The imaginary of commodified education: Open days at Slovenian grammar schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the open day at grammar schools in Slovenia (a post-socialist country) from two perspectives, namely from that of marketisation and commodification of education and from the point of view of marketing education. Slovenia, as have many countries around the world, undertook the restructuring of public schools in line with marketisation and privatisation.

In two grammar schools an observation of the open day was carried out, documents were analysed, i.e. mainly school publications and other printed materials, the principal's speech was recorded at one school, an interview with one principal conducted and unstructured interviews with parents and students – promoters of their school carried out. The findings were discussed within Baudrillard's framework of simulacra and critically reflected through marketing perspective.

Keywords: Education policy, marketisation of education, commodification of education, marketing, promotion, impression management

Introduction

In the literature there has been considerable discussion of open days in schools and similar 'promotional' events often reviewed through the perspective of marketisation and commodification (see Barnes 1993, Kenway and Fitzclarence 1998, Kenway and Fitzclarence 1999, Kenway and Bullen 2001). On the one hand, one might initially conclude that this topic offers little that is new to the field. On the other, however, the development of 'commodified education' rapidly grew away from the 'socialist' tradition in Slovenia. If marketisation of education was gradually developed in the UK and USA as well as in other Western countries, there has been a radical and significant change in this regard in Slovenia and also in other countries in transition from their socialist past to capitalist society (Flynn and Oldfield 2006). Therefore, this discussion can be relevant also for other post-socialist countries and can also represent a case which is different but also similar to current developments in the English speaking countries. So the context is different and portrays these radical changes in many countries in Eastern Europe.

The transition period in Slovenia was marked by radical changes in all areas of social life. The processes that started in the Western countries in the '80s of the previous century have become evident in Slovenian education only recently. Associated with the decline of births and hence demographic changes, the economic restructuring and, the traces of a 'socialist' tradition, these changes were reflected in the everyday life of schools as a kind of a clash of values and practices. It seems that schools have adjusted their practices to new conditions

and requirements, but a deeper insight into their practice is needed in order to see how they responded to changes.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the open day at grammar schools from two perspectives, namely from that of marketisation and commodification of education and from the point of view of marketing education as a service in education marketplace. The discussion at hand is grounded in the findings of a study conducted at two neighbouring grammar schools in the capital of Slovenia in February 2005. An observation of the open day was carried out and documents were analysed, i.e. mainly school publications and other printed materials. The principal's speech was recorded at one school (no speech was given by the principal of the second school), an interview with one principal conducted (the second principal was unavailable) and unstructured interviews with parents and students – promoters of their school carried out. The data are considered through the concept of Baudrillard and his idea of the 'imaginary'.

Slovenia, as have many countries around the world, undertook the restructuring of public schools in line with marketisation and privatisation. However, while in other countries, for example in UK, USA and Australia, school reforms have been associated mostly with a response to perceived demands for economic growth and competition, the Slovenian education reform is also associated with major political events that took place at the end of the eighties and especially in 1991. The independence and secession from former Yugoslavia required major legislative changes as well as providing an opportunity for the introduction of changes in education policy.[1] The legislative documents give emphasis to the concepts of choice, equal opportunities and the provision of a secular education[2]. The Acts do not explicitly elaborate a direct 'marketisation'; however, they implicitly invoke such movements through the processes of decentralization, deregulation and devolution of power (see Dehli 1996b).

The independence of Slovenia was, in fact, a revolutionary event and cannot be reduced to its legal dimensions at all. The change targeted the very basic economic and societal principle of the former system as well as that of education. To put it somewhat schematically, the former system tried to produce not a student as a potential market commodity, but something which used to be called a universally developed personality (vsestransko razvita osebnost). The socialist concept of the "market" was not explained and defined as the 'market of commodities', but rather, ideologically speaking, as the market of "working people". The idea of the 'market of working people' was to participate not 'in the common capital', but within the system of "common labour" (associated labour, zdruzeno delo)). The ideological foundation of the Tito-ist self-management system was radically anti-capital and pro-work oriented (Kuzmanic and Sedmak 2006). Consequently, capital, market commodification, marketisation and similar concepts used to be not central, but rather marginal and marginalised aspects of it. However, these concepts were not entirely excluded (as in the USSR and other Communist countries) from the self-management system, what was their – as it were – marginal legitimacy. The revolutionary changes that took place in 1991 fore-grounded concepts which had been marginal and marginalised. They became the very centre of the new system of post-socialism or the so-called "transition".

The school system, comprising its structure (from eight to nine years of compulsory schooling), legal framework, leadership and management, governance and curriculum, has been restructured significantly. In the process of restructuring, policy makers 'looked around' for the best transferable solutions. They adapted and adopted them for the Slovenian context. The 'new legislation' can, hence, be seen partially as 'policy borrowing', a concept which is well discussed by Halpin and Troyna (1995).

The call for a 'comparable education system', specific standardization and enhanced 'audit culture' has been mirrored in both the legislation and the practice of schools. In the same way that Smith, Baston, Bocock and Scott (2002) discuss Americanization and UK higher education, arguing that there is an important, although ambiguous influence of American education policy on the UK education system, so it could be argued that Slovenia 'looked elsewhere' for best practices and policy solutions. It is not that foreign (education) policies were straightforwardly introduced into the Slovenian context; it is rather that certain elements or concepts, if not the entire paradigm, were 'imported' into the Slovenian legislation, such as, for instance, the concept of 'special needs students'. However, effort was invested as well in order to maintain and respect contextual specifics, such as the tradition of 'special schools' and teaching methods.

Marketisation of education (Dehli 1996a, b; Kenway and Epstein 1996) grounded in choice (Gorard and Taylor 2002), competition, deregulation, decentralization and enhanced 'audit culture' (Stronach 2000, Apple 2004a, b) are hence reflected also in Slovenian education policy and practice. The new right-wing Government, elected in 2004, particularly emphasizes the movement towards marketisation. The Minister of Education and Sport has announced enhanced decentralization and has already devolved the power of financial decision to schools for the purposes of their maintenance (www.gov.si), which was previously centralized. There is a national project going on, called MoFAS, which introduces per capita funding and an 'integral budget' at the level of secondary education instead of a combination of per capita and class-as-a-unit combination.[3] Privatisation also can be traced along marketisation lines, however, rarely of the exogenous type noted by Ball (2004), which involves the 'bringing in, in various ways, of private providers to deliver public services' (Ball, 2004, p. 3), and more frequently of the endogenous type, which involves the 're-working of existing public sector delivery into forms which mimic the private and have similar consequences in terms of practices, values and identities' (Ball, 2004, p. 3). These movements raise some major concerns as to the future of public education worldwide (see Connell 2001, Ball 2004, Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich 2004), not solely in Slovenia, specially in the light of the emerging understanding of education as consumption good in a capitalist market.

In recent years, the general secondary schools in Slovenia (grammar schools/gimnazije) have been increasingly competing for students. On the one hand, said competition can be associated to a certain extent with the decline of births in Slovenia, for example, in 1975, there were 29786 births, in 1995 18980 births and 17321 births in 2003 (http://www.stat.si/novice_poglej.asp?ID=255); on the other hand, however, it can also be associated with the system of 'points'[4] needed for enrolment to an oversubscribed grammar school and/or 'points' obtained by individual students in proportion to their respective performance during general secondary school and at the national external exam (Matura examination). Also oversubscribed faculties limit enrolment on the basis of 'points' acquired at the national external exam. There were no explicit league tables until spring 2006 when the National Exam Centre published the Matura exam results for the first time in the post – 2nd WW history of Slovenian education. The results of external exams that students undertake at the end of compulsory schooling had not previously been published. On that ground the phenomenon described by LeGrand and Bartlett (1993), Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995), Whitty and Power (1997) and Trnavcevic (2002) as 'cream skimming'[5] has become a common practice of schools.

Also educational markets have emerged along with the processes that emphasize choice, as well as decentralization, and deregulation of education. Hence a number of contextual (societal), demographic and legal factors, have, in the name of transparency, resulted in cream skimming. However, the educational markets are not only associated with questions

of choice, equal rights and opportunities and so on but also push schools toward 'enterprise – based' behaviour.

A range of practices have been developed which encourage grammar schools to see themselves and behave much like enterprises. In order to be successful as enterprises, they also adopted certain marketing techniques and practices which in fact mean that they have fostered consumerism and promotional culture in education. Kenway and Bullen (2001, p. 126) argue that 'the marketisation of schools in the Western countries […] has attracted a great deal of critical research. The focus has largely been on government policy, principals and parents and on associated issues of school choice, school management and, more broadly, economic and philosophical imperatives and implications'. They argue that little research has been devoted to the concept of power and the issue of constructing the identities of students as consumers. When schools participate in a marketplace, the students assume the roles of promoters, advertisers as well as consumers of education offered by their own school. One of the many events in schools where students promote their schools is the open day of all secondary schools in Slovenia. The 'open day' can be understood in the language of marketing as promotional activity aiming explicitly at attracting students and, implicitly, at attracting not just any students, but students that are most desirable in terms of academic results, values and expectations which match the 'culture' of their school.

In Slovenia, the open day is a 'national event' since it takes place over two consecutive days at the same time of year at all Slovenian schools, much like an 'education fair', where parents and potential students assume the role of 'shoppers', while students and teachers assume that of 'vendors'. During these two days, determined by the Ministry of Education and Sport and planned in the School Calendar, visits to up to three schools are organized for parents and potential students (i.e. respective Friday at 9am and 3pm and Saturday at 9am). During the three designated hours, students attending the last year of elementary school (a 9 year compulsory schooling) flood the secondary schools in towns and cities. Together with their parents, they go 'shopping' for a school that might best serve their interests. Schools organize different events, ranging from a 'central' reception and the principal's speech to events and presentations in classrooms performed by the students attending the school in question. These students 'sell' the school, but they are simultaneously also consumers of their school. 'In the market context of schooling, parents and students have become commodities. They are both consumers of the school's value and producers of its exchange value' (Kenway and Bullen, 2001, p. 137). When 'shopping' for the school of their choice, students also 'learn' not only how to behave as consumers, but, first of all, "how to play" the role of commodity. As we will see, self-commodification is here probably the most important result of the socialisation of future students within the "logic" of commodified education.

Open day through impression management

Kenway and Bullen (2001, p. 131) argue that

> Marketing, as opposed to advertising, involves a wide range of contrived semiotic practices or what Gewirtz et al. (1995, p. 121) call 'symbolic production'. These include such things as product design – packaging and imagery, product differentiation or positioning and repositioning when necessary, and product renewal involving redesign and redefinition. It may involve market segmentation and associated population targeting and impression management associated with such concrete matters as location, architectural design, floor layout and display.

There is no doubt that from the 'education-as-consumption' point of view, open days are marketing events. Schools pay attention to good impression management related to the layout and decoration of schools. In terms of the program and age of students, both schools participating in this study followed the National Curriculum for Grammar Schools and enrolled students aged from approximately 15 to 19. The duration of the program is the same for both schools, but there are differences with respect to extracurricular activities, spatial opportunities (ground capacity) and an appropriate schedule for commuters. These elements 'position' the two schools on the market, however, only to a limited extent. Schools try to render this position, which is also associated with success and academic achievement (external exam results) visible during these open days. Ball (2004, p. 14) argues that 'the performances of individual subjects or organizations serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion and inspection'. The schools tried to convey a message as to their quality through advertising their academic results as well as through demonstrating the visible contentment and good education of their students. The decoration of the school and 'relaxed behaviour' of students also contributed to the overall impression.

Marketing education – school performance?

Grammar school L

The school was decorated with and the main hall colourful. The students waited for the 'guests' (parents and potential students) to arrive and, upon their arrival, attended to them by distributing among them copies of the special edition of the school publication and directing them to the gym room where the central presentation took place. Somewhat lost in the crowd, a number of parents and potential students (approximately 150) moved down the stairs like a tidal wave. The presentation started at 3 pm. The choir sang and then the principal gave his speech. The PowerPoint presentation and the special edition of the school publication were structured in the same manner - the same topics followed in the same order, from school location to meals, and so forth. After the presentation, the visiting crowd moved towards classrooms.

Each classroom was decorated, candies were offered around and students made short performances; for example, in one classroom, there was a puppet show. Iin another, a physics demonstration took place. In the chemistry lab, the students made ice cream, and in the language classroom, the students 'invited' parents to join them on a flight from Ljubljana to different world destinations.

The teachers briefly acquainted the parents with their subjects, extracurricular activities relating to their subject or to school more generally as well as answered other questions. In the language classroom, the parents posed questions addressing the issues of excursions abroad, student exchanges and additional language courses for students. Afterwards, the school visit started. Parents visited different classrooms, talked to students and teachers as well as observed events, such as ice cream making.

Some teachers 'behaved' differently and stood out from the crowd. While some teachers demonstrated their experiments and work with great enthusiasm, waving and inviting parents to visit their classroom(s), where students performed experiments, others were hanging around the corridors in pairs as if the 'fair' was not associated with their work. They looked disaffected, not interested in parents and potential students. They were waiting to go

home and as one teacher mentioned to her colleague: 'I cannot wait for this circus to be over'. They did not even try to pretend that they were interested in anybody. They simply ignored the entire situation.

Then, on the same day, the school also functioned as a shopping mall, with each classroom offering different 'objects of pleasure and desire' and the students set about selling the school. In the corridors, the students were inviting the parents and potential students with the words 'come to our classroom, we have an interesting performance to show you'. It sounded like 'come, there is a sale going on'. Overall, it mostly looked like it was the students who were 'selling' the school and doing the teachers' job.

Grammar school P

The presentation at school P was organized differently from that implemented at school L. However, both presentations conveyed the same message, namely, selling the school. The presentation I attended was the last presentation of this school and took place Saturday at 10 am.

The presentations were implemented in classrooms without the principal giving a speech. The teacher who made the presentation emphasized academic achievements and said that 'our students are successful and, hand on heart, we accept only higher-achieving students'. She continued with organizational issues, curricula and streams on offer (general, classical and European). When she explained the schedule, she specifically praised the organization: 'We can praise ourselves, because everything is scheduled between 7.30 am and 3 pm'. Then, the teacher elaborated on Matura (baccalaureate/national external exams) results and achievements at various competitions. Two attending students shared their views and experience of the school. One female student was extremely enthusiastic about the classical program and she pointed out that she would have enrolled in that school again if in the place of potential students. The teacher then proceeded to school issues, such as meals, cloakroom, fitness and extracurricular activities, excursions and student exchanges. Parents could also participate in quite 'exotic' excursions and the school offered language courses to parents at reasonable prices. The teacher emphasized good parent-school relationships and represented the slogan: 'P to parents' (parents to parents: starsi starsem). Parents posed two questions - one concerned the attendance at parental evenings and the other referred to e-reports on grades. The teacher said that since nothing could serve as a worthy substitute for personal contact, the teachers preferred the parents coming to school in person.

Following the presentation, the parents and potential students were invited to take a look around the school. Each classroom was like a fair. Some students performed, while others stood in front of the classrooms inviting the parents to come and see their 'show'. The students were dressed in accordance with what they represented; for example, the students who represented the Russian language course wore a traditional Russian fur cap, those representing the Spanish language course wore a sombrero, and so forth. The teachers also were participating in making invitations to parents, so that there was a general feeling of 'a big show' on the premises, of a theatre performance which they obviously enjoyed. In a chemistry lab, a lot of small experiments took place simultaneously and then the 'money laundry'[6] show began. The parents and potential students were absorbed in a simple experiment; a 'show' atmosphere was created and everyone was waiting for the big 'trick' to be performed successfully (observational data).

Selling the school

From the point of view of marketing literature, the open day can be discussed as 'face-to-face selling' (Gray 1991, Barnes 1993, Kotler 1994). The marketing plan includes promotional techniques and methods, which form an integral part of the marketing mix. Kotler (1994, p. 98) defines the marketing mix as a 'set of marketing tools that the/a firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives in the target market'. Kotler (1994) primarily used a four-factor classification of said tools called the 4 Ps: product, price, place, and promotion. Stefanou (1993, p. 103) claims that 'as marketing tools, the attraction of the four Ps therefore stems from the fact that these are the only variables which are capable of being directly manipulated by marketers'. Therefore, they can be useful for schools as well as other services. Pardey (1991) added three more Ps, namely people, physical evidence or proof and process. Promotion is hence a tool in constituting the marketing mix. However, promotion is a mix by itself, because it consists of four techniques. Gray (1991) uses the term 'technique' interchangeably with the term 'form' or 'activity'. He categorizes the basic promotional techniques into four groups: advertising, publicity materials, promotional activities and personal selling. Open days are a promotional activity of a school that provides, as Gray (1991, p. 122) states, 'an opportunity for personal selling, where face-to-face contact with prospective customers allows an individualized approach to promotion'.

As Downes (1994) argues, promotional activities are most visible in market-oriented schools. Gorard (1999) writes that schools are spending and focusing more and more on promotion. However, using promotion does not necessarily mean that a school is market-oriented (see Foskett, 1998). Promotion can be used also in a school that does not care for customers in terms of their needs. Gray (1991), Pardey (1991) and Barnes (1993) define promotion as an important part of marketing necessary for the communication with the environment and for conveying the message to the customers in order to lead to a desired exchange. A message is conveyed to the customers through the communication process, defined by Gray (1991) and Pardey (1991) as AIDA which means 'four distinct processes in the communication processes needed to obtain the sale' (Gray 1991, p. 118). Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995, p. 122) observe that:

> …messages about the ethos, culture, values, priorities and 'quality' of educational provision are inescapably conveyed by the following: school practices and policies; the language and format of school documentation and activities; the age, fabric and design of school grounds and buildings, facilities and furbishing; styles of management and headship; school designations (whether church or county, single-sex or co-educational, or whether comprehensive, grammar, or secondary modern); the socio-economic characteristics of catchment areas; and the size and nature of students' composition.

Both schools conveyed messages through the event and, to some extent, these messages were similar, such as, for instance, 'being academically excellent schools' and 'offering a range of activities to students'. Most of these activities were focused on knowledge production expressed as results and were structured in a similar, almost identical manner. There was also an enhanced focus on internationalisation, the Europeanisation of schools[7], either having 'European' classes/courses or providing excursions to and exchanges with European schools. The principal's speech in School L reflected this orientation. There was a lot of 'self-praise', although it was designed to sound like 'facts' about the school.

These data can also be reflected through a different perspective. Stronach (1999) provides a deconstruction of global evaluative discourses concerning school effectiveness and improvement and portrays them in anthropological terms such as 'cultural performance'. Stronach (1999, p. 173) concludes that such discourses are 'a form of contemporary 'spectacle'. They are our Olympic Games'. Open days could be seen as a specific form of local 'Olympic Games', as a 'spectacle' of commodified education and, also, as fairs of impressions and images. The logic of these fairs in the marketing context seems to be the production of 'sameness' rather than difference, which contradicts the logic of promotion based on differentiation and segmentation. Why, then, are said fairs needed? I shall insist, again, upon the argument of Stronach (1999, p. 180), namely that: '/…/ performance, competition, and comparison are key cultural activities on the global scene, which is characterized by a public and normative performance in which one group considers itself (and reconstructs itself) in the light of the performance of other, imagined, key reference groups' with a view to suggesting that open days are 'spectacles' of production and consumption, the sort of public performances within the context of which a school constructs itself in relation to commodified education, and parents and potential students construct themselves according to other groups involved in education. There is, however, at least, one major difference between other spectacles, such as the Olympic Games and the 'fairs of schools'. The Olympic Games are in a way real; they are a competitive event with winners and losers. The open days on the other hand are fictional, imaginary and can be regarded as hyperreal, as simulacra, but the metaphor of winners and losers here could not and should not be grasped in terms of sporting competition. We are in the terrain of "living students", at the level of life opportunities themselves. To put it differently, "reality" of school competition (open days) is much more real than that of 'Olympic Games' from our former metaphor.

Open day and simulacra

'Here you are – in a language class. We are on the plane now and will take off to a beautiful holiday destination. Dear passengers, fasten your seat belts, fold the trays, do not smoke during the flight and make yourselves comfortable. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask our crew for assistance'. The teacher and students were enthusiastic in giving this message in 8 different languages. It was impressive and the students felt they impressed the audience very much. The parents were breathless – eight languages, the students were able to speak in eight languages!

In another classroom, the students enacted a show about making ice cream at home. Before the experiment started, the students were standing in front of the classroom inviting the parents: 'Come, come to our classroom and try our ice cream – the best ice cream in the world! We know how to make the best ice cream. Join us, taste it and enjoy'! The chemistry lab was filled with parents and potential students, their faces alight with curiosity and appreciation. One father said to his son: 'Hmmm, it sounds interesting. In my times, we did not make ice cream at school'. Another parent made the following comment: 'Can you imagine, they learn to make ice cream at school!' The parents liked the idea that students learn such 'impressive', 'useful' and 'sweet' lessons.

There was also a puppet show performed in one classroom. Students invited visitors to join them and watch their performance. One parent said to another: 'This is so cute, so nice; they even have a puppet show'. At the same time, nothing was said about grades, subjects, requirements and contents of the National Curriculum. The everyday learning process was not mentioned at all. It was a show, a performance, pure form and appearance far away from the "real substance" of schooling. At these events, the school was selling primarily 'the

sweet life' (ice cream experiment), the 'edutainment' (languages as entertainment) and school life as pure performance (puppet show) based on a number of spectacles. I am taking of Baudrillard's argument about one who 'enters into simulation, and hence into absolute manipulation - /…/' (Baudrillard 1983, p. 57) with a view to discussing said events as simulations. Furthermore, these situations were much more than mere manipulations, or illusions; they became literary 'hyperreal' whereas visitors erased distinction between the 'real and reality'. In particular the hard process of learning itself was erased and knowledge as distributed power with normalising effect (Foucault 1977) was erased. Parents perceived their children (and themselves) as being able to do all the things that might feel frustrating for them to do in their adulthood, such as not understanding the instructions aboard the plane in the Russian or Spanish languages. Within the simulacra the school feigned to have and to give to students what parents did not have and could not give at all, namely, good education ('important' knowledge), fun and 'sweet life' which, in marketing terms, could be called a 'competitive advantage'. A distinct illusion was created of 'successful children in a competitive world'. The entire performance in the two schools can be associated with Baudrillard's (1983, pp. 25-26) discussion about the Disneyland imaginary, which is

> neither true or false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere particularly amongst those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness.

School performances are constructed as a set of market imaginary, in such a manner as to specifically conceal the fact about the learning process; instead, the illusion of learning and school as fun is 'sold' to parents and potential students. Said performances erased the experience of their spectators, their experiencing of the 'real' (lived) world, the boring and demanding process of learning, schooling, and the spectators, in turn, accepted as real the illusion that in this particular school, education, learning, and schooling is fun and granted success rather then 'normalising institution'. Not only "also fun", but just fun! Thus, within the simulacra, they reconstructed 'education' for their children on the basis of simulated images rather than on the basis of the representation of any kind of reality. From this point of view, the open day is a deliberate enactment of fiction rather than a spectacle like the Olympic Games. Open day functions as the miraculous vehicle which turns the imaginary into reality, and deconstructs any form of reality into fictive performances.

School values in simulacra

The principal of School L welcomed the parents and potential students, presented the teaching staff (not by names) and praised the choir because even though their teacher had the flu the choir was able to manage the performance by itself. He continued with basic information about the school. He emphasized its long tradition by saying that 'we are the school with the longest tradition'; stressing also that its students are really successful. He went on to repeat the statement as to the success of students three times: 'I can repeat that our students are really successful. He described the school as having 1033 students in 33 classes offering different streams (linguistic, general and scientific). He listed some specifics, such as 'essay' literacy and reformed math's curriculum in the fourth grade which focuses on preparations for the baccalaureate. He continued with the 'offer' – meals for vegetarians and active sportsmen. He mentioned different statuses that students could acquire (active sportsmen, active science 'researchers', and so forth). He also pointed out that 'we are a school and as such must expect from the students hard work. The emphasis was placed on academic achievements, namely 42% of very good and excellent students

and to a 98% success at the baccalaureate. The principal also listed a number of extracurricular activities, excursions and exchanges with schools abroad. He attributed great importance to the students' community and 'interpersonal' relationships. He then proceeded to enrolment requirements and explained how many points were required for enrolment the previous year. He said that the current year might be different: 'Last year, the enrolment was limited, so that I do not know what will happen this year, it all depends on you. Have a look around the school, read the school publication, visit our web site or call us on the 'blue number' (toll-free-number) and then decide. His presentation lasted 15 minutes. Then the choir sang the school anthem and the visit started (observation data at School L).

In the unstructured interview, the principal of School L emphasized the school's care for its students and said that it cannot allow the students who were excellent in elementary school to become unsuccessful. In this light, the school organizes numerous activities and provides professional support in relation to any problem that arises, whether learning, social, or emotional. However, the school does not 'market' these activities nor does it mention them, because 'we must promote the school. The whole system requires promotion. I think we are still 'healthy' when/even if we do not promote 'human relations and caring attitudes'. As everything was 'on sale', from extracurricular activities to schedule and meals, he felt that by not 'selling' it they succeeded in maintaining a certain professional and human dimension.

In the principal's reflections and ideas about the open day, there is an interesting point that can be associated with Ball's (2004, p. 13) argument:

'Within institutions – colleges, schools, universities – the means/end logic, education for economic competitiveness, can transform what were social processes of teaching, learning and research into a set of standardized and measurable products. The use of benchmarking, National Curriculum levels of achievement, performance indicators and targets etc. also contributes to this reification of educational processes. These new currencies of judgement in education provide an infrastructure of comparisons which value practitioners and institutions solely in terms of their productivity, their performances!'

The system as such, not to say national education policies, fosters market behaviour, where education is perceived exclusively and only as a 'commodity'. The principal 'accepts' the logic of promotion, market and competition, yet, at the same time, he also hesitates and refuses to market 'social relations' and 'caring values'. In their promotional activities, schools rely on 'tangible', measurable and 'materialised' results, and they feel the need to 'preserve' the values and relations that do not succumb to the market logic. In relation hereof at least, two issues arise.

On the one hand, there is a question of a specific 'clash of values' (Trnavcevic 2001, 2002). Market values are needed for the survival of schools; however, a study by Trnavcevic (2001) established that individual teachers feel these values to be imposed on education as well as upon themselves. They disagree with market competitiveness; however, they simply must yield to this requirement. The question can also be associated with what Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002) term the 'flux of identities'. They point to a teacher who 'juggles with her own professional goals (independent learning skills) and external pressures from tests' (p. 119). In this study, the principal offered a similar account of the situation – juggling between 'pedagogical' and 'market' values – the first being an intrinsic value and the second an imposition. The question, then, is when and how does an imposition become a value. Moreover, is that not contradiction in itself? By definition, a value is not something that could be imposed. Market values can be regarded as an imposition to teachers within the larger context of the so-called competitiveness yet it is an

individual who 'accepts' them or not. Therefore, it is not only a question of the clash of values, but rather a matter of re-valuation of education.

On the other hand, the commodification of education is grounded in the relationship between production and consumption. Schools produce 'good students/results' and also enrol 'good students'. They try to 'consume' them for their own survival and success. Since results do matter, the schools generate a promotion based on results and tangible 'items', and in their promotion activities, they target exactly that 'kind of population'.

From the marketing perspective (seen in the larger context of competitiveness), these values could well be promoted and 'sold' to parents. Even more, by promoting a different orientation, schools could gain a competitive advantage. Segmentation, positioning, and differentiation are strong marketing attributes (see Kotler 2001, Barnes 1993, Gray 1991) which need to be addressed in order to market an institution effectively. Marketing, in a way, is about differentiation, although marketing education seems to be based on 'sameness', since commodified education focuses on measures and standards which are rooted in 'sameness' (of measures and standards). The need for marketing by means of open days can be challenged. Namely, the results can be published, publications sent to homes, etc. It seems that the main purpose is to show how similar schools are rather than to point out their differences. Sameness rather than differentiation seems to be presented. In reducing the complexity of educational endeavour to tangible and measurable results, the education service loses, to some extent, it's proclaimed individuality and becomes a 'measured mass commodity'. As the whole event seems to feature what Baudrillard (1983) terms 'simulation' and 'simulacra', then, it can be assumed that 'sameness' and differentiation are more rhetorical than real.

Simulacra and the teachers

Although the successful 'selling' of a school can constitute an issue of survival, the teachers behaved differently. The simulacrum seemed to consist of three groups of teachers, namely: 'believers', 'spectators at simulacrum' and 'nostalgic humanists'.

'Believers' are enthusiastic teachers, who believe that open day is also their day, a day when they perform and show the most exciting part of their subjects. From the marketing point of view, these teachers do not let the 'selling job' be pursued solely by students, but they contribute to the sale with their own work. They appeared as sellers. In Baudrillard's terms, they are within a simulacrum, opting into its imaginary and illusions. They live the fiction. Just like the parents, the teachers erase the real education, grades, and everyday 'chalk and blackboard' teaching, as well. They used entertainment and fun to sell the education to parents and potential students. They perform edutainment (see Kenway and Bullen 2001), which in our case belongs to simulacra, while education as process finds little if any representation in it. As a matter of fact, existing in the way of selling, performing themselves as a (re)presentation of school and schooling, they actually erased the very process of schooling. In order to be successful, to function in simulacra of the "commodification", they radically suppressed the very basic thing that they were supposed to sell: namely, the process of schooling and school itself.

'Spectators at simulacrum' are bored teachers, who want to finish the day as soon as possible, avoid it if possible and go home. They do not form an integral part of the performance; they are spectators for different reasons, some of them being ignorant and others being 'boring/-ed', 'I am a public servant, let me go home, this is not my job'. These teachers were in pairs or threes hanging together in corners, excluding themselves from the

central area. They gave the impression of being bored and gossiped about others. One teacher said that she could not understand a teacher who 'is so pushy and makes a circus of her subject'. Some teachers were yawning while parents were passing by.

The principal is a 'nostalgic humanist'. In his speech, he described the school as a demanding place, where students have to work hard, but the results are good. On the other hand, he pointed out during the interview that the school is not all about grades, that it gives great attention to students, their emotional and social well-being, as suggested by the teachers and the principal being available to students at anytime. He also talked about a 'case' of a father who maltreated children, about how the school found out and helped the children to address the issue and solve the problem. He discussed the current trends in municipal secondary schools extensively: 'One has to look around and do similar as others. One must market one's school; one has to survive. In our school, we have to survive for some years prior to a group of teachers retiring. Only then can I afford reductions in the number of classes. We are all marketing our schools. What one starts, others must continue, the parents expect it'. But he clearly argued that his school does not market 'soft', 'human' parts of their work, even if that, in his view, constitutes the essence of education. This 'nostalgic humanism', however, does not affect and change the open day as simulacrum. He is nevertheless part of the illusion as well as the fiction created by the simulacrum process itself.

Concluding remarks

The marketisation and commodification has been extensively discussed and empirically studied in many countries. However there is no evidence that this kind of 'research endeavour' has yet been undertaken in 'countries in transition' or post-socialist countries. One might expect that due to different traditions, Slovenian education would develop different practices. The study, however, reflected rather more similarities than differences with Western countries that have gradually developed 'commodified education'.

Also in the studied schools, education as a commodity is closely associated with Lyotard's (1984, p. 4-5) notion of 'knowledge as commodity': 'Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production; in both cases, the exchange is the goal'. Education, nicely packaged, sold, traded, franchised and consumed (Roberts, 1998) is exchanged on the marketplace as commodity – packed in the National Curriculum, standardized and audited by measurable results of external exams and traded with 'consumers' for survival. Open days, within the understanding of 'education as commodity', are only a form, a technique of 'effective communication' with consumers. As such, they might be replaced by the internet and presumably more effective modes of communication, but the 'fiction', 'the imaginary' of commodified education will not be eliminated. It is to suggest that in future it will only be strengthened.

Open days form part of the 'imaginary' of commodified education. Although the imaginary is discussed by Baudrillard (1983, p. 25) as 'nor true nor false', in the case of an open day event, it is both true and false. It is true because education has been pushed to become 'edutainment' (see Kenway and Bullen 2001) and the machinery of events, such as open days, has been set up to sell educational practices. But it is also false because a considerable amount of classroom teaching in Slovenian grammar schools is still implemented through 'old, traditional teaching style, the so called 'chalk and talk'. It is also false because there is no sign or representation of 'reality', no reality itself in the education process which the students will receive and participate in, despite the changes in teaching style required and stimulated in the classrooms. The open day is part of the 'apparatus', the

market simulacra, which eliminates signs of reality, evokes the imaginary and makes it 'real' on the 'illusion' premise.

Within the broader context of the State, government and national educational policies, we come back to the 'neither true nor false' point. The whole 'machinery' of the market is set up to produce the 'imaginary', the 'edutainment', the education-as-game. Although the State claims to deregulate and decentralise education, it still constitutes the main factor involved in education through various forms of appearance (creating deregulated environment, decentralised school system, financing) which could be seen as the 'Invisible Hand' of the State, although it is actually 'the subject' of all changes, hence the 'Visible Hand'. Paradoxically, the State and government with their enforcements, grounded mainly in legal force (laws, regulations, punishment, shortly, enforcement from above), are the most decisive (f)actor in the whole counter-market (as non-market) situation of education. State and government are not the "market forces", they are, by definition, something contrary to it. Mixing these two aspects of our real life – and that is the case regarding marketisation and commodification of education - we are not only making the imaginary of education, but the simulacra 'game' in the field of education.

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[1] Between 1991 and 1996, i.e. when the package of legislation was proposed and subsequently adopted by the National Assembly (1996), intense public and professional discussions were taking place as to the role, structure, organization and financing of education in the new State. The expectations and solutions in relation thereof were collected in the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (published in 1995, English version published in 1996, see www.gov.mss.si) and related Acts for elementary and secondary schools (vocational and general education) adopted in 1996. At a later date, two additional Acts were adopted, namely the Act on Higher Education in 2004 and the Post-Secondary Vocational Education Act in 2004.

[2] Education has been secular after the Second World War. However, the emphasis was made to 'protect' public education from any ideology or religion.

[3] Lump sum is currently in place for Higher Education.

[4] Before the enrolment to a chosen secondary school elementary school students have to list their choices of schools. On that basis the estimation of schools, mostly grammar schools, with limited enrolment is done. Limited enrolment means that the marks of some subjects from elementary school, the final result of a student, and some other criteria will be transformed into points. The sufficient number of points, which differs from school to school, means that a student has met the entry level required for the enrolment to the school of his/her choice. If a student has not enough points he/she is enrolled to a school from the list he/she made at the time of enrolment. It is sort of computerized process of allocating students to the school of their first, second or other options. Schools that are not so attractive to students (e. g. some vocational or technical schools and also some grammar schools with 'not excellent reputation) do not limit the enrolment.

[5] In this study social class is submerged for two reasons: firstly, because of the lenses adopted, and secondly, because 'class' as known in Western capitalist societies has been emerging in 'new' capitalist societies in different ways and forms and wold require 'new' article. For further reading on equity issues a reader might find useful the article School leadership and equity : Slovenian elements (Trnavcevic, 2007).
However, we emphasize cream skimming which refers to academically able students in relation to oversubscribed schools. A study (Trnavcevic, 2002) indicates that cream sckimming in Slovenian elementary schools is also a phenomenon of undersubscribed city schools.

[6] It means how money, notes specifically, can be washed and clean by using some chemical ingredients and mix them together.

[7] During the time when the research was carried out Slovenia was midst the euphoria of "EU accession". Slovenia is a EU member from the May 2005.