Book Review


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It is obvious that every family, every student, every parent attended, attends or will attend school. All of us has any idea about the school and those opinions are different. We talk about the type of schools, the educational system, what subjects we like or not, or mention the teachers but talking about the problems is easier than look for, list and prove the advantages and disadvantages. Do we need more types of schools, new subjects, curriculum, more lessons? Whether does policy have to control the school? Are there more possibilities for the students to take part in extra programmes organized by the school? Perhaps the students get enough information for life but several questions wait for the reply.

The book on American educational pluralism by Ashley Rogers Berner shows the problems and points out the possible solutions.

The author’s main field is modern history, the history of modern social movements. Ashley Rogers Berner is Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, and also Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion.

The title of the study – No One Way to School – Pluralism and American Public Education – suggests that the theme is very interesting for teachers or policy-makers but the ordinary readers as well.

Not only in the Hungarian education but in American one student leave school without proper sketchy knowledge. In some countries, there are only one or two types of school, but in England, Belgium Sweden, and Canada (and so on) the parents and their children can choose from lots of type of schools. The offer of the school types in the Netherlands is huge, 35 different types of schools are available. The United States and Hungary as well do not provide enough possibilities to find the best school type for students.

On the other hand, Ashley Rogers Berner itemizes that there are factors, for example, the historical background, the role of the government or the culture, that help the reader to

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understand the importance of this study. In according to Ashley Roger Berner the structure of public schools must change, but the government has to follow and raise the “content-rich, subject-oriented liberal arts curriculum”.

The book is divided into seven parts. In the first chapter (Introduction) with five subsections the author shows the aim of the study, lists what reasons he started to deal with the educational strategy and theory, and why it is important to change the American educational system. David Brooks wrote in the New York Times that the American system is “one-size-fits-all” (p. 44.). For the Hungarian reader is useful that the author lists the American school types like charter schools, vouchers, in the following parts of the book we meet the other school types as well.

The next chapter – Educational Philosophies and Why They Matter – starts with a quotation by Charles Glenn: “[…] No aspect of schooling can be truly neutral.” This quotation is Berner’s starting point. The author examines the different opportunities of schools, in his opinion of formal education is positive: the schooling is instructive in some kind (but not all) of view. We can read the historical views about the school systems, the role of the Church (Protestant or Catholic ones), the separation of any type of religious schools and the state-funded schools.

In the chapter – Political Philosophies and Why They Matter – Berner writes the possible, existing figurations that can be found between the state, the individual and civil society. The author shows that the school systems are different in the different countries; sometimes it depends on the political status. In a totalitarian dictatorship, the schools are uniform, but in the liberal countries, there can be found as much type of schools as possible. Berner gives examples from Russia or Canada. In the subsection The Democratic Educational Theory we can read lots of opinions from several philosophers about the liberal, or religious aspects, later the evolution from political philosophy to educational models.

Reflecting upon the fourth chapter called American Constitutions and Religious Schools the author gives a historical background of the religious schools. Berner examines the Court’s rulings with several examples and says that the religious training can be a kind of pluralism.

In the fifth chapter, the author deals with the citizenship, achievement and accountability. In the very first lines, the author reminds the reader of the two aims of American public education – “to form democratic people, provide the academic and social capacities necessary for productive adulthood”. Berner shows and analyses the three phenomena, and the connections among them. In according to Berner the traditional schools work like bureaucratic agencies instead of organic communities. But how to lead the school system in the proper way?
The chapter called Limits of Educational Pluralism and How to Address They show the potential ways to the more colourful schools. But the chapter's last sentence shows that there are positive and negative examples of democratic systems that can follow or refuse them. The author notes that teachers in the USA disagree in teaching methods. In this chapter, Berner gives several examples of the acts for instance in Massachusetts, methods which can be used in Montessori Schools or Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Evangelic ones, and other, non-American schools. We can read about a very prickly question as well as sexual identity. The second part of this chapter emphasizes the school cultures, later we can read about the parents’ responsibility. Lots of them do not know the schools, but in the USA you can choose the school you want for your child. Parents need help to find the proper school.

The last chapter – Changing the Frame – is an overarching abstract or summary of the study. Ashley Rogers Berner stresses the most important facts with newer examples, we can learn the exemplary Finnish school system before the 1950s. The teachers were not trained at university. Later the government transformed the Finnish school system and nowadays the success is huge. Based on the score of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test Finland is the most successful country in Europe. The author notes the importance of teacher’s training, teacher’s preparation – the psychology and vocational skills are more inherent than focusing on academic content.

Ashley Rogers Berner gives lots of ideas about creationism, harm, equity, criticizes but admits the rigorous academic curricula. He defends the educational pluralism and helps us to keep on thinking the possibilities of the new educational system.

At the end of the chapters we can find the lists of meticulous notes, sometimes the author’s opinion about the cited lines which help us to understand the relations or connections. A useful bibliography shows the author’s commitment to the new way to school.

This extraordinary book should be required reading for everyone.