

Charles Murray: Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality. Three Rivers Press New York 2008. Reviewed by Rita Bencze

## **The four misconcepts of the American education: where does responsibility start?**

Murray begins his book with a thought-provoking sentence right in the Introduction of his volume, making the reader start thinking, when he states not less than "The educational system is living a lie. The lie is that every child can be anything he or she wants to be."<sup>i</sup>

His purpose is to make those experts interested in education realize that it is about time to stop doublespeaking and everyone should face what reality is in educational issues. One merit of the volume is that it wants to call attention to the dead ends of the American education system in a rather provoking way.

The volume contains 5 chapters, however, if we take a closer look at the inner symmetry of the book we should speak about 4+1 chapters as the last one may be regarded as a synthesis of the previous four chapters. In the first four chapters the author looks into the following four simple truths:

- „Ability varies
- Half of the children are below average
- Too many people are going to college
- America's future depends on how we educate the academically gifted children"<sup>ii</sup>

The last chapter, the +1 (Letting Change Happen), suggests that the author arrives at some kind of conclusion and despite all his critical remarks he has no doubt that something has already started to change. However, we should raise the question what made Mr. Murray draw such a negative picture of his country's educational system.

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. Mr. Murray's key statement in his book is that the present system teaches children by uniform principles which mean that every student are to be taught on the basis of a standardized curriculum (according to the No Child Left Behind principle) without taking their varying academic skills into consideration. However, in the rather confrontative subchapter of Chapter 2 (Schools Have no Other Choice but to Leave Many Children Behind) the author points out that in fact schools do not really have other choice but to neglect some children. By this the author means that „... even the best schools will inevitably have students who do not perform at grade level."<sup>iii</sup>

At this point we should stop and analyze the author's statement more carefully as Mr. Murray declares just the opposite of what American and European educational policy-makers and experts state. The main principle in today's education is to give each child equal chance and they should be pushed through the labyrinth of education by all means, whatever it takes, from which no one will benefit after all. And the smallest drawback of this process is the appearance of large proportions of students even in secondary education, too.

In Chapter 2 (Half of the Children Are Below Average) the author presents convincing data that illustrate the changes taking place between 1940-2004. 1940 was the first year in the USA when 95 % of children aged 7-13 were enrolled in school, beforehand only half of the population finished 8th grade. So what Murray states is that it is only a myth that everyone may be taught to read and write properly since „schools a hundred years ago did not have to educate many of the least able... about half of all adults in 1900 had not reached the eighth grade.”<sup>iv</sup> So this is one misconception that policymakers should face.

If we accept this as an evidence, we may easily accept the conclusion that the author comes to: the educational system has never been able to give the proper education to each child by equal and uniform standards. If so, we must put the question: why do we insist on this so rigidly after all?

Mr. Murray is pressing another crucial question in Chapter 3 (Too Many People Are Going to College) when he speaks up against letting a large scale of students into higher education, stating that as a result 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. He does not say less than „No more than 20 percent of students have that level of academic ability, and 10 percent is more a realistic estimate...”<sup>v</sup> who are able to „cope with genuine college material.”<sup>vi</sup>

Mr. Murray does not want to question the necessity of the tendency that in the 21st century more and more students go on to higher education, he only finds the phenomenon problematic that these days the BA degree has become a status symbol in the USA and many young people do not enrol in colleges to achieve their career goals but for the sake of having a degree. That is why Mr. Murray suggests that only those should go to university who need it for their career, otherwise a certificate might be just as valuable. Though the statement may seem to be too exaggerating, all that the author does is to call our attention to the declining standard of higher education and he does not intend to say that even one talented student should be kept out of higher education, he simply says that young people should not go to college out of mere snobbism.

Mr. Murray emphasises that both secondary and higher education should return to liberal education which requires more intellectual effort from students, which means only the most gifted ones would be able to meet these requirements. According to the author, focus should be put on talent and value. At the very end of the volume he concludes the following: „The goal of education is to bring children into adulthood having discovered things they enjoy doing and doing them at the outermost limits of their potential... Opening the door to the satisfaction is what real education does.”<sup>vii</sup>

Also in Chapter 3 the author deals with the question of liberal education and analyses E.D. Hirsch' core knowledge theory, underlining its importance. The author concludes that acquiring core knowledge is indispensable because it provides „shared identity... that makes... Americans together... This core knowledge is an important part of the glue that holds culture together.”<sup>viii</sup> That is why teaching this knowledge must be started at elementary level.

In Chapters 2 and 5 the author deals with the issue of free school choice. In the past few years due to the liberal education policy the right of free choice of schools has been formed and private as well as charter schools have appeared and also the home schooling system has become quite popular, which is a peculiar element of the American educational system. Related to this Mr. 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.”<sup>ix</sup> So what Mr. Murray wants to point out here 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.

In the last chapter the funnel metaphor can be considered as a precisely concentrated thought-essence of the whole volume. The author describes the main dilemma of the American educational system: the leaders of education or as the author calls them the educational romantics are not willing to accept the funnel analogy and they do not anything else but try to „make large gains in reading and math at the bottom end of the funnel, where only marginal gains are possible.”<sup>x</sup> The problem is that those students with lower ability will have difficulty in acquiring the knowledge even at the narrow end of the funnel, while the more talented ones who receive the same amount of knowledge will not raise their academic achievement properly. But the purpose is not to leave anyone behind, after all, isn't it...?

To sum up, we may say that an unquestionable merit of the volume is that Mr. Murray points out several controversies of the American education system

and even if he is not able to give a recipe that could solve the problems of not only the American but also the education of the whole globalized world, it is not by chance that the subchapter of the last chapter (Taking Responsibility) expresses a bitter and sharp critical opinion about what actors may be blamed for the present condition of education, namely politicians, parents and the whole education establishment. Here the author gives a crystal-clear conclusion to all the dilemmas he has brought up in the book: taking responsibility starts when teachers, parents have the courage to face reality and get away with pseudo-truths which lead nowhere and do not solve, only cover the truth. With unrealistic requirements we only deceive our children, ourselves and this way gradually the web of lies will spin around the whole educational system.

According to Mr. Murray in order to put down the foundation of an education with realistic goals, the purposes of the whole system must be redefined which cannot be anything else but „opening up the possibilities. Parents and educators alike should be rooting for children to shoot for the stars - and telling them to find their own.”<sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Charles Murray: Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality. Three Rivers Press New York.2008. p.10

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid p.12

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid p.47

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid p. 65

<sup>v</sup> Ibid p.67

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid p.67

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid p.168

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid p. 76-77

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid p.65

<sup>x</sup> Ibid 134

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid p.168