

ANACHRONISTIC MODERNITY: THE BELL-LANCASTER METHOD AND ITS ADAPTATION IN OTTOMAN MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the Bell-Lancaster method, also known as the monitorial or mutual system, and its adaptation in Ottoman Macedonia during the nineteenth century. First developed in Britain by Andrew Bell and later popularized by Joseph Lancaster, the method addressed the challenge of mass education with limited resources: a single teacher, assisted by student-monitors, could manage the instruction of hundreds of pupils. Its promise of economy and reach made it a global phenomenon, praised as modern and progressive. Yet the system's reliance on silence, surveillance, and public discipline revealed its deeper role as a mechanism of regulation, producing conformity rather than independent thought. The paper situates this method within Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *Sattelzeit*, the modern process of educationalisation, and Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline. As a product of the *Sattelzeit*, it reflected the conviction that education could shape society toward progress. Viewed through educationalisation, it functioned as social therapy, targeting poverty, morality, and civic order. Foucault's perspective highlights its operation as an apparatus of surveillance. In Ottoman Macedonia, introduced in Bitola in the 1830s and later in Thessaloniki and Ohrid. The method was celebrated as a sign of European modernity but adapted to local conditions, from rural improvisations to girls' moral training. Its paradox lies in being locally embraced just as Europe abandoned it.

Keywords: *Bell-Lancaster method, Ottoman Macedonia, monitorial system, educational modernity, anachronism, Tanzimat reforms, disciplinary practices*

Introduction

The history of education is filled with paradoxes. Methods that promise to democratize knowledge often create new forms of discipline; utopian visions of social transformation end in rigid practices; and models conceived as universal solutions are adapted to local contexts, taking on entirely different meanings. The Bell-Lancaster method, also known as the monitorial or mutual system, is a prime example of this. At its core, it was a practical response to the problem of mass literacy in the first half of the 19th century: one teacher, with the help of student-monitors, could teach hundreds of children simultaneously. This organizational logic promised economy, efficiency, and wide reach. But beneath the surface of practicality lay a complex web of ideological and political implications.

This paper aims to critically re-examine the Bell-Lancaster method from two perspectives. The first is historical: how did this system of mutual education emerge and spread in Europe, and how was it applied in Ottoman Macedonia - a space where education was closely linked to ethnic, confessional, and political dynamics? The second is theoretical: how can the method be understood through the concepts of educationalisation (education as a form of social therapy) and discipline (Foucault's notion of managing bodies and minds in an institutional context)?

The analysis is not limited to historical facts. It traces the specific practices of Bell-Lancaster schools but also connects them to the broader horizons of modernity. The case of Ottoman Macedonia is particularly important, as it reveals the method's limits and possibilities: how a European educational innovation took root in an imperial and multi-ethnic context, where the school was not just a place of learning but also an arena of identity conflicts and social mobilization.

Given this, the Bell-Lancaster method cannot be viewed merely as a pedagogical technique. It is a product of a specific modern logic that simultaneously promises progress and establishes discipline. To understand its appeal and its contradictions, a theoretical framework is necessary to explain the logic of its emergence, mass application, and local adaptations.

Theoretical Framework

Reinhart Koselleck's concept of the *Sattelzeit* (roughly 1750–1850) is pivotal for understanding the Bell-Lancaster method. This period functioned as a hinge between the “old world” and modernity, when the fundamental meanings of political and social concepts shifted dramatically.¹ Before this era, history was largely perceived as a collection of repetitive events, a chronicle of the past. During the *Sattelzeit*, however, the very concept of history changed. It was no longer cyclical but became a singular, forward-moving process directed toward an anticipated future. This temporal reconfiguration fueled the belief in progress and social improvement (Koselleck, 2004: 22).

The Bell-Lancaster method was a direct manifestation of this new worldview. It was not simply a classroom innovation but an attempt to manage the new historical time. Its promise of “mass literacy” and “social reform” reflected the conviction that society could be actively shaped for a better future. Andrew Bell first outlined the approach in 1797, but it was Joseph Lancaster who transformed it into a practical and exportable model, making it a global phenomenon.² Fully inspired

¹ ‘Sattelzeit’ is a crucial element of the concept of modern history. Sattelzeit (saddle period) imagines the temporal shift between two epochs as a dale or pass found between mountain ranges. This metaphor is used to depict the phase of transition between premodern and modern times and dates the fundamental transformation of Europe between roughly 1750 and 1850. This shifted the boundary between ‘old Europe’ and Modernity from its established place in 1500 to the decades around 1800. The term Sattelzeit was initially coined by Reinhart Koselleck, who casually mentioned it in his introduction to the seven-volume *Encyclopaedia ‘Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe’* (Historical Core Concepts), which first began publication in 1972. (Brunner et al., 1972).

² In 1789, Andrew Bell, a chaplain (a lower-ranking priest in the Church of England) in Madras, India, founded a school for the illegitimate, out-of-wedlock children of European soldiers with the aim of “rescuing” them from the “corrupting” influence of their Indian mothers and turning them into “useful” members of (European) society. By introducing into local Indian schools a system, method, and order, he “invented” a new way of organising his own school (Tschurennev, 2008: 247). After returning to London in 1796, Bell submitted a report on the school's work in Madras to the directors of the East India Company and introduced his new “Experiment in Education” to the governments of Bengal and Bombay. The Experiment - first published as a 40-page booklet - provided an analysis of the instructions, methods, and experiments Bell applied during his teaching experience in Madras (Bell, 1807: 47).

and guided by Bell's ideas, Lancaster began applying, developing, and refining several of these "new" instructions in his own school. In the first edition of *Improvements in Education*, he openly stated that it was his duty to acknowledge being entirely indebted to Bell's ideas and that, "by appropriating some useful suggestions," he had successfully managed a school of over 300 children (Salmon, 1904: 23).

Unlike his contemporaries, Lancaster adopted an unusual method of promotion, which attracted nearly a thousand children in less than a year. As he famously quipped, "They came to me for education like flocks of sheep" (Browning, 1921: 54). In his own words, "Anyone who wishes to send their children may do so freely; those who don't want free education may pay for it, if it suits them" (Browning, 192: 53).

By 1805, Lancaster had developed not only a new kind of teacher but also a new method of teaching and school management. The rapid growth in pupil numbers and public interest, especially from prominent figures in Britain, underscored the appeal of his model (Salmon, 1932: 7).

This ambition resonates with what scholars have called *educationalisation*: the modern belief that broad social problems - poverty, crime, health, morality - could be solved through educational intervention.³ The Bell-Lancaster system epitomized this trend. It was never only about teaching reading and writing. Its design embodied a wider social therapy: punctuality, discipline, and hierarchical order were cultivated to produce not only literate but also obedient, productive subjects for the industrial economy and the modern state.

The mechanics of the method made this clear. The system rested on three pillars: monitors who mediated between teacher and students, a teaching "machinery" of repetition, and strict discipline. One teacher could supervise hundreds, but the real work was done by monitors relaying lessons to smaller groups.⁴ Tools such as reading cards, slates, and oral drills reduced costs, making the system economically efficient. A method worth trying, because from an economic aspect it did not require large material resources.

Yet this very rationality carried disciplinary implications. Michel Foucault's framework of modern power helps illuminate them. For Foucault, power does not only repress but also produces subjects through surveillance and normalization.⁵ The Bell-Lancaster classroom exemplified this: monitors formed a web of hierarchical observation where each pupil was both learner and object of control. The teacher's elevated platform created a panoptic gaze, while silence functioned as a pedagogical tool of bodily discipline. As Tasevski notes, "*In schools that practiced the Bell-Lancaster method, speaking*

³ The concept of educationalisation highlights how education has increasingly been burdened with solving moral, social, and political problems. Depaepe & Smeyers (2008: 380) argue that schooling has come to function as a form of social therapy, with education assigned the role of addressing wide-ranging societal issues. Tröhler (2011: 56) further explains that educationalisation is embedded in the modernist belief in progress, positioning schools as agents for shaping society's future. This view is echoed in a volume edited by Smeyers & Depaepe (2008: 1-2), which explores how education has been tasked with resolving problems including citizenship, public health, crime prevention, and democratic participation.

⁴ The terminology itself marks a point of divergence between Bell and Lancaster. While Lancaster referred to these individuals as "monitors," Bell preferred the terms "assistants" or "tutors." As Bell clarified, "An assistant to the teacher, or tutor as I call or term him - or monitor, as he (Lancaster) calls him" (Bell, 1807: 7). This distinction reflects not only a difference in vocabulary, but also in educational philosophy and the role assigned to pupils within the instructional system.

⁵ Foucault (1977: 197) conceptualized disciplinary societies as institutions that used surveillance and normalization to train individuals to conform to social norms. Schools, hospitals, prisons, and military barracks exemplify such structures, with hierarchies, routines, and observation mechanisms designed to produce compliant subjects. Through repeated discipline, individuals internalize the logic of control, regulating their own behavior even without direct authority.

was considered a transgression... the most common punishment was wearing a wooden padlock around the neck, for public shame" (Tasevski, 2021: 31-32). Such punishments reinforced conformity, turning deviation into a public spectacle of correction.

This tension - between efficiency and intellectual depth, mass access and mechanical uniformity - is precisely what makes the method paradigmatic for the contradictions of modern education. Critics argued that the Bell-Lancaster method produced conformity rather than genuine education, as monitors could instruct but not cultivate independent thinking (Tasevski, 2021: 127). Thomas Bernard described the system as resembling the division of industrial labor, noting that "the principles in schools and factories are the same ... Dr. Bell's great monitorial system represents the division of industrial labor applied to intellectual purposes" (Mesquita, 2012: 662). In a similar vein, Samuel Taylor Coleridge criticized it as a mechanical model, calling it "an incomparable machine - a vast moral steam engine" (Rose, 2004: 103).

The Educational Context in Ottoman Macedonia: Tradition and Reforms

To understand the emergence and acceptance of the Bell-Lancaster method in Ottoman Macedonia, it is necessary to analyze the broader educational context in which it was introduced. The 19th century was a time of gradual modernization of the Ottoman Empire, but also of strong cultural competition among the non-Muslim communities in the European part of the empire. As a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environment, Ottoman Macedonia was a specific place where tradition and reform constantly clashed.

In the first half of the 19th century, schools in Ottoman Macedonia were largely religious institutions. Among the Muslim population, Quranic schools (mektebs) and madrasas dominated, where instruction was conducted in classical Arabic - a language incomprehensible to the majority of students. Among the Christian population, church-monastery schools prevailed, where teaching was based on reading psalters, catechism, and religious texts, most often in Old Church Slavonic or Greek, which again was not the everyday language of the students. A characteristic of these schools was their limited reach and strictly religious nature. Knowledge was reserved for a small number of students, and the main goal was the preservation of confessional tradition, not widespread literacy (Tasevski, 2021: 154-158).

The situation began to change with the Tanzimat Reforms. The "Noble Edict" of 1839 and the "Hatt-ı Hümayun" of 1856 enabled non-Muslim communities to open their own schools and participate more broadly in the educational process. These reforms transformed education in Ottoman Macedonia: they not only strengthened the autonomy of local communities but also created a space for cultural competition among them. This marked the beginning of a "school explosion," in which Greek, Bulgarian, Vlach, and Serbian communities established their own schools, striving to ensure cultural and national dominance. As Cicek (2010: 227) notes, "the educational reforms undertaken by the Ottoman governments during the 19th century laid the foundations, not of Ottoman national education, but of the separate national education of the Turks and of each of the non-Muslim minorities".

The reforms also had a broader symbolic function. They signified a transition from a strictly confessional to a semi-public and semi-municipal character of education. In these conditions, the Bell-Lancaster method gained additional appeal: it fit the logic of rapidly and cheaply organizing new schools, which increasingly functioned as arenas of cultural legitimization.

The local elites - the so-called "chorbadzhii"- played a key role in this process. As Gančev Eničerev (1904: 10-11) recalls, during meetings of the local notables in Prilep, "all eyes were turned to me, and the elders began negotiating the price of my teaching for the year," showing that these community leaders were the main financiers of the municipal schools. Education thus developed as a private-municipal initiative rather than a centralized state policy. The system operated on a *laissez-faire* principle: the state rarely intervened, and everything depended on the will and means of the

local community.

For this reason, the quality of education varied from town to town and from village to village. Where the *chorbadzhii* invested more funds, schools had better conditions, more students, and more educated teachers. This “local-elite” model of education had a dual effect. On one hand, it limited the possibility of a unified system, as schools depended on local resources and interests. On the other hand, precisely this space of autonomy allowed communities to experiment with new teaching methods, including the Bell–Lancaster method. Because the method promised mass reach at minimal cost, the *chorbadzhii* saw it as a rational investment - an opportunity to create the impression of a “modern” school that encompassed all children with little money.

Adaptation of the Bell-Lancaster Method in Ottoman Macedonia

The adaptation of the Bell–Lancaster method in Ottoman Macedonia was less a faithful transfer than a historically situated translation of “modern” schooling under severe material and linguistic constraints: its appeal was primarily economic - “one book served for six hundred” and “one teacher sufficed for the whole school” (Lancaster, 1805: 52) - which made organizational scalability possible where secular print in a comprehensible Slavic vernacular and qualified staff were scarce; even in Britain the ceiling was basic literacy, memorized Scripture, and elementary arithmetic, so in Macedonia it was unrealistic to expect that brief exposure could produce instructors able both to implant the method and to teach beyond a religious matrix .

In Macedonian historiography, the very concept of “secular education” is vaguely defined. Instead of signifying a genuine break with religious dogma, it is often equated with the introduction of the monitorial method and vernacular language in schools. Authors such as Kantardzhiev (1965: 55, 1970: 126, 2002: 144) reproduce this conflation, which has produced the paradox that clergymen - such as Neofit Rilski or other teachers-turned-churchmen - are presented as the primary agents of “secular” instruction. This paper argues that such interpretations rest on a conceptual slippage: what historiography labels as ‘secular’ education was in fact a hybrid form that preserved confessional content while adopting organizational and linguistic markers of modernity. By disentangling this conflation, the study contributes to clarifying how ‘secular’ was understood and practiced in Ottoman Macedonia.

Read through Koselleck’s conceptual history, this reflects a *Sattelzeit*-type hinge: “secular” did not mean the establishment of a fully secularized curriculum but rather a semantic shift where vernacularization and mutual instruction became markers of modernity without a full epistemic rupture.

Read through Foucault, however, the picture is different: the very micro-techniques of the Bell–Lancaster method - elevated platforms, enforced silence, and public shaming- inscribed discipline that internalized oversight and rendered mass instruction governable (Foucault, 1977: 197). What appeared in historiography as “secular progress” was, in practice, both an incomplete conceptual shift and an intensification of disciplinary power within the school.

Micro-history confirms both possibilities and limits: in Štip, the primary narrative identifies Pavle Zlatanov, who learned the method later - likely during Nikola Tondžorov’s tenure in Kyustendil - returned with Bulgarian charts, attempted partial implementation, and after his death the school reverted to mnemonic monastic practice, an oscillation typical of adaptation without stable textual and staffing bases (Ivanov, 1906: 360–367; Vasiljević, 1928: 84). Without a state textbook regime, teachers assembled curricula from diverse centers; in Prilep, Gančev Eničerev tailored Russian–Bulgarian manuals and Učitel to local needs and even composed a drawing-based geography, while

linguistic misfit spurred Mačukovski's call for a Bulgarian grammar on a Macedonian dialectal basis - clear signs of conceptual work around "language," "grammar," and "school" (Eničerev, 1904: 19–20; Mačukovski, 1872: 4).

Parallel Greek mutual schools followed similar organizational logics but provided superficial outcomes, encouraging a shift toward gymnasia and progymnasia in the 1870s (Chassiotis, 1881: 371–373). In this light, the Macedonian adaptation exemplified educationalisation's double bind - broad social expectations placed on inexpensive, disciplinary organization (Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008: 380; Tröhler, 2011: 56) and made legible the contemporary critiques that likened monitorial schooling to a division-of-labor factory and a "vast moral steam engine," efficient yet flattening (Mesquita, 2012: 662; Rose, 2004: 103).

Conclusion

The case of the Bell–Lancaster method in Ottoman Macedonia illustrates how global pedagogical innovations were refracted through local social, linguistic, and political conditions. Designed in Britain as a universal solution to the challenge of mass literacy, the system became in Macedonia less a program of intellectual emancipation than an improvised strategy for schooling in an environment marked by material scarcity, vernacular fragmentation, and confessional rivalries. Its economic logic - offering mass instruction with minimal resources - made it attractive to local elites who sought visible signs of modernity without incurring high costs.

This adaptation, however, carried a particular ambiguity. Clergy emerged as agents of "secular" instruction, not because schools were liberated from religious frameworks, but because the monitorial method and the use of the vernacular were themselves taken as signs of enlightenment. Teachers like Pavle Zlatanov and Gančev Eničerev improvised with manuals, disciplinary techniques, and hybrid curricula, producing fragile and reversible outcomes that oscillated between modernity and monastic tradition. The disciplinary micro-practices of silence, surveillance, and shame made schools orderly but also underscored their function as institutions of regulation rather than spaces of critical learning.

From a broader perspective, the Macedonian experience exposes the limits of educational universalism. The Bell–Lancaster method did not arrive as a coherent transfer but as a translation shaped by structural scarcity and identity politics. Its legacy lay less in measurable literacy outcomes than in the symbolic capital it conferred: proof that communities were aligned with European modernity. As such, it stands as a historical reminder of the paradoxes of modern education, where progress and discipline, democratization and control, became inseparably entwined.

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