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Broken chalk, broken system?

How does a good education system look like? How can education elevate or bind a nation? What should we expect from the day when our children first go to school? What kind of person will we get after eight, twelve, or seventeen years? What kind of citizen? What kind of worker? Does education take away childhood, or rather completes it? Does it nourish or inhibit talent?

These questions arise in parents, voters and taxpayers, when they see the conflict that emerged around education. Teachers and politicians, headmasters and bureaucrats face each other, and amongst all the protests, public statements, negotiations, personnel changes, ultimatums, scandals, open letters and round tables, it seems that the main point is forgotten. Over the past twenty-six years, we forgot to answer some basic questions, without which there can be little foundation for a new public education system.

For example, what do we expect from the education ultimately, what role should this subsystem play, what social mission do we attribute to it? We did not leave these questions unanswered, they were not even posed, and there hasn’t been any debate about them. Due to this, we now lack a target on the horizon which would guide our reforms. Since 1990, all the “reforms” introduced were just some kind of adjustments of the existing system, without having a final goal, a clear perspective. Therefore, these changes were incidental, and since there was no professional consensus behind them, the next government usually withdrew everything and maneuvered the system in another direction.

But how do we determine the mission of such a large social institution? If we want to discuss this issue, it is advised to have a result-focused approach to it. We have to talk about what kind of citizens we would like to raise, what skills they need in the era of modern technology, under what set of values can purposeful and happy young people be released into the rapidly changing labor market. We basically have to find an answer to what kind of society we would like to see in Hungary in ten or twenty years, considering that education is the most important factor of social changes.
The current Hungarian education system resembles the spirit of the 19th century (it is very expressive that chalk – or lack thereof – has become the symbol of the current conflict: a tool which should not play an important role in modern education). The system is based on one-way knowledge-transfer, focuses on individual problem solving, and is authority and performance-centric. Its main objective is transferring the curriculum to the students, and if something could not be dealt with during lessons then it will become homework. Depending on the type of school students get 20-30 hours of homework every week (!), meaning that they work a half shift at home in addition to the time they spend in school.

What does the current system teach to students? One thing is certain: it teaches memorizing. Students will know when important treaties were concluded, how to solve equations step by step, how to write the formula of deoxyribonucleic acid, and they will be able to recite ten poems by Sándor Petőfi woken from their deepest sleep. However, they will not learn how to work together, how to present their results, how to make decisions, how to convince others, how to perform well in a debate, how to solve conflicts, or how to use the knowledge they memorized.

If we review the teachers’ demands, the controversial issues or the priorities of the decision-makers, we have to draw the sad conclusion that it is almost irrelevant what will be the outcome of the current conflict, because these issues do not affect the essence of the system, and even the most positive outcome would only make a flawed system a bit more tolerable.