

Book Review

Melissa Benn & Janet Downs (2016). *The Truth about Our Schools*. London and New York, Routledge.

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The two authors, Benn and Downs, give a cutting edge analysis of the British education system: how comprehensive schools have tended to lose their leading role, while free schools, and academies have gained more strength in the past few years. It is evident from the very first page, and the authors do not wish to hide their opinion by all means when speaking about the changes that have taken place in education, that they are enthusiastic supporters of comprehensive education.

The authors point out at the beginning of the book that despite those arguments which say that public education is in crisis due to the rising inequality, still comprehensive schools may have the potential to provide equal access to education for all children regardless of class or ethnic background. So the main feature of comprehensives is its non-selectivity which makes possible for every single child “to walk through the same gates to school.”²

We may conclude that the authors’ main purpose was to make education experts and politicians realize that it is time to stop double speaking about education and everyone should face what reality is in educational issues.

One merit of the volume is that it gives a thorough cross section of the British education system, although the reader can always be aware of the fact that Benn and Downs are passionate and committed advocates of the comprehensive school system.

The volume contains 8 chapters, each of which attempts to challenge and explore the eight myths of the British education system: comprehensive education has failed; local authorities control and hold back schools; choice, competition and markets are the route to educational success; choice will improve education in England: the free school model;

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academies raise standards; teachers don't need qualifications; private schools have the magic DNA and progressive education lowers standards.

When arguing for comprehensive schools the authors underline the fact that the current school system is extremely divided and hierarchical, which may be one reason for the deepening inequality³ and this takes the authors to the conclusion that the comprehensive reforms should be completed because all in all it was comprehensive schools that helped working-class people get into higher education and not academies.⁴

To prove this statement, the authors bring several data and examples from other successful education systems, like Canada, Finland, Hong Kong etc.

However, some of the examples mentioned seem to contradict the authors' far too positive picture of comprehensives. Several countries' state education has been transformed to better match a more business-like model, which the authors do not consider as a real solution to the challenges education faces in Britain. By drawing a parallel between British free schools and American charter school, in *Myths Three and Four exposed: Choice, competition and markets are the route to education success/Choice will improve education in England*, the authors point out that private schools do not achieve better results in PISA tests than comprehensive schools, according to OECD surveys.⁵ However, at this point maybe we should refer to another book written by Charles Murray, who also tried to explore some myths regarding the American education system and stated that the in the past few years one merit of the liberal education policy was the right of free choice of schools as a result of which charter and private schools became quite popular in the USA. Murray underlines the fact that the importance of private and charter schools cannot be measured simply by the improvement of math and reading scores, rather by the fact that they offer „safe and orderly environment” as well as „supportive intellectual environment for hardworking students.”⁶ What Murray wants to point out is that educational experts forget about the simple fact that each child is different and the main advantage of charter and home schools is that they can help children develop their own potential. And this is the aspect that Benn and Downs fail to consider in their analysis.

When Benn and Downs argue that every child should have access to exactly the same educational opportunities and education should be free and uniformly excellent, they seem to vote exclusively for comprehensive education and do not think that the option of free choice provides a more vivid, colourful and varied education system but rather it makes the system more fragmented and selective.

³ p15

⁴ p10

⁵ p114

⁶ Charles Murray: *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*. Three Rivers Press New York.2008. p.65

They also point out that one major principle of the comprehensive system was to introduce the concept of a common curriculum which was supposed to open access for huge proportions of young people to education.⁷ And the authors may conclude with satisfaction that mission accomplished, as according to the data they bring the number of those getting a degree rose from 68,000 in 1981 to 331,000 in 2010.⁸

Interestingly enough, when these two authors welcome these changes and tendencies in their education system, another author overseas, once again Charles Murray tried to point out that in the past 70 - 80 years opening up secondary and higher education to a large proportion of students has become a tendency not only in America but worldwide as well, which may have its drawbacks, too. He states that by letting a large scale of students into higher education, these institutes will not be able to provide academically talented students with what they really need, while students with lower skills will have difficulty meeting the requirements needed.⁹

This may be another aspect of opening up higher education to the crowds of students that would be worth considering, but we may not find answer to this question in Benn and Downs' book.

Even if the authors leave some questions open or may occasionally give a one-sided picture of a complex issue, still it is an undeniable merit of the book that it provides an overall review of the structure of the British education system. Recent education reform in England has resulted in a dramatic shift towards academies (funded directly by central government, instead of a local authority) and free schools (called 'charter schools' in the USA). Over half of state secondary schools in England are now academies¹⁰ and, a fifth of its secondary schools are faith-based.¹¹

In Chapter 5 the authors deal with Myth Five that is academies raise standards. Academies appeared in a large number in the education system in 2002 with the aim of turning round underperforming schools in more disadvantaged areas and with the help of the Academies Bill schools could be judged „Good” or „Outstanding” to become academies¹² and by this getting more financial support. However, the authors bring several data which

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⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Charles Murray: *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*. Three Rivers Press New York. 2008. p.67

¹⁰ p56

¹¹ p68

¹² p80

prove that for all the investment these academies got, they did not perform much better than other non-sponsored state-run schools.¹³

They disagree with those who claim academy status is the best way of improving schools. They admit that some academies are Outstanding; but so are non-academies and some schools have improved after becoming academies but some others have not. So all in all, changing a school's status from non-academy to academy has not had the promised effect.

In the last chapter the authors want to do away with one more myth which says that progressive education lowers standards.

The authors give a precise description of progressing education when describing it as 'child-centred' education or as 'child-led' education which includes class discussion, pupils sitting round tables instead of in rows, group work, skills, worksheets. As they highlight: "problem-solving and critical thinking are more important than subject-knowledge... education should be more child-centred rather than didactic or teacher-led...group work and independent learning are superior to direct instruction."¹⁴

These ideas are extremely crucial as in the past, the teacher stood at the front of the room and held the undivided attention of their students and the teacher was the focal point. These days, however, students should be the centre of the classroom. The goal is to make teaching-learning more community oriented rather than teacher oriented. That is progressive education that the authors present accurately.

This chapter definitely proves that the authors do have a complex understanding and vision of in what direction the teaching-learning process of the 21st century should go, independently of the issue whether we are speaking of comprehensive, state, denominational or private schools.

As a conclusion we can say that the whole volume is a thought-provoking and informative reading. Consequently, this book is a perfect reading not only for experienced researchers and those who are experts of educational issues but also for beginner researchers.

And why could this book be an instructive and useful reading for Hungarian researchers, teacher educators and policymakers? The volume gives a detailed picture of the British education system and the main challenges it has to face these days. Although the two authors put a special focus on the comprehensive system, still they manage to show some pros and cons of the different types of schools in public education (comprehensive, academies, free schools). They also try to show the controversies of the British education system, which is-according to the authors- far too fragmented and selective. In the past decades the Hungarian public education system has been undergoing several significant

¹³ p92

¹⁴ p126

and so to say controversial changes and reforms: one of the most radical steps was the deprivatisation of schools which resulted in the disappearance of private or charter schools from the palette. This tendency definitely leads to a less varied education system, but selectivity and fragmentation still remains. Maybe this book helps the experts find the way to a better education.