

# KNOWLEDGE AND SCHOOL

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The author of the book, Benő Csapó, has been teaching at the Pedagogy Department of the University of Szeged since 1976. The professor's research fields encompass a wide spectrum; his scientific research interests extend to the following areas: learning and instruction, intensive educational methods, developing and improving thinking abilities, organisation and the quality of knowledge, pedagogic evaluations, testing theory and test development. As a member of international workshops and as an organiser of science, he has had a notable effect on educational scientific thinking in Hungary: he is a participant in the research programme of the Institute for Educational Inquiry (Seattle, USA), he is chief editor of *Magyar Pedagógia* [Hungarian Pedagogy], he is a member of the editing board of Learning and Instruction and he was elected a member of the leadership of the European Society for Research on Learning and Instruction in 1997.

Immediate precedents of the Knowledge and School publication are "Az iskolai tudás" ["School Knowledge] and "Az iskolai műveltség" ["Literacy at school"], published in 2002 by Osiris Kiadó, which published results from the large scale research carried out by the Szeged researchers team under the professor's leadership. The significance of the above books is also shown by the fact that three authors (Mariann Buda, Erzsébet Golnhofer and Péter Bogdán) reviewed them in the 6-7th volume of the 2003 edition of the professional journal *Iskolakultúra* [School Culture].

At the scientific book talks organised by the Hungarian Institute for Higher Educational Research and the Education Sociology Group of the Hungarian Sociological Association the author claimed that the motivation for the edition of this book was that, in his experience, few professional materials have entered Hungary in the past ten years in the field of learning and instruction - and research based on international professional literature and on international comparative research (the results of which are published in this book) would serve as a means to do away with such a deficiency. In the Introduction he writes: "The majority of the articles have had an outer inspiration and are connected to specific occasions or co-operations. A request to give a lecture at a conference or being invited to meet an international team of researchers has provided me with the opportunity to answer questions by citing the results of different international research programmes, so that one can look at problems within a broader context." (p. 7.)

Out of the book's twelve essays, ten had been previously published in the columns of the *Iskolakultúra* [School Culture], the *Új Pedagógiai Szemle* [New Pedagogical Journal], *Educatio*, and *Magyar Pedagógia* [Hungarian Pedagogy] - and also in two English language collections of studies. The two new articles ("The knowledge and competences" and "Education and cognition") have been presented earlier as lectures.

In this book the author seeks answers to the question of what valid knowledge means - that is, what valid knowledge means in an era when knowledge becomes outdated very rapidly. "A child born at the end of the Millennium has approximately two decades to acquire all the elements worth knowing in civilisation's development within the past two Millennia, including acquiring results from the information boom of the past two centuries." (Csapó, 2002a:21) The (eternal) topicality of his question is shown by the fact that we use innumerable critical expressions, both in professional and in colloquial language usage, to describe the problem's final product: with the terms 'useless, scholastic, school-bookish, theoretical, unrealistic, ineffective, carried as dead-weight, learnt without understanding, , and inapplicable' we are all denoting the same thing. From earlier works of the professor (Csapó, 2002b, 2003) we get to know that the value and the quality of knowledge may not only be measured by the quantity of the elements and components, as such a thing is fundamentally determined by its organisation. However, one of the problems of the Hungarian educational system is that it is precisely quality that is being disregarded, and - as was said at the book's presentation - "this produces a robust product which lacks delicacy". A fundamental issue arising with quality development from this point of view is, consequently, how quality can be generated (See chapters "The quality of knowledge" and the "Quality development as catalyser of the educational system"). The author emphasises that measurement and evaluation provide important feedback, yet these do not solve the problems *in themselves*; for without a utilisation method, a political decision is unsatisfactory, as a technology is needed in order to translate results. According to the author, real educational reforms can be made if they have as their basis well-prepared conceptions. At the same time, an accumulation of unsolved concerns within the educational system leads to an increase in tension, which has a major impact on the lowering of content quality. The appropriateness of the professor's suggestion is best shown by the fact that a Hungarian child who was five years old in 2002 will go on to spend 16.4 years within the educational system - which is a very long time, even if it is slightly less than what exist in Western European practices/patterns.

The chapter "Competence development in schools - problems and possibilities" may be of special interest to practising pedagogues and teacher-trainee students; here, the author indicates what pedagogical, professional-political, teacher-training-related and research developmental conditions need to exist in order to increase the efficiency of competence-development in schools. The author emphasises that "the nature of the problem is complex, and many conditions need to be created in order to solve it - an accumulating effect can only be expected from a series of changes that begin from many directions" (p. 89.). As regards the question of what is the source of pedagogues knowledge concerning a competence development that meets up to required standards, the answer is "the basic training (BSc, BA) provided by colleges and universities, the further education of teachers, a generalisation of one's own professional experiences as a teacher, and a conscious self-development." (p. 98.) However, the author also stresses that "in order to utilize the above four resources in a joint and more efficient way, it is necessary - in the case of the first two - to fill the institutional framework with appropriate content, and - in the case of the latter ones - to create opportunities and motivation." (ibid.) From Benő Csapó's earlier works (Csapó, 2002a, 2003) we have learned that understanding is inevitably limited, as its form and quality is primarily affected by already existing knowledge - that is, the system into which information can be inserted, and people's abilities to create connections

between such pieces of information. So the generally accepted aim of school education is conceptual understanding, which entails a rich meaning content.

On the basis of new approaches in learning and instruction and also to education theory - as well as issues arising via research into educational sociology and youth research into a "better understanding of the situation of young people" (with this also being a priority laid down in the European Union White Paper on Youth) - we can say that the teaching profession needs no longer be considered a mere collection of information-providing roles. Today "new challenges must be met, which entails the acquiring of new skills." (Orbán, 2004:519) It is in the nature of skills that their development requires *time*, just as expertise requires *practice* (Berliner, 2005). Nevertheless, today's teacher-training is not satisfactorily practice-oriented; for in many cases it tends to build itself upon disciplinary understanding, so the obtained knowledge is, in part, useless after someone's graduation; the number of encounters with practical cases (events, later memories, schema) is unsatisfactory also, while the rapid changes and transformations seen within the teacher image (i.e. the pedagogue as a model) - as created by previous knowledge and previous memories - creates a situation where the knowledge, practices, competence and the system of competences of teacher trainees is no longer sufficient if preparing a person for the teaching profession. In order to raise education standards and to educate learners with regard to special educational needs, an expanded basic and further education, as well as the training of practising teachers, is of major importance. "The training of teachers still focuses one-sidedly on knowledge of the subject. It barely deals with a sociological or socio-didactic analysis of deprivational or learning difficulties, or with social inequalities and cultural differences. Teacher training should put more of an emphasis on strategies that are aimed at handling learning problems and disadvantageous backgrounds, and should have an additional focus on school direction, and counselling.

In Portugal and in Ireland, we are able to find examples of reform within teacher training. In Portugal, a centre was set up within the framework of a programme called PEPT (>>education for everyone<<) with the aim of further educating teachers. The objective of this training is prevention of students' dropping out early from schools, thus making it more customary to spend a longer time at school. In the Irish >>Teacher Counselling Draft << counsellors are bringing into harmony a global school-concept so that correct practices and strategies can be developed and applied, which may be helpful when one is attempting to 'force back' disruptive behaviour" (Furlong, Stalder and Azzopardi, 2004, 30). "It is being debated in many European countries what competences a graduate teacher should have. This is significant from two perspectives: the first is that social recognition of the teaching profession strongly correlates with the quality of qualifications; and the second is that societies must ensure that training places train pedagogues in such a way that they are capable - even at the beginning of their careers - of giving an appropriate professional performance within the education of students." (Orbán, 2004:520)

In the last two essays of the book the author elaborates upon the topic of democratic development; and in the chapter "Cognitive aspects of democratic thinking" he summarises his thoughts as inspired by two years of work within Professor John Goodlad's researcher team (The Place called School). The researcher team consisted of representatives of different social sciences, who, during every 2 or 3 months, at weekends, defined how they saw the conditions necessary for the development of a democratic character based on results and explanations from their own respective fields.

The last study of the book arrives at basic democratic values from a different direction, one that is close to the education-sociological approach. "It is a long-established fact that there are differences in the maturity and knowledge of pupils who are the same age, though it is a new phenomenon that strongly selective processes are occurring in schools: there is a tendency for schools to direct pupils into different classes or schools on the basis of their maturity and degree of preparation. Now, this tendency has become so strong that it not only ruins the performance of the educational system as a whole but it also opposes basic values held by a democratic educational system." (p. 9-10) "School failure is primarily determined by the structure of the educational system and a syllabus-oriented approach. Respective educational systems have, more or less, always functioned as grouping and selecting mechanisms. The moment of grouping and selection, as well as applied measuring tools and criteria serve to determine when and how pupils will >>fail<<. Conclusions related to selection and the diversity of consecutive programmes determine how this >>failure<< will then influence someone's school career further on. Learning and teaching conditions have an effect on the performance and the motivated-ness of learners - and will determine whether or not learners performing poorly will be able to catch up. Consequently, educational systems that are strongly selective doom certain pupils to success or failure early on due to the untimely selection process and because of limited potential movement between programmes. In evaluation systems that concentrate on pupil comparisons, the performance of the poorest-achieving learners is noted as >>unsatisfactory<<. [...] Current educational systems select and segregate as well as reproduce social inequalities. The policy of expansion - the aim of which is the inclusion of as many young people as possible and the re-inclusion of the ones who have dropped out - has failed. Socialisation within the family, educational aspirations and the selection-based mechanisms had by educational institutions all contribute to the creation of an atmosphere in which children coming from privileged social groups are more favoured. Young persons coming from the higher layers of society are not only better performers at schools - they also have greater opportunities to study to higher levels. Even though schools endeavour to guarantee that *all* children should receive the same sort of education, they are hindered all too often by the refining mechanisms of discriminative and social exclusion.

Research has shown that teachers' expectations regarding their pupils' performances - and recommendations arising with regard to someone's studying further - depend largely on the social background of a pupil. Teachers, who, typically, come from the higher middle class, tend not to make judgements based on the *real* performance of their pupils but - determined by their own socialisation - do so based on to what extent pupils meet the requirements of middle class performance and behaviour." (Furlong, Stalder and Azzopardi, 2004:25) "The earlier programmes aimed at the elimination of school failure are started, the more successful they are. [...] Emphasis is laid on preparations for school and on the competences that will make adaptation to school norms more easy (expanding the child's knowledge of the world, improving their ability to organise knowledge, language competence, etc.). Beyond emphasising the development of the child, more frequent contact between the school and parents (mothers' club, counselling centres, parent-teacher meetings) is supported. American research indicates that "early intervention" programmes are extremely efficient and profitable as investments, not only because of their impact on learning but also because of the decrease in the number of failures and the number of cases re-directed into the therapeutic pedagogy system.

Additionally, there are more successful educational careers - and there is a reduction in the number of children with antisocial behaviour" (Furlong, Stalder and Azzopardi, 2004:27-28).

Géza Sáska, an education researcher speaking with praise of the book, maintains that it is a 21<sup>st</sup> century necessity that democracy and capitalism should not change because democracy is unserviceable without capitalism. In his opinion, a society without selection - i.e. when everybody works according to his/her abilities and benefits on the basis of his/her needs - has proved an illusion. So the question remains: to what extent is it possible to move between layers - and what are the rules of such movement?. This idea is especially important from the point of view of Hungarian educational research, as there were dramatic social-political-economical changes at the end of the 1980s, namely the de-politicalisation of education and the ending of rigid ideological control and orientation of the system; this was the time when the government acknowledged that pupils and their parents had a right to choose their direction within the educational system on the basis of abilities and intentions; and there was the decentralisation of education's administrative and management background - and the establishment of school autonomy. The transformation of the educational system, however, does not provide a satisfactory answer to the challenges of the school youth period "The elite-centeredness of the educational system does not facilitate - but, rather, aggravates - steps made into the school youth period. The present educational system selects and discriminates strongly within crisis and stagnating zones, both in our country and in Europe - and, consequently, it increases, instead of decreases, inequalities inherent in background and dwelling place/location, it increases instead of decreasing the generation gap between generations and *within* the young generation; and, finally, it leaves questions concerning the insecurity of young persons in their time spent at school unanswered, while it is indifferent to the vulnerabilities had by the young. We should also emphasise here that in Eastern Europe the reason for this is not the establishment of the market system but precisely the fact that its establishment is being delayed" (Gábor, 2004:10).

Benő Csapó's book is an example of scientific devotion to finding a diagnosis - and is an exploration of causes which - citing the words of Erzsébet Golnhofer, an instructor at ELTE [Eötvös Loránd University] - has a completely society-centred approach; and it attempts to see what conditions need to be made available in order to process and be able to solve a problem such as this.

Considering the above, Knowledge and school is intended for a broad audience, but, simultaneously, it is scientifically elaborate, its style is of great interest, and it presents a diversity of attractive approaches. Thus, education researchers and people interested in the topic, pedagogues and people working in pedagogue-training will find this useful to read.

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*Benő Csapó works are available online at:*

<http://www.edu.u-szeged.hu/~csapo/publ/online.htm>