students from other catchment areas.

2 The phenomenon of cream skimming is often described in the context of oversubscribed schools. Selection criteria can be applied when a school is oversubscribed with students from its own catchment area or, when a school operates in a market. Selection criteria could therefore be understood as a reflection of the ends toward which a school directs its promotional efforts. LeGrand and Bartlett (1993) point out that once a school is oversubscribed, there is an increased opportunity for 'cream skimming'. Gewirtz et al (1995) contend that schools seek students who are successful, able, committed and middle-class. Whitty and Power (1997) argue that "most studies of education markets confirm that cream skimming is a major issue" (p. 226). They also assert that academically able students are the 'cream' most schools

seek to attract. The study of Trnavcevic (2001a) shows that even undersubscribed schools with special focus (or those close to the 'magnet school' ideal) can pick out certain students only, even though their selection mechanisms tend to be more sophisticated and less transparent.

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