

INTERSECTIONS OF POLITICAL NORMS AND PEDAGOGICAL GOALS: THE IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHER TRAINING IN SOCIALIST HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

Teacher training in socialist Hungary not only fulfilled professional but also political and ideological functions. The training of preschool teachers in the 1960s was a particularly sensitive area, as the party-state regarded educators involved in early childhood education as key ideological agents. In my presentation, I explore how the educational policy directives and political expectations of the period shaped the content, structure, and value system of preschool teacher education. My research is based on archival sources, ministerial decrees, curriculum documents, contemporary press coverage, and personal recollections. I analyse how elements of Marxist-Leninist ideology were integrated into course materials, the evaluation of pedagogical practices, and efforts to stimulate students' political engagement. I also examine the role of various mass movements (e.g., the Hungarian Young Communist League – KISZ, the Hungarian People's Army – MHSZ) in the everyday life of teacher training institutions and how these influenced the development of students' professional identity.

The analysis highlights that both professional and political considerations were present—often in competition or mutual reinforcement—within the institutions of preschool teacher training. Ideological expectations of the era affected pedagogical practice not only at a declarative level but also in everyday routines: the demand for ideological loyalty frequently outweighed professional competence. Nevertheless, students employed various strategies to navigate the tension between political conformity and personal beliefs.

The aim of my study is to demonstrate how preschool teacher education became one of the institutionalized arenas of political socialization and to reveal how this process entangled notions of femininity, care work, and the ideological constructions of the era.

KEYWORDS

kindergarten teacher training, socialist educational policy, ideological education, teacher role, political socialization, 1960s

INTRODUCTION

Since the youngest generation spent most of their time, apart from the family, in educational institutions, particular significance was attached to those who directly influenced children's personality development, worldview, and social integration, especially in the period of consolidation following the 1956 revolution. The role of educators—especially kindergarten teachers—during this period went beyond the classical tasks of education: they also had to function

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as mediators of the idea of socialist social construction and as embodiments of political-ideological expectations. At every level of teacher training, the party-state paid increased attention to ensuring that, alongside professional preparation, appropriate worldview and ideological content were given a prominent place.

The research addresses two key areas: on the one hand, it explores the specific features of kindergarten teacher training during the socialist era and the manifestation of the socialist ideal; on the other, it seeks evidence that the system of kindergarten teacher training became one of the consciously applied tools of political socialization. The analysis emphasizes not only the examination of curricula and training structures but also how ideological pressure transformed the practice of teacher education and how this was reflected in everyday teaching and educational work. The focus of the research is further shaped by the traditionally female character of the kindergarten teaching profession and by the interpretation of nurturing and caregiving as a traditionally female role.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After the revolutionary events of 1956, the consolidating political system set as an important goal the political-ideological reorganization of society, in which teachers, responsible for the education and upbringing of future generations, were assigned a crucial role (Mészáros, 1994). Following the suppression of the revolution, not only the political and economic elite of the Rákosi era but also the leadership of educational administration and the broader field of education were replaced (Darvai, 2022, p. 43).

Although the abolition of social origin-based admission categories in 1962 can be interpreted as a sign of political relaxation, the effort to admit students of working-class and peasant backgrounds remained strong, particularly in the field of teacher training (Ladányi, 1991, p. 44). Strengthening, centrally organizing, and controlling the ideological training of young people continued to be a key objective, aiming to prevent another revolution like that of 1956. During the revolution, the youth organization of the Hungarian Workers' Party, the Working Youth Alliance (Dolgozó Ifjúság Szövetsége), had disbanded. In its place, the Provisional Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party declared in its February 1957 resolution that "*for the sake of raising a new communist generation with a Marxist–Leninist worldview, and also to ensure that the youth movement, fragmented into different sectional organizations, would have a comprehensive political leadership body, it is necessary to establish a communist youth organization*" (cited in Kardos, 1995, p. 27).

The establishment of the communist youth organization can also be interpreted as an extension of the educational institutional system, whose task was not merely to supplement classroom instruction but to politicize and control all aspects of young people's lives. The exclusive prioritization of the Marxist–Leninist worldview among pedagogical aims resulted in political socialization becoming the primary task of education. From a historical perspective, this development led to the disappearance of earlier, more diverse youth movements: religious, civic, or other youth associations organized by social groups were replaced by a state-directed, unified organization. The comprehensive political leadership body mentioned in the resolution thus served not only an organizational coordination function but also extended socio-political control over the lives of young people. As a result, within educational thought, the community-building, cultural, or personality-shaping dimensions of upbringing became secondary to ideological and political objectives.

The importance and influence of the organization are reflected in the resolution, which emphasized: “KISZ must be granted real rights in every field of state and social life. It shall represent Hungarian youth before the Party and the government” (cited in Kardos, 1995, p. 27). Within teacher training institutions, KISZ (Communist Youth League) played a leading role in organizing and coordinating dormitory life (Szabados, 1969). The declared aim was not merely to establish a new youth organization, but to create a comprehensive institution capable of socializing younger generations into a unified Marxist–Leninist worldview. The emergence of KISZ thus eliminated the earlier pluralism of youth movements, merging diverse initiatives into a single centralized structure under state-party control. The education of a “communist generation” appeared explicitly as an ideological program, in which political loyalty and worldview uniformity took precedence over pedagogical, cultural, or community-building objectives.

The second quotation illustrates particularly well that KISZ was not simply an organization with an educational function, but also operated as the exclusive instrument of socio-political representation. The “real rights” granted to the organization meant total control over Hungarian youth: not only in schools but also in state and social spheres, KISZ embodied the official “voice” of the younger generations. This eliminated the possibility of independent advocacy and autonomous organization among young people, replacing it with a form of representation legitimized before the Party and the government but directed from above.

Based on these sources, it becomes clear that KISZ functioned as a key institution of party-state education and political socialization. Its role was twofold: on the one hand, to fully politicize the everyday lives and career paths of young people; on the other, to secure the reproduction of the system. All this demonstrates that in this period the concept of education was interpreted by state power in a broader sense than mere instruction or personality development: education was primarily realized as a political program, with the goal of ensuring the survival of the system and the maintenance of ideological unity.

The political leadership also assigned a prominent role to women during the Kádár era. Alongside rapid industrialization came the need to fill previously male-only professions with female labor, exemplified by the idealization of female miners and tractor drivers. In parallel with political détente, the number of applicants to teacher training and kindergarten teacher training institutions increased significantly (Pukánszky, 2013). After consolidation, the feminization of the workforce became increasingly evident in traditionally female roles: not only in health care, administrative-office, and teaching professions, but also in the service sector (Háber, 1999). While the plan for full employment was promoted, women’s equality was also supported by the extension of universal, equal, and secret suffrage to women after World War II (Pukánszky, 2013).

At the same time, the mass entry of women into the workforce was paralleled by the unification of traditional family-based educational styles and values. To foreground and enforce socialist values, the Party sought to override families’ individual value systems, particularly by weakening religious commitment and undermining religious conviction (Mészáros, 1996). Socialist pedagogy interpreted the child not as an individual, but as a social being, whose upbringing primarily emphasized respect for the primacy of the community and reinforcement of socialist-materialist values (Valuch, 2005). The development of a socialist conviction became the primary task of institutional education, pushing emotional, intellectual, and moral education into the background (Mészáros, 1996).

The vision of the ideal communist world also appeared in the education of the youngest: instead of religious-national themes of the interwar period, kindergarten activities were organized around topics such as the Five-Year Plans, machine stations, and collective farms (Pukánszky, 2005).

Alongside the curriculum, it was equally important to select sufficiently committed individuals with firm ideological-materialist convictions to serve as teachers. Loyalty and dedication to the system were paramount. As the Political Committee stated: “*Teachers who oppose our people’s democratic system are not suitable for the education of our youth*” (Mészáros, 1994, p. 70).

During the period of political consolidation, the former four-year, secondary-level kindergarten teacher training program was abolished and replaced by a two-year, post-secondary kindergarten teacher training system. Although the decision to restructure training was made as early as July 1956, it was only implemented in 1958 (Szabados, 1964, p. 53). The 1958 Act No. 26 on the transformation of Hungarian kindergarten teacher training into a higher-level system defined the task of the kindergarten teacher training institutes as “*the training of teachers and kindergarten teachers for kindergartens who are educated, understand and love their vocation, and possess a communist worldview and morality.*” The decree set the training period at two years, prescribed the establishment of a practice kindergarten alongside training institutions, and required the creation of dormitories for students. The strong centralization of education in this period is demonstrated by the fact that both teacher training and kindergarten teacher training institutes could only be maintained by the state, while their curricula and operations were determined by the Minister of Culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

During the study, I primarily applied the methods of document analysis and content analysis. The research is based partly on journals available in the *Arcanum* database, and partly on materials preserved in the Archives of the *Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Sopron*. The corpus of sources consists of documents produced in the 1960s. Among these, I focused mainly on curricula, subject descriptions, the Institute’s *Educational Program*, and the official correspondence between the Institute and the *Department of Teacher Training of the Ministry of Culture*.

Within the framework of selective sampling, I primarily examined documents related to the ideological content of kindergarten teacher training and to the teaching of the subject *Marxism–Leninism*, which was considered of outstanding importance in the training.

During the investigation, I formulated the following research questions:

- How did ideological expectations appear in the curriculum and practice of training?
- How was students’ professional identity shaped under ideological pressure?
- What institutional forms of political socialization were present in kindergarten teacher training?

RESULTS

In the examined sources concerning the aims and content of kindergarten teacher training, the Ministry of Culture sent detailed information to the heads of the two-year kindergarten teacher training institutes, established in 1959 in three locations—Kecskemét, Sopron, and Szarvas—based on the secondary school-leaving examination, regarding the training program renewed in 1964. Instruction No. 140/1964/M.K.15. MM, the regulation of the Minister of Culture on the curriculum of the day courses of teacher training and kindergarten teacher training institutes, presents in detail the objectives of kindergarten teacher education, also addressing the ideological requirements:

“The aim of the kindergarten teacher training institute is to educate cultured kindergarten teachers with a communist worldview and morality, who understand and love their vocation. In order to achieve this aim, the task of the institute is to ensure that students acquire all the knowledge necessary for carrying out modern kindergarten educational work; to acquaint them with the significant results and aspirations of national and international educational science; to demonstrate how this knowledge can be applied in practice; to introduce them to the methodology of kindergarten activities; and to develop the skills required for kindergarten education.”

Thus, alongside high-level professional and methodological knowledge, communist morality and worldview appeared as key expectations, reinforced by the continuation of the directive:

“To develop in students the moral qualities of socialism: patriotism, proletarian internationalism, humanism, a conscious attitude toward work, initiative, ambition, and perseverance; on this basis to enable them to work for the community, and also to cultivate these qualities in their pupils in ways appropriate to the children’s age.”⁷⁷

In preparing future teachers, the aim was not only to reinforce socialist ideology, but also to require the transmission and authentic mediation of socialist values. In this regard, Lajos Tóth, Director of the Kindergarten Teacher Training Institute in Szarvas, emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of community during training in his study published in *Pedagogical Review* in 1963:

“The socialist kindergarten teacher must also be a person of community. If she has a well-developed sense of community, she will not only be able to create a good community in the kindergarten but will also become an enthusiastic participant and leader of the community activities of her workplace. She will work in the spirit of collectivity in her staff, in the youth organization (KISZ), in cultural centers, and in other social forums. An indispensable moral trait must be the new socialist attitude to work. (...) If she has embraced the communist work ethic, she will not work well for the sake of her superiors, but out of inner necessity.” (Tóth, 1963, p. 889)

Thus, expectations directed at teacher educators went beyond preparing students for effective kindergarten work: newly graduated kindergarten teachers were also expected to take on prominent roles within their communities.

It is also worth considering the comments of kindergarten inspectors, who supervised daily educational practice and worked as staff members of the County Cultural Committees. In 1960, the newspaper *North Hungary* reported on a panel discussion for kindergarten teachers, where one inspector shared her experiences with the newly introduced higher-level kindergarten training:

“We must ensure that, alongside providing material conditions for kindergartens, the quality of the substantive educational work is improved, and that kindergarten teachers, by constantly developing their ideological and professional knowledge and by actively participating in the cultural, political, and economic life of towns, villages, and communities, fulfill the role expected of them by our socialist public education system as socialist educators. (...) Unfortunately, not all kindergarten teachers are yet making full use of children’s free time. In many places, the children are left entirely to themselves, with only an occasional warning. This shows that there is a need to raise the standard of educational work. This is precisely the purpose of the professional working groups, which are enriched with lectures on ideological topics. So far, the ideological training of kindergarten teachers has been overshadowed by professional in-service training. Fundamental

⁷⁷ SOE BPK Archives 726/1964. Letter from Gyula Bizó, Head of Department, to the Director of the Sopron Kindergarten Teacher Training Institute regarding the sending of curricula. Budapest, August 24, 1964.

change can only be expected from the new two-year kindergarten teacher training, based on the secondary school-leaving examination.” (North Hungary p. 5)

In this opinion, formulated based on practical experience, the socialist pedagogical value of prioritizing community life and emphasizing the outstanding communal and educational role of teachers also appears. The expert further pointed out that with the introduction of higher-level kindergarten teacher training in September 1959, the standard of educational work improved. She highlighted the fact that in the earlier four-year, secondary-level training, which included general education subjects, there was insufficient time for acquiring professional knowledge. However, the introduction of the secondary school-leaving examination as an admission requirement eliminated the pressure of teaching general subjects, thereby allowing the entire two-year program to focus on professional training.

Since, after completing the two-year training, the new teachers entered the teaching staff at a very young age—barely twenty years old—it was natural that the youth organization (KISZ) played a prominent role in shaping and supervising students’ leisure activities. The reference to the communist work ethic coincides with the expectations of the central training program issued by the Ministry of Culture, in which an important role was assigned not only to formal education in the training institutes, but also to the leisure activities:

“Our aim is to train and educate teachers who are cultured, possess a Marxist worldview, and love their vocation. This aim must be pursued at every stage of the educational process, as well as through the various forms of both school-based and extracurricular education—for example, in study circles and in the field of sports.”⁷⁸

In line with the socialist pedagogy’s ideal of the “all-round perfect human being,” young students were prepared for their future vocation not only within the framework of compulsory subjects but through all activities. This, in addition to ideological training, also represented an important process of professional socialization, since students had to acquire not only ideological knowledge but also essential educational-scientific, psychological, and methodological knowledge—all within less than two years.

In the renewed training structure, from the 1964 academic year onward, the subject of Marxism-Leninism was taught with a particularly high number of hours, totaling 183 hours over the course of the program. In comparison, subjects more directly related to kindergarten pedagogy—pedagogy and psychology (referred to in the period as *i.e.*, “*science of the soul*”)—were allocated 142 and 130 hours of instruction, respectively.⁷⁹

About the subject of Marxism-Leninism, the central directive also formulated the application of the materialist perspective in pedagogical situations:

“The deepening of students’ dialectical-materialist worldview through the study of individual subjects and their Marxist studies; ensuring that, on the basis of a profound understanding of Marxism-Leninism, they recognize the path of social development leading toward communism;

⁷⁸ SOE-BPK Archives 720/1966. *Our Tasks in the Development and Improvement of the Educational Work of Teacher Training Colleges, Teacher Training Institutes, and Kindergarten Teacher Training Institutes.* Ministry of Culture, Department of Teacher Training, Budapest, November 18, 1966.

⁷⁹ Instruction No. 140/1964/M.K.15. MM from the Minister of Culture on the curriculum of the day courses of teacher training institutes and kindergarten teacher training institutes – Curriculum of the subject Marxism–Leninism, pp. 12–15.

enabling them to apply Marxism correctly in both their pedagogical and social work, and to embrace, as a vocation and conviction, participation in the building of socialism.”⁸⁰

Regarding the subject of Marxism-Leninism, the central directive also specified the application of a materialist perspective in pedagogical contexts:

“To deepen students’ dialectical-materialist worldview through the study of individual subjects and their Marxist studies; to ensure that, based on a thorough understanding of Marxism-Leninism, they recognize the path of social development leading toward communism; to enable them to apply Marxism correctly in both their pedagogical and social work, and to commit themselves wholeheartedly to building socialism.”⁸¹

The excerpt shows that teacher education aimed not only at professional training but also at shaping students’ worldview and political convictions. The scientific grounding and development of a Marxist–Leninist worldview emerged as a fundamental goal of studies, indicating that education was closely intertwined with the ideological directives promoted by the political authorities. In teacher training, the professional and ideological dimensions could not be separated: the two mutually reinforced each other and jointly defined the career profile of the emerging educators.

The text particularly emphasizes the importance of acquiring a “socialist worldview and morality,” which was presented not only as academic knowledge but also as a norm for daily life. Teachers in this period could not maintain a neutral stance: personal example, firm character, and a deep sense of duty were articulated as expectations that shaped the teacher identity desired by the institutional system. Students were thus expected to become not merely teachers but active participants in the shaping of society. The teacher became a conscious and committed member of the political community, expected to embody and perpetuate ideological principles through both life and work.

The second part of the quotation highlights the “ability to creatively apply dialectical materialism,” which signals a central aim of Marxism–Leninism instruction. It was not enough for students to know the basic concepts and propositions of the curriculum; they were also expected to apply them in everyday pedagogical practice and transmit them further. In this way, the subject directly contributed to the quality of teacher training by imbuing professional preparation with ideological content essential to the system. The emphasis on “scientific grounding” further indicates that educational policy of the period sought to establish Marxism–Leninism as a comprehensive worldview, overarching and integrating all other disciplines.

During the research, the archival sources included not only the circulars and directives sent by the Ministry of Culture to the training institutions, but also reports submitted by the institutions themselves. Lőrinc Földi, head of the Sopron Kindergarten Teacher Training Institute, in his report prepared for the Ministry, addressed in detail the family and social background of the enrolled students:

“Students are admitted to the institute from all over Transdanubia, bringing with them their worldview and political orientation, which were shaped by the quality and character of their

⁸⁰ SOE BPK Archives 726/1964. Letter from Gyula Bizó, Head of Department, to the Director of the Sopron Kindergarten Teacher Training Institute concerning the forwarding of curricula. Budapest, August 24, 1964.

⁸¹ Instruction No. 140/1964/M.K.15. MM from the Minister of Culture on the curriculum of full-time teacher training institutes and kindergarten teacher training institutes – Curriculum of the subject Marxism–Leninism, pp. 12–15.

secondary schools. A significant portion of them completed their secondary studies while commuting from rural residences or living in dormitories. Their environment is typically that of rural working-class families, as reflected in the proportion of children of manual workers among the students. The institute strives during admissions to select students who are ideologically and politically most suitable. The composition of the entering classes generally presents a promising picture—sometimes even better than what is observed later in certain cases. However, in some instances it becomes apparent that certain students' ideological and political convictions are not sufficiently strong. These, however, are isolated cases; the majority of students demonstrate characteristics in this regard that meet expectations. Their level of ideological development is most clearly reflected in their attitude toward religion. The students themselves are also prone to reduce the question of worldview primarily to this aspect."⁸²

Young students arriving from various regions of Transdanubia came to the institute with distinct worldviews and political orientations, shaped by the quality and character of their secondary schools as well as their socialization environments. A significant portion of the applicants came from rural family backgrounds, often completing their secondary studies while commuting or living in dormitories. Children of rural working- and peasant-class families were notably represented among the student body, which aligned with the official ideology of the period, regarding the prominence of children of manual workers as a favourable development.

In the admissions process, not only academic performance but also ideological and political reliability served as decisive criteria. An applicant deemed suitable for a teaching career was expected not only to demonstrate professional competence but also to conform in worldview and political behaviour to the norms endorsed by the state. This dual standard established, from the very beginning of training, the framework within which students' identities and professional development could be shaped. According to the institute's leadership, most entering classes presented a favourable profile, though in some cases the ideological convictions of certain students were not sufficiently firm. Officially, these were considered isolated cases, but they highlight that students' political socialization was not uniform, and differences stemming from prior upbringing sometimes caused tensions.

The measure of ideological development was most clearly reflected in students' attitude toward religion. In that era, religiosity was not merely a personal matter of faith but also a subject of political evaluation. Religious affiliation often appeared in official discourse as ideological wavering or unreliability, which is why questions of worldview were frequently narrowed to this dimension. Students themselves were also prone to interpret their situation in these terms: their worldview was largely defined by their stance toward religious traditions and the extent to which they could distance themselves from them.

CONCLUSION

Kindergarten teacher training in the socialist era combined professional preparation with ideological education. Institutions bore a double responsibility: on the one hand, to prepare students with the pedagogical, psychological, and methodological expertise required for early childhood education, and on the other, to ensure that future teachers internalized a Marxist–

⁸² Letter from Lőrinc Földi, Director, to the Department of Teacher Training, Ministry of Culture – Document on the Development of Educational and Teaching Work. Sopron, March 13, 1967.

Leninist worldview and demonstrated the political loyalty required by the socialist state. This dual function shaped curricula, admissions policies, and the daily rhythm of institutional life.

The curriculum itself reflected this double aim. Alongside subjects directly related to child-rearing—pedagogy, psychology, and methodology—students were required to complete courses in political economy, dialectical materialism, and party history. These were not intended as abstract knowledge but as frameworks to be actively applied in pedagogical practice, reinforcing the model of the “communist educator.” The emphasis on ideological education was not confined to the classroom. Political organizations, above all the KISZ, played a decisive role in shaping student life, extending their influence through cultural programs, extracurricular activities, dormitory life, and public celebrations. Political socialization thus became a continuous, everyday experience.

The central goal of the system was explicit: to produce teachers who were not only professionally competent but also politically reliable and committed to the objectives of the community and the party. The “ideal” kindergarten teacher was envisioned as someone who combined pedagogical expertise with unwavering loyalty to the socialist state and an active role in the broader community. In the longer term, this model produced a twofold impact. On one hand, it undeniably contributed to the professionalization of kindergarten teaching. Following the 1958 reform, the transformation of training into a higher-education program raised the entry threshold, concentrated the professional curriculum, and strengthened methodological preparation. As a result, the profession’s social prestige grew, and kindergarten teaching became both a recognized and legitimate form of women’s employment. Within the wider discourse of gender equality and female labor participation, the training of kindergarten teachers came to symbolize women’s social advancement in socialist Hungary.

On the other hand, this very system also imposed strict limitations. Professional autonomy and pedagogical creativity were subordinated to political demands, and both students and instructors had to navigate ideological expectations. Many adopted strategies to reconcile professional knowledge with political conformity, but the compromises involved left lasting marks on teacher identity. In this sense, the socialist kindergarten became a laboratory of ideological education: teachers were perceived not as both educators and representatives of the political system, tasked with transmitting ideology to the youngest members of society.

This duality demonstrates that socialist-era kindergarten teacher training cannot be understood in isolation from broader historical and social processes. Industrialization, the expansion of women’s employment, the decline of religious traditions, and the emphasis on collective life all intersected within teacher education, making it simultaneously an instrument of social modernization and political consolidation.

Ultimately, the history of kindergarten teacher training in this period illustrates how professional preparation and ideological instruction were deliberately interwoven to serve both educational and political purposes. Recognizing this interdependence is essential for understanding teacher education as a phenomenon embedded in its wider political and social environment rather than as a purely professional process.

At the same time, this study points to avenues for further research. Future work could explore in greater depth how students experienced the tension between professional and ideological expectations in their everyday lives, what strategies they developed to manage these dual demands, and how their professional identities were shaped in the process. Equally, it would be valuable to examine the roles played by instructors: to what extent they acted as transmitters of ideology, and to what extent they sought to preserve pedagogical integrity. Finally, a longer-term perspective—

particularly the legacy of socialist teacher education in shaping identities after 1989—can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the historical significance of this training model.

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