



Every Child According to Its Pace: School Maturity between Expertise, State Policies, and Parental *Eigensinn* in Socialist Hungary

Annina Gagyiöva

Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

gagyiöva@hiu.cas.cz

It is widely known that socialist states such as Hungary attempted to increase social mobility through a compulsory elementary school system. While the research on socialist education is vast, the relevance of school maturity to an egalitarian education system is still understudied. By the end of the 1950s, lack of preparedness for school among children had captured the attention of Hungarian experts in medicine, psychology, and pedagogy, who were hoping to ensure that first-year students would begin their schooling under roughly the same conditions. In response, in 1965, local initiatives started experimenting with corrective (remedial) classes. The aim of these initiatives was to overcome class differences by offering targeted support and helping children who were less prepared for institutional schooling catch up and transfer into the standard school system later. During the first half of the 1970s, the Hungarian Ministry of Education adopted this pedagogical experiment on a national level. In this article, I put two distinct methodological approaches into dialogue, the sociology of expertise on the one hand and *Eigensinn* on the other. By doing so, I shed light on the complex interplay of state policies, concepts of expertise, and parental agency. As I show, corrective classes reflected persisting social inequalities, thus children from the lower middle classes and the Roma minority were overrepresented in these classes. Ultimately, I explore how bottom-up initiatives had unintended consequences that were often disadvantageous for the children who were in principle the intended beneficiaries. These initiatives thus worked against rather than for the quest for social equality. In the discussion below, I show how pediatricians, psychologists, pedagogues, and parents shaped the school system, working within, taking advantage of, and thus limiting efforts for social transformation despite asymmetrical power relations.

Keywords: state socialism, socialist education, school maturity, remedial class, equality

Like the other socialist states, Hungary made concerted efforts to transform radically the public education system to meet the needs and achieve the vision of a new political system. Once the socialist government was firmly in power, the

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government created a compulsory elementary school system in which every child was expected to attend school for eight years to avoid preserving or intensifying existing social stratifications. General school education was seen as a powerful tool by which to do away with class divisions and pave the way for social equality. Also, the turn to industrialization and the modernist project more generally required a skilled workforce, and a growing bureaucracy needed educated cadres sympathetic to the socialist project.¹ In short, the project of building a modern socialist state relied heavily on an inclusive, well-designed school system.

In the fight against social segregation and inequality, it was pivotal that every child be able to build on the same foundations when entering school. In this context, first graders' physical, mental and social maturity was essential. However, by the end of the 1950s, experts were alarmed by an increasing dropout rate, which according to their estimates was due to a lack of preparedness among eight to ten percent of first graders. Experts repeatedly pointed out that the notion of school immaturity did not include disabilities of various kinds but referred rather to children who developed more slowly than their peers or were only lagging behind in several areas but were intellectually sound. Since these children tended to show “unstable ability to focus, possible speech deficits [...], emotional underdevelopment, and consequent infantile behavior, increased mobility, lack of ‘work maturity,’ and lack of task awareness,” they could not fully develop at school and usually fell behind, and this had a negative effect on their psychological states.²

Experts who had been advocating an egalitarian school system were alarmed, as these differences among children were clear indications that the children were not equally prepared for school from the outset. Since the issue of school maturity was a condition that required screening from a medical, psychological, and pedagogical perspective, experts in various disciplines contributed with their research in the hopes of arriving at a nuanced and practical understanding of the issue. The comeback of psychology as an independent discipline at research institutions and universities during the process of de-Stalinization had an especially decisive impact on how practices regarding screening and treatment

1 There is growing scholarship which questions the success of efforts to further social equality through the socialist school system. Hanley and Matthew, “The Persistence of Educational Inequalities”; Millei et al., *Childhood and Schooling*.

2 Pál Szabó, “Kísérlet.”

of school immaturity developed.³ There is a solid body of scholarship on the relationship between psychology and education in socialist Hungary, according to which the 1960s was a decade of heightened collaboration between the two disciplines.⁴

Despite the pivotal role of the psychological turn, school maturity was a decisively interdisciplinary topic, with the disciplines involved relying heavily on one another's findings. Growing expertise on the subject also had an impact on the governmental level. To prevent children from falling behind due to their relative overload, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education settled on a new school enrolment system in 1964. From then on, school-age children had to undergo a compulsory examination, which included psychological screening, with the responsible pediatrician. The only option pediatricians and psychologists could offer parents was simply to delay a child's entrance into school, and this solution was not popular among parents, but in 1965, Budapest launched a pilot project involving the introduction of corrective classes.⁵ These separate corrective classes, which spread quickly throughout the country, made school entry possible for children at the age of six even if they assessed as immature. In small classes, specially trained teachers worked with the children on catching up with their peers and switching into regular classes as soon as possible.⁶ Pedagogues linked corrective classes to the project of raising general school education. One teacher, cited by the newspaper *Népszava* (The People's Voice), was optimistic about the role of special classes for the future school trajectory of children who were lagging behind: "We have already achieved so much that the number of unexcused absences and truancies has dropped significantly compared to before. And this should help us get more of them to complete the eighth grade."⁷

Although experts saw many positive results, non-Roma parents were reluctant to accept having their children put in these corrective classes due to the stigma

3 Pléh, "Intézmények"; Kovai, *Lélektan*; Szokolszky, "Hungarian Psychology"; Máriási, "Remembering"; Lászlófi, "Work as a Cure."

4 Laine-Frigren, "Emotionally Neglected"; Kovai, "The Social Roles"; Darvai, "A Szocialista neveléslélektan"; Sáska, "A pszichológia."

5 Literature on remedial classes from a historical perspective is still rare. See e.g., Hjörne and Larsson, "Beyond Teaching."

6 Although the technical term in English is "remedial class," for analytical reasons, I settled on a close translation of the Hungarian wording "korrekciós osztály" and therefore use "corrective class" throughout the article.

7 Szenes, "A tankötelezettséghez."

of taking part in a program in which the Roma minority was overrepresented. Eszter Varsa and János Géczi have recently examined the precarious situation of Roma children within the Hungarian school system more systematically. At the beginning of the 1980s, the number of immature schoolchildren rose. Never before had there been such a pressing need for corrective classes, but limited financial means, the dwindling support of the school management, and insufficient numbers of special teachers made the corrective classes seem an outdated model. This happened during a more general drive towards decentralizing the education system during the last decade of state socialism, as Melinda Kovai and Eszter Neumann have pointed out. Very much against the advice of medical, psychological, and pedagogical experts, the Ministry of Education decided in 1987 to bring the corrective classes program to an end.

By taking school maturity in children as a point of departure, this paper traces the influence of medical, psychological, and pedagogical expertise on reformist politics while also considering the role of social interaction between experts and parents. In the spirit of Gil Eyal, I understand shifts in notions of expertise as the result of shifting networks of expertise. These networks consisted not only of people but, as Eyal has observed, also of concepts and devices used by experts. Furthermore, institutional settings and spatial arrangements impact how experts understand problems and develop possible solutions. Eyal also describes how, in the case of the “autism pandemic,” parents began to appear alongside the traditional networks of experts as a “new set of actors,” exercising agency and blurring “boundaries between parents, researchers, therapists, and activists,” with parents becoming “experts on their own children.” While Eyal analyzes broader parental networks as a middle-class phenomenon in a democratic, liberal society, individual cases show how parents in socialist Hungary similarly cast themselves as (lay) experts in the perceived interests of their school-age child, opposing the views of professional experts.⁸ Using Eyal’s methodological insights, the paper will consider the circulation of expertise across the Cold War divide and within the “socialist bloc.”

Since these expert-like practices in a socialist society are equally linked to members of the middle class defined by its education, I trace them from the angle of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Drawing on an array of sources, starting with expert discourses in specialized journals, archival material reflecting the party’s position, administrative practices on the local level in Budapest, discourses published in

8 Eyal, “From a Sociology of Expertise.”

the state media, and caricatures, this paper investigates how the conclusions of experts in various disciplines clashed with parental expectations by tracing *eigensinnige* ways of coping with conflicts of interest between the state, human science experts, and families with school-age children.⁹ Expert writings offer a window into everyday life by depicting the authors' struggles to consider *eigensinniges* parental behavior without jeopardizing positive developments in a child deemed not adequately mature for school. While the sources used do not express the direct voices of parents, they nonetheless reveal what kind of strategies parents developed to cope with the pressures of the socialist school system, showing the impact of social interaction between experts and parents on the promise of equality. Furthermore, the introduction of corrective classes as a state measure serves as an excellent case study for a discussion of the possible tensions between the medical authorities and the Roma minority and the ways in which ethnicity and class intersect more generally. While experts and state sought to overcome previous class divisions, it is not at all clear that the egalitarian initiatives launched by the state indeed served the intended purpose or, on the contrary, they recreated and solidified social differences. Ultimately, the discussion below casts light on the ways in which pediatricians, psychologists, and parental practices shaped the school system, used and perpetuated asymmetrical power relations, and put limits on efforts to further social transformation.

Screening Children to Determine Levels of School Maturity

As early as 1887, Hungarian medical experts mentioned for the first time the importance of school maturity for a child's school trajectory. The issue attracted more and more scholarly attention during the first decades of the twentieth century, and emphasis was placed on the potential harmfulness of physical and mental immaturity, which showed in "low intellectual development, underdeveloped language skills, social immaturity, and a lack of task awareness."¹⁰ During and after World War II, heightened psychological research pointed to the alarming fact that seven to ten percent of Hungarian schoolchildren were not mature enough to begin school. Consequently, up to 10 percent of young students suffered short-term and long-term consequences, often leading to higher dropout rates and lower educational levels.¹¹

9 On the concept of *Eigensinn*, see the edited volume Donert et al., *Making Sense of Dictatorship*.

10 Pál Szabó, "Tízéves."

11 Ibid.

After the establishment of the socialist state, however, the introduction of compulsory education renewed scholarly interest in the issue of school maturity. Since psychological expertise significantly lost institutional representation during the Stalinist period, it was not until the gradual return of psychology to academic institutions from 1958 onwards that school maturity was more widely discussed in its full complexity.¹² This coincided with the preparation of an inclusive eight-year elementary school system. At the end of the 1950s, pediatricians, psychologists, and pedagogues alike increased their research activities in the quest to overcome previous class structures through educational efforts. After all, physically and psychologically immature children will “find it difficult, if not impossible, to fit in with the schools’ rigid timetable, and they are unable to learn together in groups.”¹³ Hence, the admission of immature children into school was not only traumatic for the child but also challenged the utopian project of engineering social equality.

With the establishment of an inclusive school system in 1960, human sciences experts began to become increasingly alarmed about the levels of school immaturity among Hungarian schoolchildren. A group of psychologists led by György Aczél demonstrated in their research in a neurological clinic in Győr that the percentage of school-immature children within their sample of 3,511 children showed an increase from 7.9 percent in 1958 to 13.4 percent in 1961. In each case, the psychologists recommended that the child postpones school entry by staying in kindergarten for another year. Since the numbers were indeed worrisome, the authors diligently highlighted that the change “does not mean a real increase, but rather that parents and schools are paying more attention to retardation,” meaning delays in the children’s physical and mental development.¹⁴ Gradually, parents had become increasingly aware of the question of school maturity, which compelled psychologists to become more insistent on the importance of systematic assessments of children’s mental preparedness for school. From the early 1960s, when psychology was back in full swing and taught as an independent subject at university again, psychological testing methods of mental and emotional maturity were discussed and tried on Hungarian children. Psychological experts were, in fact, arguing for the pressing need for these

12 However, child psychology survived even the 1950s, when the State Institute of Child Psychology (Állami Gyermeklélektani Intézet) became the Institute of Psychology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, conducting independent research without major interruptions.

13 Szabó, “Tízéves.”

14 Aczél et al., “A retardatio.”

evaluations when they wrote that “the difficult educational situation of first graders nationwide and the consequences of this situation for the other grades call for a realistic assessment of school readiness.”¹⁵ Psychologists discussed the importance of complex assessment practices from medical, psychological, and pedagogical angles, which also required close cooperation with parents. Indeed, experts deemed an interdisciplinary approach vital for schoolchildren who were expected to manage a high curricular load, both in teaching hours and content.¹⁶ “Nowadays,” as they argued, “in line with our social development, we solve or try to solve much less important issues than school readiness with scientific justifications, which is why it is necessary to determine and decide on school readiness through complex scientific research and to clarify the concept of school readiness in general.” Or in other words, socialism was going to provide scientific conditions for solving societal issues hitherto neglected in modern Hungary.

The urgency of the matter was not ignored on the governmental level.¹⁷ The Ministry of Education started addressing the situation of first graders by expressing the need for extraordinary measures. These measures revealed the understanding that school maturity examinations were part of a necessary response by state officials to increasing pressure from experts in various disciplines.¹⁸ As a result, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture settled on a new school enrolment system in 1964 for assessing school maturity levels in children.¹⁹ From then on, a pediatrician examined a given child’s level of physical development and overall health from the perspective of a successful school start. Unfortunately, this turned out to be insufficient as a means of screening for more complex matters of school maturity, especially regarding the child’s psychological state. Since psychology had only recently been introduced as an independent university discipline and there were very few professional psychologists, it was not actually possible to involve them in the enrolment examinations. Psychologists did express concerns, however, saying “that only psychologically school-ready children should be referred by the school doctor. A child not ready for school is at risk of neurological and psychological health problems, partly due to overload and partly due to school

15 Lőrincz et al., “Adalékok.”

16 Lőrincz et al., “Az iskolaérettség.”

17 Gláz et al., “Négy-ötéves.”

18 Lőrincz et al., “Adalékok.”

19 Gláz et al., “Négy-ötéves.”

failure. It also interferes with the progress of his peers.” To tackle the issue, psychologists developed a test to be conducted by pediatricians. This test was supposed to help pediatricians identify children who needed further screening. Experts saw this kind of a compulsory examination as a tool with which to determine the primary reason for any developmental gap, whether physical, intellectual, emotional, or social.²⁰ This would also determine the necessary therapy that would be organized by the locally operating educational guidance centers (*nevelési tanácsadók*).²¹

With the introduction of compulsory screening of preschool children from the perspective of preparedness for school, experts discussed the examination critically. While there was consensus that children who were not ready for school despite their age needed institutional and individualized support, pedagogues raised the issue of the reliability of the school doctors’ assessments, specifically regarding the psychological state of the child. László Faragó, a pedagogue at the Ministry of Culture and Education, stated, “we are aware of researcher’s tests of school readiness and their procedures. Still, we do not consider them suitable for compulsory psychological testing of children entering school.”²² Mrs. György Horányi shared similar thoughts in the central journal of pedagogues, *Köznevelés* (Public Childrearing), noting that “most doctors do not have the specialized psychological knowledge to identify children who are delayed due to psychological factors. No obvious standardized testing procedure can be used to assess the maturity of many children quickly and with sufficient certainty.” Pedagogue László Vincze took the criticism even further when describing the practice of school maturity testing as an outdated relic of a bourgeois political order, unworthy of a progressive socialist society. In his assessment, “children must be sent to school and taught in the way appropriate to their general and individual, childlike, age-related characteristics so that they can develop their general and individual characteristics and abilities.”²³ Thus, according to Vincze, it was not the child who was supposed to adapt to the requirements of the school system, but the teacher who needed to adapt teaching methods and pedagogical attention to the child.

While studies of the rates of school immaturity in Hungary differed significantly, parents had most possibly no knowledge of those controversial

20 Réti, “Az iskolaérettség.”

21 On the role of educational guidance centers, see e.g., Laine-Frigren, “Encountering.”

22 Faragó, “Megjegyzések.”

23 Vincze, “Még egyszer.”

expert discussions.²⁴ However, parents chose to make their own decisions, showing a noticeable amount of *eigensinniges* behavior once their child had been assessed as not ready for school. This was due to their specific parental mindset and the social pressure they felt from family, friends, and acquaintances. In this context, one expert pointed out “public opinion considered it a disgrace if a child was not enrolled ‘on time.’” People also tended to feel that a child was “losing” a year if not enrolled in school before its seventh birthday. Because of the social climate, parents often opted to use personal connections to get a recommendation certificate, which would overrule the rejection. In this case, the school had to accept the child into first grade.²⁵ What started as a measure taken in the child’s interest was often questioned and even contradicted by parental practices. Yet, these practices provided noteworthy anecdotal evidence integrated by the experts into their discourse. The aforementioned László Faragó reported that a sizeable number of children assessed as not adequately prepared for school completed the first class successfully. This was because the parents enrolled the child in school despite the expert assessment, which in their view was inaccurate.²⁶ Faragó took this as sufficient evidence that the examinations were not without fault, particularly when dealing with borderline cases.

Parents also contradicted the assessments of experts in other cases, especially when psychological factors had been identified as the primary cause for a child’s unreadiness for school. Experts widely agreed that those children were, in most cases, harmed by their environment, for which the parents were decisively responsible.²⁷ For instance, a child growing up in a milieu with little or no intellectual stimulation would have a developmental delay of one or more years. In other cases, the care provided by overprotective parents caused separation trauma in children who ultimately attended school.²⁸ Other experts identified damage caused by the environment at home as a dominant feature in children who were not ready for school, citing West German psychologist Klaus Schüttler-Janikulla, who found that half of these cases could be traced back to the home.²⁹ With the discourse on the importance of the home environment, class made an implicit and, at times, explicit entry into the discussion surrounding

24 László Faragó writes of results ranging between six and eight percent and 41 percent. See on this Faragó, “Megjegyzések.”

25 Horányi, “Az iskolaérettség.”

26 Faragó, “Megjegyzések.”

27 Pál Szabó, “Az iskolaérettség.”

28 Horányi, “Az iskolaérettség.”

29 Szabó, “Az iskolaérettség.”

preparedness for school. Faragó reports that “educators reported a vast number of cases [of children] from disorderly, broken families, a debauched, drunken father, a parent who did not care for the child’s upbringing, a mother who could not take care of the given child because of the large number of children, and illiterate parents (e.g., in the case of Roma pupils).”³⁰ This is how expert voices linked social and emotional deprivation in families to children’s readiness for school, bringing socioeconomic factors back into the discussion surrounding egalitarian approaches.

Rehabilitation Instead of Separation: The Emergence of Corrective Classes

The question of how the school system could compensate for such disparities became a burning issue. After all, the examinations used to assess children’s preparedness for school made the problem visible and measurable, but they hardly offered clear solutions. The only solution in use at the time was for the child to spend another year in kindergarten, but this could be difficult if there was no kindergarten close by, and parents did not have to send their children for the extra year of kindergarten, as attendance was not compulsory. Faragó asked of these children, “[w]hat will be their fate? What will the exemption, the one (or two) years of inactivity, mean for them?” With these questions, he pointed to shortcomings within the school system which he thought needed urgent attention.

It was precisely this worry expressed by experts about school-immature children without a realistic chance for targeted support that prompted state officials and experts alike to seek a sustainable solution. Only one year after the introduction of compulsory preschool screening, the Department of Child and Youth Health of the National Institute of Public Health (Országos Közegészségügyi Intézet, OKI), with the help of the Ministry of Education and the Budapest City Council, agreed to start a pilot project in the Hungarian capital. The experimental undertaking, which was pushed by a broad range of experts, such as physicians, pedagogues, and psychologists, included introducing three small primary school classes.³¹ Since first graders usually shared a class with 30 to 40 other children under one class teacher, small pilot classes (*kísérleti osztályok*) with a maximum of 15 children allowed for the pedagogue to devote

30 Faragó, “Megjegyzések.”

31 Szabó, “Az iskolaérettség.”

more individualized attention to every child. The hope was that children coming from a background with insufficient “stimulation” would receive what they sadly had been missing out on at home.³² Experts expressed their vision for this pilot project, saying that “the small size of the classes allows the teacher to get to know the children’s personalities and their immediate environment and to choose the most appropriate methods with which to achieve results.” As these classes ran parallel to existing classes in elementary school, children who caught up could switch into regular classes later. Although such classes were found in other socialist states, Hungarian experts were explicitly inspired by the prolific West Berlin-based school psychologist Klaus Schüttler-Janikulla.³³ However, teachers of the first small classes were sharing their experiences with other teachers in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.³⁴ This was another case of knowledge circulation that proves the notion of the insurmountable “iron curtain” wrong and shows a selective approach towards expert exchange on school-maturity issues within the “socialist bloc,” sidelining the alleged dominance of the Soviet Union over its “satellite” states.

These small pilot classes, which were launched in elementary schools across Budapest, produced convincing results in helping school-immature children catch up with their peers. Five years after the opening of the first experimental class, a decree by the Ministry of Education made it possible for elementary schools in Budapest to organize such small classes, now under the name “corrective classes” (*korrekciós osztályok*). As a result, 16 small classes started in the school year 1970/71, and within ten years this number had risen to 92 in Budapest alone. However, the geographical distribution of the classes had clear socioeconomic implications. Most of them were found in the districts III, X, and XV, while the traditionally bourgeois districts I and II offered the least of them. Parallel to these developments, psychological and pedagogical expertise became more significant in the so-called complex enrolment examination introduced in 1971. This system included, for the first time, thorough psychological and pedagogical tests once kindergarten teachers or a pediatrician suspected that a given child was not ready for school. In 1974, another decree by the Ministry of Culture and Education regulated the conditions for organizing rural remedial classes and the

32 Psychologist Pál Szabó, who was highly involved in the pilot project of small classes, contended that 76 percent of the children attending these classes in 1965 came from a “destabilizing family environment.” See on this Szabó, *ibid.*

33 Szabó, “Kísérlet.”

34 Szabó, “Tízéves.”

complex enrolment examination, adapting the local, urban experiment to rural school conditions across the country. As a result, the number of such classes increased dramatically, and by the beginning of the 1980s, there were 321 such classes across the country.³⁵ In the context of discussions of preparedness for school, experts also wrote of their alleged humanistic quest for equality, which motivated their efforts. As psychologist Pál Szabó wrote,

However, we cannot ignore the slower developing, less gifted, and even mentally disabled children, whose talents require much pedagogical effort. Everything possible must be done to help them reach their full potential! This is not only important from the point of view of the school, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a psycho-hygienic point of view, as it is a fundamental condition for the harmonious development of their personalities.³⁶

While experts and state officials regarded the new possibilities for children who were not ready for school as progressive, parents often reacted to their children's placement into corrective classes with reluctance. Ironically, many of those parents were responsible for a home environment that was far from ideal for the mental and behavioral development of their child. Thus, reform-oriented pedagogues recognized the need to include parents in the therapeutical efforts to help the child. Pedagogues held more meetings with parents than was required and visited families at home in more complex cases, educating parents on the factors contributing to school readiness and explaining to them how they could create a home environment in which their child could develop and mature. At first, many parents "feared that they [corrective classes] would not ensure the same knowledge and credentials as large classes," but as a result of the pedagogue's efforts, "parents' initial aversion to small classes gradually disappeared."³⁷ However, it proved much more difficult to convince parents to allow their children to take part in the corrective classes in the first place. Pál Szabó reported on talks with parents after their children had been assessed as not adequately mature for school. When they spoke about their children possibly taking part in corrective classes, one-third of the parents did not wish to follow the experts' proposal. Many saw "some kind of stigma" or disadvantage in enrolling their child in a small class.³⁸ Both cases show that experts needed to

35 Szabó, *ibid.*

36 Szabó, *ibid.*

37 Szabó, "Kísérlet."

38 Szabó, *ibid.*

engage in intense communication with parents to convince them of what they saw as fitting for the positive development of the child in question.

Given the importance of communication on the matter, experts identified a need for propaganda efforts in media outlets to foster acceptance of the new institution. However, early communication in media outlets on the matter seemed to feed the prevailing prejudices than challenge or discredit them. A 1967 article published in the aforementioned trade-unionist newspaper *Népszava* refers to corrective classes rather than classes with over-age children because “it is not simply the over-age children who need to be grouped, but children who are similarly disadvantaged and difficult to educate, because we achieve relatively better results only by modifying the standardized pedagogical process and correcting it in a targeted way.”³⁹ While this exploration might have strengthened the perception among parents of corrective classes as a source of shame for the child and family, later communication aimed at parents had more inclusive undertones:

The main goal is to help children in small classes catch up as quickly as possible, to become ‘ready for school,’ and to return to regular classes. Everyone is working on this: teachers, doctors, speech therapists, psychologists, and that is why parents need to be more involved in their child’s schoolwork and thus in his or her development. Don’t be alarmed if your little one is placed in such a preparatory group, the rate of development varies considerably.⁴⁰

This passage offers an example of how public discourse started to normalize different developmental paces and collectivized efforts to identify and meet individual needs in children. By associating corrective classes with positive prospects for the children who attended them, the author tried to do away with the widespread understanding that these children were second-class students and artificially segregated from their peers.

While parents needed to be continuously convinced of the advantages of corrective classes, experts explored the many benefits of the new institution, which was spreading throughout the country in the 1970s. As early as 1971, pediatrician Sándor Kövér stated that children who enter school one year later still show weaker results than the average student in their first year. He stressed the urgent need for further corrective classes, especially outside Budapest,

39 Szenes, “A tankötelezettséghez.”

40 bel, “Megy a gyerek, iskolába,” *Esti Hírlap*, 16 March 1970, 2.

where structured support would positively influence the child's development.⁴¹ Pedagogue Mihály Berkics was similarly adamant about the relevance of using one year productively, and he pointed to the advantage of social mobility in line with socialist ideas of equality. Using the example of English society, where school classes were formed based on measured abilities in children, calling it a “complete pedagogical dead end,” he understood the English school system as a “direct reflection of their class position.” Corrective classes, in contrast, separated the weaker students and gave them the opportunity to catch up with their peers and return to the standard classroom as quickly as possible. Instead of often long-life separation, the Hungarian system would seek rehabilitation of children deemed not ready for school.⁴² But the question then arises: did the corrective classes in socialist Hungary actually help further a social transformation towards equality?

Corrective Classes and the Haunting Shadow of Socioeconomic Differences

Corrective classes were supposed to do away with socioeconomic differences among children by ensuring similar start positions. Instead, socioeconomic differences reemerged in expert discourse on corrective classes, serving as a magnifying glass for societal realities. As a pedagogical case study on the children of skilled manual workers in an elementary school in the district VII of Budapest shows, the overwhelming majority of students in corrective classes was of working-class origin. Although the material conditions of working-class families differed significantly among the children at school and were often good, the children still were at a disadvantage. This, the study states, was because “their demand for culture and knowledge was much lower than that of [children from] educated families which may even have lower incomes.” The author stresses, however, the critical importance of corrective classes as a means of furthering equal opportunity for the children and, thus, social equality.⁴³

At the educational guidance center of the first district in Budapest, neurologist József Niehiesel drew a much bleaker picture of the parents of children who had been deemed unready for school: “[...] the parents of the children who appear here are all seeing a neurologist, or at least should do so. If not, the neurologist should indeed deal with the parents and convince them to

41 Kővér, “Beiskolázás.”

42 Berkics, “Nagy József: Iskolaelőkészítés.”

43 Z. Á., “Fizikai dolgozók.”

get themselves examined. The problems are mostly social: bad housing, drunken husband, etc.” While this summary of work experiences drawing a connection between immature school children and their problematic parents was not supposed to reach the public, a study published in the central pedagogical journal on the developmental stage of children aged four to five explicitly considers socioeconomic factors in relation to school maturity. With the help of a newly designed complex testing method, the researchers showed that, in the case of a group of 120 children, “90.3 percent of the 104 better-off children met the requirements, and only 9.7 percent were problematic, while 62.5 percent of the 16 socially vulnerable children did not show the required level of maturity.” However, the worst possible combination was when the children were both from a poor socioeconomic background and did not attend kindergarten: none of the children of whom this was true showed sufficient levels of maturity.⁴⁴ While kindergarten attendance did not compensate for the disadvantage of coming from a lower socioeconomic background in all cases, it was undoubtedly alarming when children did not attend kindergarten at all, since this left them with little chance of having a positive start at school.

By the end of the 1970s, the discussion about the influence of socioeconomic conditions on school education gained new momentum. Pedagogues published an extensive study in the academic journal *Valóság* (Reality) on the inner stratification of several elementary schools in the highly industrialized district XVIII of Budapest, casting doubts on the egalitarian nature of the eight-year school-for-all project. They assessed the corrective classes and arrived at the conclusion that these classes were on a lower level within the inner school hierarchical structure. Although the small size of the classes made it difficult to generalize, the authors of the study were struck by the fact that none of the children in these classes were from families belonging to the managerial and high-ranking intellectual elite, while children of white-collar workers, production supervisors (*közvetlen termelésirányítók*), and skilled workers were overrepresented. Even more strikingly, children of unskilled workers were underrepresented in these classes and overrepresented in special schools. Considering these results, the authors noted that “social factors other than ‘biological’ factors play a significant role in determining who ‘meets’ the requirements of primary school.”⁴⁵ In another study published only two years later, some of the same authors adopted

44 Gláz et al., “Négy-ötéves.”

45 Csanádi et al., “Az általános iskolai.”

a decisively gendered approach when stating that “children whose fathers were qualified and whose mothers were in unskilled physical occupations were over-represented in the remedial classes.”⁴⁶ This suggests that experts attributed a more decisive role to the mother’s education than the father’s.

While the children in the corrective classes in Budapest schools came from a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds, the official discourse on the corrective classes in schools outside of Budapest suggests that the students in these classes came from relatively similar social backgrounds. In the schools outside of Budapest, school immaturity seemed almost exclusively to be caused by a lack of cultural stimulation at home. An interview with two teachers of a corrective class in Tapolca, a city in the upper Balaton area, described the challenges they faced when working with children who predominantly came from families with little to no cultural or educational stimulation at home. To make matters worse, some children had parents who were alcoholics or were illiterate. But where grim prospects reigned, corrective classes could make a positive difference, at least so went the discourse. One of the teachers made the following remark concerning her experience, “[p]erhaps the most shocking thing is that these children are bewildered by fairy tales. It is not until the end of the year that the magic of the fairy tale reaches them, that the excitement and anticipation are already on their faces.”⁴⁷ What for most children was a routine and intellectually stimulating part of growing up for these children it was something they experienced only after having begun school.

While the public discourse on the issue of school maturity repeatedly addressed socioeconomic conditions and parents who failed to stimulate their children sufficiently, the ethnic background of children attending these classes was not part of the presentation of the program to the public. In expert discourses, however, Roma children who had been assessed as inadequately developed for school only shortly after the introduction of compulsory school examination made a noticeable appearance. Faragó highlighted the problem that many children did not acquire basic skills such as the ability to read and write or do basic math because of their repeated absences. Based on data from Tolna County, many of these children were members of the Roma minority. Many assessments of Roma children used the word “cigány” or Gypsy (instead of Roma) and contained critical references to the conditions the children faced

46 Csanádi and Ladányi, “Az általános iskolai.”

47 Imre Hamar, “Segítség az induláshoz,” *Veszprémi Napló*, 23 July 1980, 5.

at home. According to one, for instance, the child in question was of “Gypsy origin, sub-standard home conditions; parents’ ignorance is the reason for poor progress. There are four children in the family.” According to another, the boy “is also a child of a Gypsy family, they wander a lot, the care provided by the parents amounts to zero.”⁴⁸ Unlike the assessments of other children who had been deemed school immature, in the assessments of Roma children, the dominant tenor is about how these children are problematic and do not fit into the school system because of their problematic upbringing, usually caused by parental neglect.

From the mid-1970s on, the question of Roma first graders gained new momentum. Experts saw the complex school maturity examination as a welcome opportunity to assess school maturity among Roma children more reliably. Statistical evidence showed that Roma children were disproportionately placed in special schools when they mostly suffered from a delayed development rather than physical or mental disability.⁴⁹ While inadequate placement within the school system was increasingly criticized, experts proposed the establishment of separate corrective classes for Roma and the establishment of boarding schools exclusively for Roma children. They thought that only separate education tailored to the needs of these children would provide the conditions which would allow the children to catch up with their peers.⁵⁰ Indeed, many argued that it was not the children who were problematic but the school system, which did not allow the children to assimilate because “in practice, the school system classifies them as unsuitable for adapting to school life. Only a small percentage of them consider further education, and they have almost no chance of obtaining an upper-secondary qualification (and the social benefits that come with it). The current school system is therefore not favorable to Gypsies.”

Non-Roma children came from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and this was true of Roma children, too. As experts pointed out, however, housing conditions were usually worse than with even the most problematic non-Roma child, and these conditions were cited as the cause for recurring, often respiratory-related illnesses, which led to high truancy rates.⁵¹ Also, due to their insufficient command of Hungarian, Roma children were far more likely to be deemed

48 Paragó, “Megjegyzések.”

49 “A tankötelezettségi törvény végrehajtásának tapasztalatai,” 7 July 1976, Budapest Főváros Tanácsa Végrehajtó Bizottsága üléseinek jegyzőkönyvei, BFL. XXIII.102.a.1.

50 Trust, “Töretlen utakon.”

51 Pík Katalin hagyatéka, 1940-2001, MNL OL P 2224. 9–11. tétel.

inadequately mature for school, especially children of unskilled workers. There was a direct correlation between the parents' occupational category and their children's future at school: the higher the parents' qualification, the better the children's outcome on school maturity examinations. Specifically, the children of skilled workers were more likely than their peers to attend the standard first-term class than to need corrective education.⁵² To be sure, although absolute numbers were higher among Roma children, the reasons why children were unprepared for school were mostly the same across the board. A countrywide study concluded by the mid-1970s on school entry arrived at the following conclusion: “[...] we can say that school readiness is not Gypsy specific. In other words, the causes of low rates of school readiness (except for speaking technique and comparative vocabulary) are to be found elsewhere. More specifically, Roma children achieve lower or higher levels of school readiness for the same reasons as non-Roma children.”⁵³

At the turn of the 1980s, experts and state officials alike noticed rising levels of children deemed unprepared for school across the country. According to a report by the Department of Education at the Budapest City Council, “the number of school-immature pupils who either are exempted for another year or need remedial help is increasing year after year.”⁵⁴ In part as a consequence of insufficient numbers of elementary school teachers, working conditions for pedagogues worsened as they dealt with more over-age children, high dropout rates, and children needing to repeat the first grade. Although differences between counties were stark, rising alcoholism among parents and increasing divorce rates took a toll on children, affecting their levels of development negatively.⁵⁵ The literary and political magazine *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature) also pointed to specific conditions in Hungary, where a legalized second economy was thriving, especially since the beginning of the 1980s, leaving parents with less time to engage with their children.⁵⁶ Other networks of experts, e.g., medical doctors involved in school maturity assessments, also rang the alarm. In an interview in the magazine *Munka* (Work), a Budapest school doctor expressed concerns over recent developments: “Unfortunately, many children are falling behind due to lack of environmental stimuli. I emphasize that this is due to poor stimulation,

52 Csongor, “Cigánygyerekek.”

53 Mihály Berkics, ‘Nagy József: Iskolaelőkészítés és beiskolázás’, *Magyar Pedagógia* 75, no. 3 (1975): 380–83.

54 “A főváros közoktatási fejlesztési koncepciója az ezredfordulóig,” September 1983, Fővárosi Tanács VB Művelődésügyi Főosztálya, BFL XXIII.102.a.1. A.

55 Kerekes, “Az általános iskoláról.”

56 Albert, “Életünk Szörnyei.”

not mental retardation. The children do not understand basic concepts. They do not know their colors, they do not know their address, let alone their mother's name. But they are clearly in possession of the most expensive toys." These children did not seem to suffer economic hardship. On the contrary, they enjoyed a surprising level of affluence, but they were deprived of parental attention. The involvement of 75 percent of Hungarian families in the second economy as a means of ensuring a stable income in the face of dramatic inflation left its imprint on the next generation of children.⁵⁷

While the need for corrective measures had never been greater than it was at the time, a controversy over corrective classes arose in expert circles. Sociologist Katalin Pik, who was critically engaged in pedagogical questions both in theory and in practice, examined the prospects of former children who had attended the corrective classes. While the corrective classes were largely effective as a means of dealing with school maturity issues, Pik explored the problems that arose when these children left the familiar social environment of the corrective class to enter the standard first-year or second-year class. Pik's data show that the children who had been in corrective classes and who, at the age of eight or nine, suddenly found themselves in a new school environment did not perform as well as children who had entered the class from a different school. They often did not catch up academically, prompting Pik to draw the pessimistic conclusion that these children "end up in a very unfavorable position in the micro-milieu of the second grade, with no prospects for their future school careers."⁵⁸ While corrective classes were also socially relatively homogenous at least outside of Budapest, parents seemed to react predictably to the stigma attached to these classes when looking for ways to keep their children out of them.⁵⁹ The article, a mix of scientific study and opinion piece, needs to be seen in the context of the pedagogical research of Mrs. Zoltán Báthory and Vera Kántás, published only a few months earlier. Their article also examined the stigma attached to corrective classes, though they arrived at slightly different conclusions. While they agree with Pik on discrimination against children in corrective classes, their study shows that the "'corrective past' is by no means as decisive a handicap as we had assumed." They saw the main culprit for the lack of positive development in parents and schools alike: the outcome was especially unfavorable when both parents and teachers were impatient and uncomprehending in their attitudes

57 Bodnár, *Fin de Millénaire Budapest*.

58 Pik, "A korrekciós osztályok."

59 Ibid.

towards corrective classes.⁶⁰ More generally, various experts stated during the controversy that they saw the success rate of corrective classes at 65 to 70 percent. This was also underlined by psychologist Pál Szabó, one of the main proponents of school maturity examinations and corrective classes.⁶¹

While a controversy among experts is far from unusual and perfectly in line with their investigative role, it seems remarkable that in the case of the issue of children's school maturity, the experts took parental practices in their assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of corrective classes into account. One year before the controversy, the state media reported on how hesitant parents were to send their children to corrective classes, perceiving them primarily as a potential disadvantage when the children would move on to the standard school system, where classmates might be prejudiced against them.⁶² Indeed, as a caricature in the satirical magazine *Ludas Matyi*⁶³ shows, parents saw the issue of school maturity as central and stressful at the same time. The scene shows the first day at school for first graders. Parents are patiently watching as their children move slowly into the classroom under a sign which says, "we are learning for life." A boy, one of the last ones to enter the classroom, is taken aside by his father, who asks him, "Why don't you push the others aside? Otherwise, they might think that you are not school-mature!" As the cartoon suggests, school maturity was a measure of a child's ability to meet the requirements of the school system. However, in the eyes of the parent portrayed, solely fitting in was insufficient. One ruthlessly had to put oneself ahead of one's peers, to their potential detriment. As a critical comment on contemporary society, the caricature shows that the question of a child's preparedness for school was understood as pressure to meet a necessary precondition for success in school, even when this involved circumventing (and defeating) socialist egalitarian principles.⁶⁴

To be sure, many parents opted to have their children attend the regular classes rather than suffer the stigma of being put in the corrective classes, even when this hampered the child's development. The Executive Committee (*Végrehajtó Bizottság*) at the Budapest City Council discussed the issue in the mid-1970s during a meeting with one of the participants. According to the committee,

60 Báthory and Kántás, "Korrekción osztály."

61 Horányi, "Az iskolaérettség vizsgálatáról."

62 F. J., "Iskolába jár a gyerek...."

63 This title is a reference to a somewhat satirical epic poem by nineteenth-century Hungarian author Mihály Fazekas. The title could be translated into English as "Mattie the Goose-boy."

64 N. N., "Évnyitó."

some parents are averse to this [having their children put in corrective classes], some for reasons of prestige alone, others because of the longer travel time to the corrective class within the district. There are one or two places [for these classes] in a district. The parent is asking for their child to be excused rather than put in a corrective class. In many cases, the education authorities grant these requests, which we do not approve of because in fact this child will later become over-age. They need to be given the right education to catch up with the others, and if they do not get it, they will become over-age, and this will bring the specter of failure, of falling behind.⁶⁵

Even with the opening of many more corrective classes throughout Budapest and a certain normalization of corrective classes, at least in the capital, the educational guidance center of the district I reports in 1983 on how parents were going against the conclusions of medical, psychological, and pedagogical assessments and were finding ways to circumvent the recommendations.⁶⁶ Other experts reporting on their experiences in the district II, another well-to-do part of Budapest with a high proportion of academically educated inhabitants, noted that parents felt the stigma of corrective classes even more intensely.⁶⁷

Experts who had these experiences on the ground addressed the issue in state media for communicating to parents via a different channel, independently from individualized cases regarding their children. While experts did not tire of stressing that corrective classes were not for disabled or intellectually limited children (a perception still present in Hungarian society) but only for children who were not adequately developed for school, they did acknowledge that the name “corrective classes” might have unfortunate associations. However, as psychologist Zsuzsa Flamm pointed out to the broad readership of *Népszava*, a “corrective first class is not recommended by experts without justification, and therefore if parents, ignoring expert advice, enroll their unschooled child in a large class [standard class], they must take responsibility if the child starts the school year with a failure that may well mark the next eight years.”⁶⁸ While reminding parents of their role as responsible caretakers, the author stresses

65 “A tankötelezettségi törvény végrehajtásának tapasztalatai,” July 7, 1976, Budapest Főváros Tanácsa Végrehajtó Bizottsága üléseinek jegyzőkönyvei, BFL XXIII.102.a.1.

66 “Az I. ker. jelentése: a felmentettek és iskolaéretlen gyermekek helyzete számárányuk növekedéseinek okai,” November 1983, Nevelési Tanácsadó, I. kerület, BFL VIII.3709.b.

67 Szurdi, “A korrekciós.”

68 Flamm, “Ami nem önézeti probléma.” The parental guidance book by well-known pediatrician László Velkey makes similar statements, cf. Szabó, “Dr. Velkey László.” Earlier publications also point to comparable issues, cf. the parental guide by Szabó, *Iskolás lesz a gyermekünk*.

another responsibility of parents: nurturing the intellectual abilities of their children to avoid lack of school maturity in the first place.⁶⁹

Parents were not the only ones who needed to be continuously convinced of the positive impact of corrective classes on children who had been deemed unready for school. Pedagogues were sometimes also found to be problematic. In the magazine *A tanító* (The Teacher), published mainly for pedagogues, an article reports on a successfully run corrective class in a Budapest elementary school precisely at the time when criticism and discrimination on the ground were at their heights. While some critical undertones chimed in with respectful if not admiring descriptions of the corrective classes they had attended, the author notes that the school did not label the class corrective. It was simply called “1e,” in line with the overarching method of naming classes. Although the designation used for the class did not reveal its purpose, one’s impression of it changed once in the classroom. The interior reflected both the support and freedom needed by children who were not yet mature enough for regular schooling. As the author noted, “one side of the room has a carpeted floor, which serves as a play area. Small wicker armchairs, tables, and a game shelf make this a realm of free play. When I visited the classroom, the children played after their morning session. Mostly board games and indoor board games were available, but anyone who wanted could draw.” Due to the varied functions of the classroom, the refurbishment of such classes was drastically more expensive than it was for regular classes, but the school management put the needs of the class first. The teacher “radiates kindness, attention, and care,” and the overall school climate contributed to the children not being excluded or even stigmatized, even when they eventually joined the other children in the standard classes.⁷⁰ In fact, the child-centered approach of corrective classes was so convincing that Dr. Gyula Mezei, an expert and high-ranking state official in the Ministry of Education, stated at the end of the 1970s that “if we had more money, more classrooms, more teachers, it would be ideal if all children could start their primary education in such classes, because this form of education provides a good transition between kindergarten and primary school.”⁷¹ This citation shows that the existence of separate corrective classes was also an implicit critique of the existing school system, with its streamlined, traditionally scholastic approach.

69 Flamm, “Ami nem önértzeti probléma.”

70 Varga, “Látogatás.”

71 Mezei, “Vakáció után.”

School-Immature Children and the Abolition of Corrective Classes

At the end of the 1980s, when the need for individual assistance for children who were not prepared for regular schooling had never been greater, institutional support decreased, very much against expert advice. Since corrective classes had been struggling to win sufficient acceptance among parents and pedagogues alike, the Ministry of Education decided in 1987 to bring the program of corrective classes to an end. Among the official reasons was the contention that “these classes could not eliminate individual disadvantages to the extent expected, in many places they were given the worst accommodation and the least suitable teachers instead of the best conditions, and the name itself has become stigmatizing.”⁷² As a result, the Ministry shifted responsibility from the district administration to individual schools, which were free to offer so-called small-sized classes (*kislétszámú osztályok*) as a replacement for corrective classes.⁷³ Parallel with the abolition of corrective classes, the Ministry moved the date according to which the year of child’s age would be measured for compulsory school attendance from September 1 to May 31, meaning that only children who had completed their sixth year of life by the end of May would leave kindergarten and enter school. As a result, the number of children in the first grade who had been born in the summer (i.e., who were younger by many months than their peers) decreased, and the schools soon benefitted “from having older, more physically and mentally developed children in the first grade.”⁷⁴

New regulations enabled parents to exercise more agency and freedom of choice during the process. While kindergarten teachers played a decisive role in assessing children’s developmental stage, the final decisions had to have the support of the parents. If kindergarten pedagogues and parents could not reconcile their views, only then would the educational guidance center act as a mediator and ultimately have the last word.⁷⁵ However, experts from the guidance centers were now obliged to share their findings with the parents, allowing parents better to comprehend the evidence on which the experts’ recommendations were based. It was then up to the parents to decide if they wanted their children to stay in kindergarten or attend a small class. Effectively, parents had a larger role in the decisions that were made concerning their children’s schooling.⁷⁶

72 Koncz, “Kényelmetlenné vált.”

73 Ibid.

74 Horányi, “A fejlettség szerinti”; Hamrák, “Tanulási képességek”; Koncz, “Kényelmetlenné vált.”

75 Horányi and Kósáné Ormai, “A nevelési tanácsadás.”

76 Horányi, “A fejlettség szerinti.”

While the emphasis on the positive integration of parents into the decision-making process was intended to help resolve earlier tensions, experts saw the abolition of corrective classes and diminishing state support for these kinds of measures critically.⁷⁷ Many schools did not plan to have small-sized classes. Or, more precisely, where there had been no infrastructure for corrective classes, it was hardly likely that small-sized classes would be introduced. Even in schools in which corrective classes had been held, school management thought twice about holding small classes, which required increased infrastructure, personnel, and financing.⁷⁸ This problem became even more pronounced as the number of children recommended for these classes rose. In 1987, ideally 18.4 percent of schoolchildren would have attended small-sized classes on the basis of the recommendations of experts. In 1988, this figure had risen to 21.7 percent.⁷⁹ Experts also pointed out that among the children who remained in kindergarten for an additional year, many still struggled with below average learning abilities.⁸⁰ This also became prevalent among children deemed unready for school who sometimes even ended up in special schools.⁸¹ Additionally, parental *Eigensinn* could be an issue, especially when parents pressured kindergarten teachers (sometimes even violently) to let their children attend a regular school, which led to predictable problems for the children and the school.⁸² At the end of the 1980s, during the last breaths of Hungarian state socialism, decentralization and liberalization around the question of school maturity produced many uncertainties for which the state no longer accepted full responsibility. A growing number of children deemed unprepared for school and their parents could no longer rely on widespread structured support. This happened precisely at a time when visible social inequalities became widely accepted in society.

Conclusion

The modern project of building an egalitarian socialist utopia set the tone for creating the conditions for equal opportunity through collective state institutions, such as the educational system. However, the case of children's school maturity and the institutional solution of corrective classes shows how the egalitarian

77 Ibid.

78 Koncz, "Kényelmetlenné vált."

79 Horányi, "A fejlettség szerinti."

80 Hamrák, "Tanulási képességek."

81 Horányi, "A fejlettség szerinti."

82 Ibid.

project of a comprehensive school system reached its limits. I have shown how corrective classes ultimately mirrored social differences already present in socialist Hungary, making the corrective classes something of a magnifying glass for societal realities. In these special classes, children from the lower middle classes and the Roma minority were overrepresented. To be sure, experts and state officials alike were devoted to seeking solutions to give these children the best conditions possible. Different networks of experts, mainly physicians, psychologists, and pedagogues, approached the problem of school maturity from various angles and worked towards possible solutions. Interestingly, knowledge circulation based on citation practices revealed, at least in the case of the topic of school maturity, that the notion of the impenetrable “iron curtain” is untenable. Instead, it shows a selective approach to the exchange of ideas among experts on school-maturity issues within the “socialist bloc,” sidelining the alleged dominance of the Soviet Union over its “satellite” states.

While all actors had in common that they wanted the best for the children who were deemed immature for school, opinions diverged on how to achieve this. I have shown how the state, experts, and parents shaped the system of school maturity assessment and corrective classes, and I have called attention, in particular, to the fair amount of parental agency in this process. As the practices of willful parents revealed, parents had some space for maneuver, even in opposition to the opinions of experts, as they were able to use their more intimate knowledge of their own children. Not surprisingly, parents were influenced by popular perceptions, such as the stigma attached to corrective classes, as well as social pressures, for instance with regard to class background. Ironically, state measures, introduced as a tool with which to further social equality, created concern in parents that corrective classes would leave their children at a social and cultural disadvantage. In the eyes of experts and state officials alike, the role of parents, however, could be problematic in two ways. First, parents were often seen as the cause of the child’s delayed development before anything else, especially in the case of social and emotional deprivation. Second, parents were often opposed to corrective measures for reasons of (loss of) social prestige or for practical reasons of convenience. These parents were thus caught between exerting agency on the one hand and being part of the problem themselves on the other, showing the limits of socialist transformation.

The discontinuation of corrective classes at the end of the 1980s went against societal needs and most experts’ opinions, and the process of democratization and decentralization gave parents more opportunities to influence decisions

concerning their children's schooling. This was not always in line with the interests of children who were not yet sufficiently developed for schooling, and it created problems both for these children and for the responsible experts. While the rates of school immaturity in children preparing to leave kindergarten and attend the first grade was never as high as it had been in the 1980s, state support vanished. As part of a more significant trend shaped by a financial crisis and drastic economic reforms throughout the decade, the state implemented austerity measures. However, contrary to the secondary literature, according to which decentralization tendencies were dominant in the 1980s, corrective classes were intensely experimental and linked to local developments throughout their history from the mid-1960s onwards.⁸³ Although the Ministry of Education adopted the Budapest pilot project between 1971 and 1974, it was mainly up to individual schools to open corrective classes. The fact that corrective classes were not ubiquitous in the educational landscape shows a specific fragmentation of an otherwise centralized school system, strongly linked to the individual initiatives of school management, pedagogues, and local educational guidance centers.

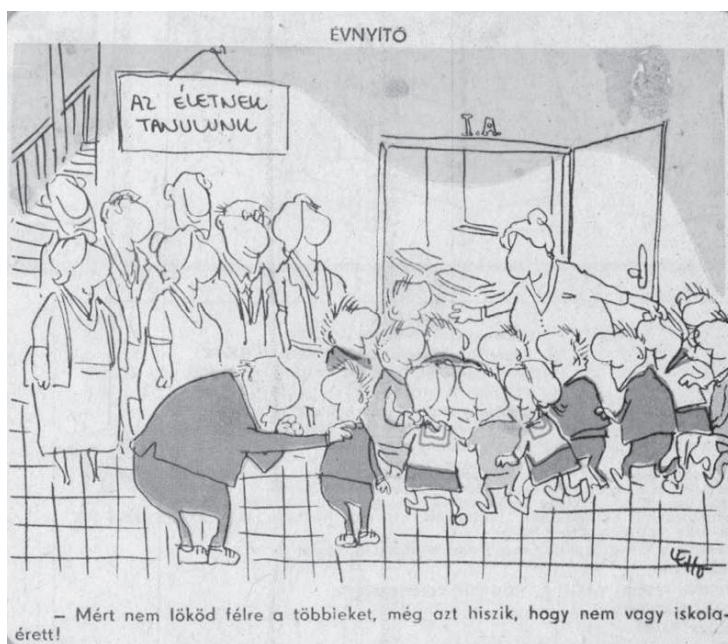


Fig. 1. N.N. “Évnyitó.” *Ludas Matyi*, 25 August 1983. “Why don’t you push the others aside? Otherwise, they might think that you are not school-mature!”

83 Cf. for example Kovai and Neumann, “Hová lett,” 75.

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