

Thematic Article

Pedagogical modernization or political assimilation? The 1879 elementary education act in the mirror of parliamentary debates and *Néptanítók Lapja*

Katalin Kéri¹

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Abstract

Act XVIII of 1879, which mandated the teaching of the Hungarian language in all elementary schools across Hungary, represented a decisive turning point in the educational structure of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eugen Weber (1976), this research focuses on how state-driven linguistic homogenization emerged simultaneously as a professional necessity and a tool of nation-building. Our study presents the content of the act and the pro et contra arguments within the parliamentary debates surrounding its adoption. Furthermore, it highlights the core concepts and elements of the official pedagogical discourse following the legislation through a qualitative thematic analysis of the 1879 issues of *Néptanítók Lapja* (People’s Teachers’ Gazette), a government-sponsored weekly professional journal. Our findings reveal an inherent contradiction in the official rhetoric: while the journal promoted innovative, communication-centered “natural methods” in language instruction, these pedagogical advancements primarily served to consolidate political loyalty and erode minority national identities. The analysis identifies three main discourse types: the professionalization of the “Magyarization” process, the ideological construction of the Hungarian language as a “civilizational” prerequisite for social mobility, and the practical challenges faced by rural educators working in multilingual environments. By placing the Hungarian case within a broader European comparative perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of how 19th-century school systems functioned as arenas for national identity construction in multiethnic regions.

Keywords: Act XVIII of 1879; Magyarization; language policy; nation-building; Central European history of education

Introduction

The enactment of Act XVIII of 1879, making the teaching of the Hungarian language compulsory in every elementary school in the Kingdom of Hungary, was not an isolated legislative event but a manifestation of a broader European trend toward linguistic homogenization within the framework of the nation-state. As Ernest Gellner (1983) posited, the transition to a modern industrial society required a unified “high culture” and a common language, achievable only through a centralized educational apparatus. The process of “turning peasants into Frenchmen”, analyzed most profoundly by Eugen Weber (1976) in the context of the French Third Republic, parallels the Hungarian government’s efforts to consolidate the nation-state through the classroom. The “Magyarization” policy of the Trefort era can thus be interpreted as a pedagogical mission to integrate a diverse, multiethnic population into a unified political community. By examining the official pedagogical press, particularly the 1879 issues of *Néptanítók Lapja*, we can observe how the state utilized educational discourse to resolve tensions between national identity and the practical challenges of rural, multilingual environments (cf. Hobsbawm, 1990).

¹ Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Sopron, Sopron, Hungary; katalin.keri@uni-sopron.hu

Theoretical Background

Act XVIII of 1879 on the Mandatory Teaching of the Hungarian Language

Following decades of aspiration, the modern educational system in Hungary was established during the Dualist period starting in 1867, within the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Act XXXVIII of 1868 mandated general and compulsory primary education from the age of six, regardless of gender, nationality, religion, or place of residence. The preparation and initial implementation of this law are primarily attributed to József Eötvös, Minister of Religion and Public Education, who also played a significant role in drafting the Nationalities Act of 1868. Paragraph 58 of the Education Act, in sync with the spirit of the Nationalities Act, stipulated that every pupil should receive instruction in their mother tongue, provided that language was prevalent in the community (Corpus Iuris, Act XXXVIII of 1868). Neither this act nor Act XLIV of 1868 mandated the compulsory teaching of the Hungarian language in elementary schools. The law declared full linguistic equality for the individual: “every citizen may freely use their mother tongue in dealings with the state government, their own ecclesiastical, school, and municipal authorities, and shall receive information and adjudication in their mother tongue from their officials” (Corpus Iuris, 1868). According to a 1869 report by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, out of 13,292 elementary schools in Hungary, 5,818 used Hungarian as the sole language of instruction, while 1,286 were mixed-language schools (Mikó, 1944, p. 431). Consequently, in 46.55% of schools, the Hungarian language was neither used nor taught. By 1877, out of 15,486 schools, 7,024 used Hungarian exclusively as the language of instruction (House of Representatives Journal, 1879, p. 242). A significant innovation related to the law was the 1868 launch of *Néptanítók Lapja*, which, in addition to the Hungarian version, was published weekly in six minority languages, reaching virtually every school and teacher. This policy-oriented and methodological journal supported the implementation of the Education Act as much as the curricula and textbooks published in various languages. Its role was equally vital concerning the teaching of the Hungarian language.

In the second half of the 1870s, a shift occurred in Hungarian cultural policy. This was partly due to the death of József Eötvös (1871), who had only just launched the educational reforms and whose passing left a vacuum in the ministry. Furthermore, Hungarian political life was changing, influenced by socio-economic modernization and international shifts in education. After 1875, similar to other countries in Western and Central-Eastern Europe, a combined role of conservative-liberal forces took hold in Hungary. The policies of Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza were not free from measures against nationalities, garnering support both within the Liberal Party and among impatient nationalists (Szász, 1987, p. 1168). Debates over minority rights were frequent in parliament and the press. After 1875, “the official use of the Hungarian state language gradually expanded far beyond the boundaries set by the Nationalities Act” (Katus, 1987, p. 1337).

In 1879, under the ministry of Ágoston Trefort, Act XVIII on the mandatory teaching of the Hungarian language was passed (Corpus Iuris, Act XVIII of 1879, p. 86). Trefort’s goal was not forced Magyarization (which characterized the later *Lex Apponyi* of 1907) but the creation of state unity. He believed a common language was a fundamental prerequisite for a modern bourgeois state and economic development. This law initiated the process intended to forge post-Compromise Hungary into a more cohesive cultural and linguistic community. The government viewed it as a tool for modernization and patriotic education, whereas Hungary’s ethnic minorities received it with suspicion, many viewing it as an assault on their autonomy and the first step toward assimilation.

Paragraph 4 of the act contained the controversial provision stating that the introduction of the Hungarian language was mandatory in all public elementary schools, to be implemented gradually if a qualified teacher was unavailable (Corpus Iuris, 1879, p. 86). Fulfillment of this law naturally required thousands of Hungarian-speaking teachers in minority schools; thus, Paragraphs 1–3 addressed teacher training. Accordingly, non-Hungarian teacher training colleges were required, even at the cost of increased credit hours, to teach candidates the Hungarian language. The law permitted the employment of teachers graduating in or after 1882 only if they had mastered both spoken and written Hungarian. A particular problem was the vast number of teachers already in the field who spoke little or no Hungarian. For them, Paragraph 3 was guiding: they were granted a four-year preparation period to pass a Hungarian language examination (Corpus Iuris, 1879, p. 85). That same year, Decree No. 17,284 was issued, containing the curriculum for non-Hungarian language elementary schools. In single-teacher schools, 9 hours were to be devoted to teaching Hungarian speech, and 8 hours weekly to teaching reading and writing in both the mother tongue and Hungarian.

Several historians of education, such as Elemér Kelemen (2003) and Miklós Mann (1997; 2001) have presented the work of educational politicians and ministers of the Dualist era in several books and studies. In their analyses regarding Trefort's ministry, they also addressed the Education Act of 1879. Kelemen viewed the act as a strengthening of state influence over minority schools, and in one of his analyses, he wrote the following:

“contrary to the spirit of the Elementary Education Act of 1868, which established elementary schools instructing in the mother tongue, and the Nationalities Act, also adopted in 1868, both of which followed the liberal principles of individual freedom and national self-determination, the turn was initiated by Act XVIII of 1879 on the teaching of the Hungarian language in elementary schools, which made the mastery of the Hungarian language a strict condition for obtaining a teaching qualification and mandated the compulsory inclusion of the Hungarian language among elementary school subjects. This policy of linguistic dissemination, which appeared gentle at first but became increasingly coercive over time, along with the incorporation and Magyarization of minority elementary schools through administrative means, with an obvious assimilatory agenda and generating ever-more severe conflicts, runs like a red thread through the school and political history of the era” (Kelemen, 2003, p. 50).

Miklós Mann viewed this legislation as a departure from Eötvösian principles, writing the following:

“Regarding the nationalities question, Trefort increasingly adopted the political objectives of the landed class, which differed so greatly from liberal thought. By amending the Elementary Education Act in 1879, he ordered the mandatory teaching of the Hungarian language in all elementary schools, and gradually required a knowledge of the Hungarian language from teachers graduating from non-Hungarian training colleges as well” (Mann, 1997, p. 198–199).

Furthermore, the institutional and social dimensions of these legislative shifts have been extensively analyzed by Péter Donáth. Donáth underscores that the implementation of mandatory Hungarian language training placed an immense structural and pedagogical burden on minority and denominational teacher training colleges, which struggled to adapt their curricula and staff to the rapidly escalating state demands regarding linguistic loyalty. (Donáth, 2008) This transition is further contextualized by the educational sociologist Péter Tibor Nagy (2011), who identifies Act XVIII of 1879 as the primary catalyst for the expansion of state control over the educational sphere. Nagy emphasizes that the legislation was backed by a rare consensus between the ruling party and the opposition, representing a collective shift away from the liberal Eötvösian minority policies toward a more centralized state ideology, a move famously contested by opposition figure Lajos Mocsáry as the crushing of peaceful coexistence.

Néptanítók Lapja (The People's Teachers' Gazette)

The source base for this study, alongside parliamentary journals and the text of the law, consists of the 1879 articles of Néptanítók Lapja, one of the most influential organs in Hungarian educational history. The journal was founded in 1868 by Baron József Eötvös, immediately following the adoption of the Elementary Education Act (Act XXXVIII of 1868). Its primary objective was to serve as the official intermediary channel between the state and the elementary teaching body, facilitating the construction of a bourgeois school system and the dissemination of pedagogical professionalism. Throughout its existence (1868–1944), it remained the official bulletin of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. Distributed free of charge to every elementary school, its influence among rural teachers was inescapable. The editors and regular contributors were prominent educators and ministry officials of the era, ensuring the direct expression of the government's will. The journal's content was built upon three distinct pillars:

- Official Section: Containing ministerial decrees, circulars, and textual explanations of new laws (including the 1879 Language Teaching Act).
- Methodological Column: Providing practical guides, model lessons, and didactic treatises. This section hosted debates on the most effective methods for teaching Hungarian and introduced the latest textbooks.
- News and Correspondence: Featuring field reports from rural teachers, grievances, and accounts of the everyday difficulties of popular education.

The analysis of Néptanítók Lapja is crucial because the journal simultaneously represented power expectations and pedagogical professionalization. It did not merely issue instructions; it constructed the ideological and methodological framework in which “Magyarization” appeared as a modernizing achievement and a patriotic duty. This press history source allows us to examine not just the law itself, but its discursive implementation:

how the state attempted to convince teachers, and through them, minority communities, of the necessity of language acquisition. The use of the Arcanum digital archive ensured full-text searchability, allowing for a systematic quantitative and qualitative processing of the 1879 article material.

Methods

The parliamentary debate preceding the vote on the law was processed through document analysis of the printed journals of the House of Representatives, while the 1879 articles of *Néptanítók Lapja* were processed via manual qualitative content analysis. (While the legislative process involved both chambers, this study constrains its focus exclusively to the debates of the House of Representatives (Képviselőház) and does not address the discussions within the House of Magnates (Főrendiház.) Data management for the latter was conducted in a structured digital research log (Microsoft Excel), where each article received a unique identifier (ID) and was categorized based on a pre-defined coding system. During the coding process, recurring themes such as pedagogical methodology, nationalist rhetoric, and practical challenges of implementation were identified. This spreadsheet-based approach allowed for the systematic organization of key quotes, facilitating both thematic synthesis and a quantitative overview of discourse frequency during the examined year.

To ensure coding reliability, a coding manual was developed. Each category was defined: “Pedagogical Methodology” referred to technical educational advice; “Nationalist Rhetoric” included arguments linking language to political loyalty and nation-building; and “Practical Challenges” focused on the socio-economic obstacles to implementation. Additionally, a further category was established to capture the complexity of the educational arena: “The Teacher’s Dual Role” examined the professional identity of educators as state agents of modernization. The results of the qualitative research were supplemented by an examination of numerical data from contemporary censuses and statistics to unfold the topic in its broadest context.

Table 1. Coding Manual

Code Name (English)	Code Name (Hungarian)	Definition / When to use?	Examples / Keywords
Pedagogical Methodology	Pedagógiai módszertan	The technical and didactic aspects of language teaching; concrete instructional advice.	szemléltetés (<i>object lessons</i>), ismétlés (<i>repetition</i>), beszédgyakorlatok (<i>speech exercises</i>), direkt módszer (<i>direct method</i>), tankönyvhasználat (<i>use of textbooks</i>)
Nationalistic Rhetoric	Nacionalista retorika	Linking language with political loyalty, state unity, or national identity.	állameszme (<i>state ideology</i>), hazafias kötelesség (<i>patriotic duty</i>), egységes nemzet (<i>unified nation</i>), nyelvi lojalitás (<i>linguistic loyalty</i>), kultúrfőlény (<i>cultural superiority</i>)
Practical Challenges	Gyakorlati kihívások	Administrative and infrastructural obstacles to the implementation of the law.	tankönyvhiány (<i>shortage of textbooks</i>), szakképzetlen tanítók (<i>unqualified teachers</i>), ellenőrzési nehézségek (<i>difficulties in monitoring</i>)
Teacher’s Dual Role	A tanító kettős szerepe	The educator as both a professional and a political agent of modernization/the state.	népnevelő (<i>educator of the people</i>), kulturális misszió (<i>cultural mission</i>), az állam őre (<i>guardian of the state</i>), erkölcsi példamutatás (<i>setting a moral example</i>), új pedagógiai szemlélet (<i>new pedagogical mindset</i>)

Findings

Parliamentary Debate on the Act

The parliamentary debate leading to the adoption of the act vividly illustrates the emergence of the predefined codes, transitioning between Nationalistic Rhetoric and the anticipation of Practical Challenges. On April 29, 1879, Gábor Baross introduced the bill for general debate. He argued that the law would not infringe upon the autonomy of denominations or nationalities. In his view, the Hungarian language was essential for mutual understanding and participation in public life. He also emphasized the expected pedagogical impact: providing teachers with an avenue for patriotic education. Baross further justified the bill by noting that ethnic minorities were falling behind in secondary education and argued that while minorities were backed by large “mother nations,” the Hungarians would vanish if they lost their language. His speech, which was not devoid of anxiety,

also posited that in exchange for equal rights, the state could rightfully demand the fulfillment of civic obligations (House of Representatives Journal, 1879, p. 242–243). Although the records indicate “general and lively applause” at the end of Baross’s speech, the debates, which remained on the agenda until mid-May, hardly reflected universal approval. Numerous representatives voiced concerns regarding the preservation of minority languages, cultures, and ecclesiastical autonomy.

Nationalist representatives such as Adolf Zay, Lajos Mocsáry, Károly Gebbel, Sándor Román, Milos Dimitrievics, and others argued vehemently against the bill. However, some minority lawmakers (e.g., Péter Stojkovic for the Serbs, Sándor Máriássy for the Szepes Germans, and József Zsámbokréthy for the Nyitra Slovaks) supported the proposal. Both sides frequently cited moments from Hungarian history and international precedents. István Nagy argued that the law was necessary to foster a sense of national belonging, whereas Lajos Mocsáry cautioned against rekindling ethnic strife amidst Pan-Slavic and Germanic threats (House of Representatives Journal, 1879, p. 262). Beyond legal and political arguments, pedagogical points were frequently raised. The Serbian representative Maximovics quoted Comenius: “to introduce a language other than the mother tongue into the school is like teaching a child to gallop before they can walk” (House of Representatives Journal, 1879, p. 357).

Ágoston Trefort, Aladár Molnár, Kálmán Tisza, and others maintained that the intent was not forced Magyarization but ensuring that every citizen understood the state language (Trefort, 1888, p. 14–24). They emphasized that the law aimed not to coerce, but to provide a right to learn the language, as it was in the interest of every citizen (Katus, 1987, p. 1343). Despite claims that minorities themselves were demanding the law, a point fiercely contested by Romanian and Serbian representatives, the bill passed without significant modification, and Sándor Román’s counter-proposal was defeated.

Arguments in the 1879 Issues of Néptanítók Lapja

Following the promulgation of the law, the pedagogical press was flooded with related writings. Néptanítók Lapja devoted significant space to presenting “results” and methods. Teachers from across the country competed to share their views. Some focused on methodological innovations, such as detailed reviews of new Hungarian textbooks. Others articulated arguments in favor of teaching the language or reported on supplementary language courses.

In terms of the core code of Nationalistic Rhetoric, the summer issues of 1879 published predominantly enthusiastic contributions highlighting civic duty and state unity. Key arguments included: the minority population recognizes the necessity of the state language (Bihari, 1879; Kaposy, 1879); the Hungarian language fuses the population into a unified whole (Zajzon, 1879); and it contributes to the survival of the Hungarian state (Erdődi, 1879). One contributor noted: “I hardly think I err in stating that this law meets the wishes of most non-Hungarian speaking teachers... for their own cultivation and advancement” (Bihari, 1879, p. 186). Others described teaching the language as a “sacred duty” (Erdődi, 1879, p. 435).

Significantly, authors like Péter Bihari argued that the law did not seek to deprive any nationality of its language, but merely to provide those who do not attend higher schools an opportunity to learn the state language during a few weekly hours (Bihari, 1879, p. 182–185). Methodologically, the contributors were optimistic. Reports mentioned children enjoying Hungarian folk songs more than their own (Kaposy, 1879) and advocated for “natural methods” based on object lessons and lifelike conversations (Skultéty, 1879; Emericzy, 1879). Gyula Berecz emphasized maintaining interest at all levels and suggested that teachers should verify understanding by asking students to translate words back into their mother tongues (Berecz, 1879, p. 207–211). Erdődi summarized the goals as understanding oral and written speech and achieving fluency in expression, arguing that “practice comes first, and grammar only second” (Erdődi, 1879, p. 436). Concurrently, the articles heavily reflected the code of Pedagogical Methodology, where authors and teachers remained highly optimistic about speech-centric language acquisition.

Discussion

The discourse in Néptanítók Lapja reveals a contradiction between pedagogical modernization and political assimilation. On one hand, the promotion of the “natural method” (direct method) represented a progressive shift toward communicative competence. On the other hand, this methodological professionalism served as a tool for a centralized nation-building program. In reality, despite positive reports, implementation was fraught with difficulty.

Starting in the summer of 1879, six-week supplementary courses were organized for teachers. Reports on these courses were notably more critical. They were often unpopular and ineffective; it was illusory to expect adults to master a foreign language in 6–8 weeks. Furthermore, the courses imposed a financial burden on school providers for travel costs. Minority teachers often viewed the law with resentment, and the daily allowance of 70 krajcárs provided little incentive for studying 4–5 hours daily in the summer heat. Some hoped that hosting these courses in Hungarian cities would foster “better feelings” toward Hungarians through hospitality (Barsch, 1880, p. 599). The challenges surrounding the supplementary courses and teacher burnout directly map onto the code of Practical Challenges, revealing a severe gap between legislative expectations and rural realities.

The success rate was dismal: only about 2–3% of attendees passed the language exam. Some critics blamed the teachers’ general lack of education, citing examples of educators who could not even count backward in their own language. Erdődi (1879, p. 458) highlighted the issue of burnout: in single-teacher schools, the sheer number of compulsory subjects made adding Hungarian language instruction nearly impossible. Consequently, a boom in textbook publishing occurred, though many were criticized for being too grammar-heavy, modeled after secondary school manuals.

Our findings support the idea that the 1879 Act did not merely aim for bilingualism; it redefined the elementary school as a space of civic loyalty where Hungarian functioned as a primary “civilizing” tool. This aligns with Weber’s (1976) concept of “internal colonization,” where the state uses the school system to erode local identities in favor of a standardized national one. The emphasis on speech-centered methods indicates that the state required loyal citizens who could understand and respond in the state language, rather than linguists.

Statistical data confirms that progress was slow. In 1880, 2,529 teachers spoke no Hungarian at all (Mikó, 1944). A decade later, nearly 2,000 teachers still could not teach the language, and 2,400 schools showed no results (Katus, 1987). The 1891 census noted that while some “Magyarization” was evident among the youth, it was driven more by social contact than by schooling. By 1900, 40% of the population still did not speak Hungarian. This failure led to a series of increasingly strict decrees (e.g., No. 72,000 in 1905), which introduced disciplinary actions against “unsuccessful” teachers. Furthermore, the state’s expectations regarding the Teacher’s Dual Role became evident during the turn of the century, as a teacher’s attitude toward teaching Hungarian became the primary criterion for professional evaluation.

Conclusion

In summary, the systematic review of parliamentary records and the analysis of *Néptanítók Lapja* demonstrate that Act XVIII of 1879 was a key instrument in the transition from a traditional multiethnic educational space to a centralized, modern nation-state model. While the pedagogical methods promoted were innovative, their primary function remained the political integration of non-Hungarian speakers. The Hungarian school system became a “frontier” of national identity construction, where professionalization was inextricably linked to linguistic loyalty. Despite these efforts, implementation remained incomplete. Future research should contrast these official narratives with the reflections of the contemporary minority and opposition press to gain a more nuanced understanding of local strategies of resistance and adaptation. Ultimately, the legacy of these 19th-century language policies continues to inform Central European debates on educational equity and linguistic rights today.

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