EXPRESSION OF THE „CHILD'S VOICE" IN THE LITHUANIAN KINDERGARTEN IN THE LATE SOVIET ERA

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Abstract: The article analyses aspects of the expression of the concept of the child in the late Soviet era (1964–1988) Lithuanian kindergarten. The research is conducted by use of a narrative qualitative methodology. Thematic analysis of the data revealed the pedagogical attitudes prevalent among kindergarten practitioners during this period and, by comparing these with contemporary quality criteria in early childhood education, identified distinctive features of their pedagogical practice. The research revealed that late Soviet era preschool pedagogy in Lithuania was characterized by: a standardized educational program content; focus on knowledge domain; superficial comprehensive education aspect; normative methodology for assessing children's achievements; subject-based academic instruction; inflexible organization and strict rules of group life, one-way impact pedagogy, often accompanied by psychological and physical punishments; collective education; a narrow conception of didactic tools; unificating internal and external environment without creating conditions for children's activity, creativity, experimentation, and accumulation of experiences; limited parental involvement; strict state and institutional control; a social and ideological context directly influencing pedagogical decisions. The findings indicate that across all the main examined parameters (content and assessment, methods, environment, interactions) there was no visible signs of the concept of the proactive child, an active player in his/her childhood, involved in decisions that

were important to him/her; children's wishes and opinions were not taken into account; the child's powers were seen not as special, but as weak, not equal to those of an adult; in the educational process, the child was treated solely as an object of education. Thus, the opportunities for the expression of the "voice of a child" were extremely limited and that is why the empirical data of the research encourages a more critical, rather than moderate, approach to preschool pedagogy of the analyzed period. The results of the study are relevant because even today there are still common and viable attitudes and solutions that sometimes replicate and multiply outdated practices that are very far from child-oriented pedagogy.

Introduction

Soviet era pedagogy of Lithuania and other Baltic countries, characterized by historical commonality in their forced and significant, radical transformations, has been examined from various perspectives to reveal its key features and provide assessments. The most general approach suggests that the Soviet era pedagogy of the Baltic countries deviated from the European intellectual tradition (Rubene 2013) and that the continuity of the development of pedagogical science in the Baltic countries was interrupted because from 1940 to 1990 it "developed in the Marxist-Leninist pedagogical tradition and was isolated from important global trends" (Rouk 2013: 261).

At the same time, scholars argue that Lithuanian pedagogy from 1940 to the early 1970s was characterized by silent resistance, which evolved into more explicit self-expression during the period of active adaptation (1960–1990) (Vaitkevičius 2001). Kestere & Gonzalez (2021) analyze forms of invisible resistance integrated into everyday social life, examining both teacher and student perspectives. Rōuk et al. (2018) interpret Soviet pedagogy through the lenses of cultural trauma and resilience theories. Other scholars identify not only adaptation and resistance as defining features of Soviet pedagogy, but also its transformative dimensions. It is observed that during the late socialist period, Soviet pedagogy began to change, emphasizing the importance of individualised education, based on the child's developmental characteristics, needs, etc. (Trimakienė 2007; Kestere 2013; Grišinaitė 2017).

The field of preschool pedagogy has also been analyzed. *The Concept of Lithuanian Preschool Education* (Lithuanian: *Lietuvos vaikų ikimokyklinio ugdymo koncepcija*) (Monkevičienė et al. 1989) was the

first strategic document that evaluated the Soviet era pedagogy and emphasized that the perception of childhood as an inherent value at that time was lost. An essential change in methodological approaches to preschool pedagogy (comparing with the pre-Soviet early childhood education in Lithuania) appeared (Gražienė 1998; Montvilaitė 2000), so ideas of child-oriented pedagogy were undesirable[1].

On the other hand, attention to the development of certain areas of preschool education, e.g., art (Narvydaitė 1983; Toleikienė & Trušys 1984), music (Katinienė 1988) and advancements in psychological research (e.g., Chomentauskas 1983) in the late Soviet era Lithuanian kindergarten can be seen as progressive changes. These rather different perspectives on the evaluation of preschool pedagogy during the analyzed Soviet era period — one more critical and the other more moderate — encourage reflection on how evidence about Soviet-era preschool education practices should be understood in the context of these quite contrasting viewpoints, and what tools can be employed for such an evaluation.

First and foremost, the concept of the child should guide the approach and be central to the analysis. It encompasses both theoretical and practical understandings and conceptions of childhood, how we understand children's abilities and capacities, their relationships with adults and environments, and their role in educational processes. Importantly, conceptualizations of the child are dynamic, shifting according to historical, social, cultural, and ideological contexts, which themselves may be integrally related (Falkenberg & Krepski 2020); these prevailing conceptions directly shape pedagogical practice (Sorin 2005).

In contemporary discourses on childhood, based on constructivist philosophy (Sommer et al. 2010; Correia et al. 2019; Edwards 2021), emphasis is placed on the extent to which the child can act actively, make decisions, and exercise independence and agency, whether the child can choose, express opinions, be heard, be seen as a full individual, and have his/her potential recognized. In line with this approach pedagogical practices that support child development and are child-oriented emerge as a priority (Schleicher 2019).

Closely connected to this is the notion "voice of a child", which functions as an operational expression of the child-oriented approach (and in a way as a metaphor). It reflects the core idea of seeing the child as an active, competent individual and serves as a means for implementing this perspective in everyday pedagogical practice. The "voice

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1   There are even more critical assessments: Soviet era preschool pedagogy is compared to the practices in China and North Korea (Putkiewicz 1996)

of a child" is not understood as a mere expression of speech but as a process of participation, in which children are provided with space to express themselves: the more this voice is "heard", the more obvious is child-oriented approach.

Furthermore, the notions of "child perspective" and "child culture" are also closely related to this discourse. The first approach seeks to understand the world from the child's point of view, recognizing children as independent subjects with unique logic, experiences, and perceptions (Sommer et al. 2010; Thulin & Jonsson 2014; Rasmussen & Schmidt 2024). Meanwhile, the second approach emphasizes that children create their own autonomous worlds, distinctive forms of communication, play, and meaning making (e.g., Staerfeldt & Mathiasen 1999); both notions are essential for the understanding of child-oriented approach.

Universal quality criteria for early childhood education, defined by the European Commission, help give clearer shape to today's concept of childhood. These criteria, declared in the *Proposal for Key Principles in a Quality Framework on Early Childhood Education and Care* (2014) emphasize:
- creating conditions for children's activity,
- respecting their perspective,
- providing individualized, inclusive, and integrated learning environments,
- promoting process-based (rather than solely outcome-focused) education,
- ensuring two-way interactions between children and adults,
- empowering parents to participate in decision-making processes,
- involving staff of the institution to cooperate, including psychologists, speech therapists, etc.

These criteria are also consistent with the Lithuanian concept of quality in early childhood education, outlined in *Early Childhood Education Program Guidelines (Lithuanian: Ikimokyklinio ugdymo programos gairės* (2023), which prioritize holistic, inclusive, play-based, and experiential learning approaches.

The described concept of childhood, including the outlined quality criteria for early education, will be used in the study as a framework for the evaluation of empirical data.

Research object: aspects of the expression of the concept of a child during the late Soviet era (1964–1988)[2] in Lithuanian kindergarten. *The*

2   The chronological beginning of the late Soviet era period is commonly considered to be 1964, while the end of the period varies: it is either 1985, as

aim of the research: to reveal mentioned aspects. *Research questions*: What aspects of preschool education content, assessment, methods, environment and interactions can be identified based on the oral stories of kindergarten teachers who worked during the late Soviet era? What concept of the child is revealed, based on contemporary quality criteria of early childhood education? What did the "voice of a child" sound like?

Research Methodology and Framework

This study focuses on understanding of human experience, thus employing qualitative research methods. When investigating Soviet era pedagogy, qualitative methods such as source analysis, comparative analysis, expert evaluation, and others are often utilized. Since documents from that time are of relative reliability, a narrative methodology aligned with phenomenological, ethnographic, interpretative-hermeneutic approaches is more acceptable for this research. This combined approach allows for the exploration of lived experience (phenomenology), the social and institutional context of Soviet pedagogy (ethnography), and the interpretive meaning making of educators' stories (hermeneutics). Narrative research is thus understood as a contextual and meaning oriented inquiry, well suited for educational research (Mitchel & Egudo 2003).

In seeking to create meaning from life events or personal experiences, individuals tend to verbalize them (Hänninen 2004; Clandinin 2006). Personal narratives ("told narrative") within the "narrative circulation model", grounded in theories by J. Bruner, D. Carr, T. Sarbin, A. Giddens, and others (Hänninen 2004: 73–74), intertwine with inner narrative or experience ("inner narrative") and with life story ("lived narrative").

The connection of narrative research with the biographical aspects of the participants is emphasized by Craig (2011), O'Tolle (2018), and Parks (2023). In many cases, it was not easy for the participants of this research to detach from personal contexts: while recounting, life circumstances are remembered, reasons for their actions are explained.

Indeed, integral and authentic evidence of the era is most suitable, specific tool for research on the Soviet era (Vinogradovaitė et

well as 1988 (or even 1989). The boundaries of this period are associated with the political realities of the USSR, as well as with the processes of the Lithuanian National Revival at the end of the 1980s, so the period embraces 1964–1988 year

al. 2018). Thus far, there have been few attempts to base conclusions about Soviet era preschool pedagogy on narratives (e.g., Sliužinskė 2015; Rubene 2019). As this opportunity diminishes over time, it is crucial to accumulate and interpret empirical material from various aspects.

Research Design

Participant selection of the research was based on purposive sampling aimed at forming a homogeneous group. Only those teachers who held kindergarten teaching positions during the late Soviet period (1964–1988) were invited. The main inclusion criterion was direct, firsthand professional experience in preschool education during the specific time. In the article, narratives collected from 2020 to 2022 were utilized (they are encrypted, with each assigned a numerical code with a letter, e.g., A1); the statements of the research participants were not edited, with only language errors corrected. All individuals participated in the research voluntarily.

Data was collected through individual conversations. The main question posed or the main theme was: "What was the Soviet era kindergarten like?". The aim was to get a coherent narrative without disturbing the respondents with separate questions, but if necessary (for example, in cases of confusion or deviation from the topic) just directing their narrative towards revealing the main question. For that purpose, participants of the research only sometimes were guided to reflect on the examined parameters: content of preschool education, assessment of children's achievements, methods, environment, interactions. There was no strict order or structure in presenting topics or open-ended questions; the answers were not prompted.

During the conversation the participants were not stopped from speaking, they were not interrupted, and there were no specific time frames for speaking. Efforts were made to ensure that there were no outsiders in the room during the interview, and that it was quiet and possible to concentrate.

The categorization of participants' narratives was based on mentioned above parameters. Data interpretation involved carefully analyzing transcribed texts multiple times and identifying the most prominent episodes — evidence reflecting the research objective. The stories of 31 participant (all women, aged 70–85) are characterized by recurring statements about factors and strategies related to the "voice of a child", allowing for certain generalizations. Following the principles of qualitative research synthesis, the results were not interpreted

statistically; the emphasis was on interpretive depth and contextual understanding.

Expressions of the Concept of the Child: Empirical Evidence

1. Preschool Curriculum and Child Assessment Practices

Former kindergarten teachers from the Soviet era claim that the education content was unified:

> The educational program was one, it was not changed to tailor it to the needs of the students. It lacked creativity, personality development. The goal was to make all children the same, to suppress their individuality (A1);
> There were plans that teachers simply had to follow. There was no consideration for the children or their desires. Everything was written down in the plans from A to Z, the teachers couldn't ask any questions (A20);
> There were specific instructions for age groups, which topics to teach children, which fairy tales to read, which poems to memorize, what to draw, mold, what movements to teach, what crafts to do, and so on (A1).

One standard curriculum was not adapted for each "Republic"[3] or kindergarten, let alone for individual groups.

The curriculum included areas of moral, intellectual, labor, aesthetic, and physical education, thus encompassing comprehensive education ambitions. However, it is stated that labor education prepared children for "further life", aesthetic education prioritized artistic means and techniques; although children's health care was important in Soviet era kindergartens, the concept of health essentially meant only physical health, and there was no attention given to the child's psychological well-being (Gražienė & Leistrumienė 2022: 14–15). Moral education of children corresponded to the utopia of creating a "New Human" (Trimakienė 2007; Kestere et al. 2020; Kestere & Gonsales 2021; Naudžiūnienė 2021). Participants of the research testify to the ideological practice:

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3   Although at the end of the late Soviet period, examples of national culture (fiction texts, games, etc.) were included in the program, the theoretical and methodological foundations of the curriculum remained the same.

For example, when Brezhnev died, all the children were seated, the radio was turned on, and they were told to cry (A19);
The Soviet childcare system was very ideological. Important holidays were "Lenin's Birthday", March 8th, May 1st, etc. (A6).

Such practices reveal how the education system served not only to instruct but also to indoctrinate, shaping children's values to align with the state's political and social ideals.

General abilities such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative, etc., were not a focus of the curriculum, because the overarching goal of the educational system was to ensure uniformity, not fostering of individuality through the broader skills necessary for personal growth and autonomy. Thus, the content of preschool education is characterized by a standardized curriculum, primarily focused on knowledge acquisition, with a limited emphasis on the holistic development of the child.

In children's achievements during the Soviet era, the priority was given to the assessment of knowledge domain. For example:

The focus was mostly on intellectual achievements, science (A2);
Assessment was very simple, the teachers' task was to release to school children who could read and write, so the assessment was whether they learned and were rated well or not (A7).

This means that the assessment was more result-oriented rather than focused on the educational process. Assessment of outcomes was related to standards and children's achievements were compared to each other's. Research participants say:

Individual children's achievements and progress were not assessed. Children were compared to each other... it was common phrases: "you drew nicely, but you didn't", "take an example from him" (A16);
So, everything was based on comparing children (Jonas, look how well he did, and how does your work look?) (A4).

All children had standards to meet. This had to be ensured by constant, systematic administrative control of teachers' activities. For example:

Teachers were checked every time, they had to present the tasks and results of the daily schedule to the kindergarten director. Taking into account the theme of the day and the educational plan for the month, she approached the children asking them certain questions,

if the children got confused and didn't answer, the teachers wrote explanation sheets and received certain warnings (A8).

Thus, the assessment of children's achievements during the late Soviet period reflected a normative, result-oriented approach, emphasizing standard compliance with rigid criteria over individual progress or developmental nuances.

2. Methods of Preschool Education

The educational content — curriculum — was implemented through separate "lessons". Participants of the research state:

> I remember that there were lessons in the Lithuanian language, mathematics, environmental studies, the Russian language, art, music, and active games. There was a strictly defined schedule and time for each lesson, as well as the number of lessons per week (A10);
> Each lesson was separate: if it was language, then it was language; if mathematics, then mathematics; if construction, then only that, etc. They were left to work independently after the lessons (A11).

So it was an obvious subject-based teaching. Moreover, education was meticulously planned and organized. Therefore, there were no opportunities for flexible, creative development or utilization of educational contexts. One of the participants remembers:

> There were no free activities, children couldn't say what they wanted to do or engage in. Everything proceeded as the teacher planned, as she wanted. There were no free, play-like teaching methods (A31).

Children had no freedom of choice; moreover, since there were many lessons every day, and their quantity and duration were strictly defined, there was little time for play. Play elements in lessons were used only to help children learn and "absorb the material".
The teaching process was very "school-like". Teachers recall:

> The Soviet kindergarten program was oriented towards the average level of development of children of a certain age, so all children were taught equally, regardless of their abilities and talents. No one sought out weak or significantly advanced children. There were no individual or group activities with children (A13);
> Lessons, when children had to sit quietly and learn, resembled school (A14).

The parts of the teaching process were as follows: repetition of the previously taught material, then new material, and finally its consolidation. Silence was required during learning, and to speak, you had to raise your hand.

The participants of the research confirm that there was no individualized education. They state:

Gifted, active children were not allowed to express themselves (A1);
Children with disabilities? Such children could not exist because all people had to be perfect. All children with disabilities were separated from healthy children (...), and those with disabilities were isolated in special education institutions, which everyone called "kindergartens for the backward" (A15);
Children could not write or eat with their left hand, and if they tried, they were punished (A17).

Individual children's needs were considered very primitive. Neither gifted nor children with special needs or left-handed children who had to switch their dominant hand to the right (e.g., Rubene 2019) were seen as different groups. The gifted were often seen as non-standard, "inconvenient" children. In educating everyone, not each child, the child's perspective mattered little. For example:

There was no privacy, not even in kindergarten toilets (A18);
(...) emphasis was placed on "collective mood". We do everything together, we work together, we laugh together, we play sports together, we listen together, etc. (A13);
Children had no chance to express their opinion, so they were like puppets to teachers and parents (A5);
The goal at that time was to prepare the child properly for school and for further life (A27);
According to previous program (...) children were highly standardized. Children had no courage, hardly asked questions, hardly spoke (A9).

Many respondents' accounts include references to psychological violence, bullying, and physical punishment. For example:

Raising your voice was normal (A21);
"Offender" stood in front of all the children, and they would shame him: "Shame, shame on you, how aren't you ashamed"! Also, there were squats: if they disturbed during lessons or didn't sleep, they had to do squats about 10 times (A11);

Children were forced to eat, and no one cared whether they liked it or not (A17);

Disobedient children were made to stand in a corner or were sent to another group. Children also had to sleep. No one asked if they wanted to or not. If they didn't sleep, they were shouted at, and they were also sent to the toilet (A1);

Another case was when a child decided to jump from tile to tile in the toilet and play, and when another teacher saw it, she got angry and told them to stay in the corner, and then during lunch, the child did not receive a normal portion of food, it was like a day's punishment for misbehavior (A22);

Children who didn't listen had to go to the head teacher's office for a conversation (A24).

It is worth mentioning a specific group of kindergarten employees — assistant teachers. Although their functions were not pedagogical, they often felt important and not only assisted, but also "educated": they suppressed, punished (e.g., a person who attended the kindergarten[4] remembers how he was locked in a folding bed, attached to the wall, by the assistant for not sleeping).

The organization of group life had a certain rhythm: periods of more intense children's activity and rest, mental and physical activity alternated. Both indoors and outdoors elements of this daily routine were controlled. The exceptional feature of group life organization was its inflexibility and strict rules. Participants of the research detail:

The daily routine was divided into hours, with accuracy to the minutes (A20);

The daily routine was very specific, nothing could be changed because a specific plan was made, and children's opinions were not taken into account (A33).

Thus, when analyzing the methods employed in preschool education during the Soviet era, it becomes evident that a subject-based, academically oriented approach prevailed, with minimal attention to experiential or play-based learning. The educational process was highly structured, rigid, and uniform, leaving little space for spontaneity, creativity, or responsiveness to individual children's interests and developmental needs. The lack of individualized education, limited opportunities for self-expression, and the prevalence of disciplinary practices reflected an overall focus on conformity, standardization,

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4   Not a participant of this research.

and collective order over personal growth, autonomy, and emotional well-being.

3. Environment of Preschool Education

In kindergartens there were toys, building blocks, musical instruments, physical education equipment, outdoor play equipment, etc., but they were scarce, and the ones available were of poor quality. Educational tools in kindergartens at that time mostly associated with didactic materials:

> Large educational posters and educational cards, which helped to learn the rules of polite behavior, also presented positive and negative behavior of children. There was also a felt board and pictures, which served as educational material, and we created stories for the children using cards (A29).

The group environment was modeled by "corners". Teachers' memories indicate that some corners were purely decorative, as not all toys were accessible to children. For example:

> In their group, there was a so-called Lithuanian corner that children could not even approach. Children were allowed to take something from it only when a commission visited the group or during some seminar when the teacher had to conduct a lesson for the children (...). There was also a large closet in the group with many toys, but children couldn't touch them; children could only play with them when there were guests in the group (A23);
> Among the listed tools, there was also a large walking doll, which looked more like a museum exhibit because only "special" children were allowed to touch and play with it, usually touching was strictly prohibited. However, privileged children occasionally had the opportunity to play with it for a short time, of course, under the supervision of teachers (A31).

In Soviet kindergartens, the physical environment was the most important. Despite that the environment was very standard: the same architectural design, the same standardized appearance of group and outdoor environments (metal cars, swings, sandboxes, etc.). Participants of the research say:

> Just like school teachers, kindergarten pedagogues did not have much freedom of choice, even the arrangement of the group itself,

the outdoor environment looked very similar to other kindergartens (A32);
The group environment was such that the sleeping area was separate, there were metal beds, one after the other, because there were many children. Then there was a large common room where children eat, play, and have lessons. There were also separate rooms for the toilet and a small kitchen. There were only a few educational corners (A33); Sometimes, during the summer, teachers themselves renovated the kindergarten premises. They painted walls, floors, shelves (A34).

Physical environment was adapted to a large number of children and planned so that children would be in kindergarten from early morning until evening: there were places for children to sleep, one or several rooms, a kitchen, a laundry room, storage rooms, etc. The psychological environment was not a priority, for example, there were no spaces for parents; during the Soviet era, kindergartens did not have names, instead they were simply numbered, groups did not have names neither (the name of a group only indicated the age of children, e.g., "Nursery group").

In conclusion, the physical and didactic environment in Soviet era kindergartens was marked by a narrow, utilitarian conception of educational tools and spaces. The environment was standardized and unifying, prioritizing practicality and conformity over fostering conditions for children's active engagement. The lack of flexibility and the limited opportunities for experimentation or self-directed learning constrained children's ability to explore their interests, express their individuality, and accumulate meaningful experiences through play and discovery.

4. Interactions
in Preschool Education

It is argued that during the Soviet era, the educator was assigned a central role in the educational process (Montvilaitė 2000; Sliužinskė 2015). Indeed, the relationships between children and educators in the memories of the participants of the research reveal a one-sided communication "from adult to child". For example:

In other kindergartens, some educators were very strict, with a predominance of "military" discipline, while others tried to provide more favorable conditions for children. In our collective, such situations did not occur, but the relationship with the children was based on a practice of obedience (A20);

We were authorities for the children, but we did not have very close and warm relationships (A35);
Equality between educators and children was impossible to discern because the superiority of the educators was clearly felt, and the child had to obey (A12).

Participants of the research repeatedly mention the overestimated authority of educators and authoritarian relationships. Although respect for adults was considered one of the priority values, it often turned into unconditional obedience.

Former teachers recall that parents were not allowed into the group, and they would only accompany the child to the group's door. It is mentioned that most often, parents only had questions about their children's sleep and meals.

Although the network of children's kindergartens expanded during the Soviet era, and the number of children attending preschool institutions increased (Sliužinskė 2015), there was still a severe shortage of kindergartens. Not all families received help (e.g., from grandparents), so getting a child into kindergarten was a challenge, and bribes were often used. Gifts and bribes were a normal practice in the pragmatic "boredom society" (Vaiseta 2014):

The parents, who held good positions, often brought gifts to the educators: a good handbag, a pair of winter boots, peas, mayonnaise, bananas, and other deficit goods of that time (A6).

Not only parents had to navigate the unsafe reality. The pedagogy of power — where authority and control were central in dealing with children — coexisted with various "survival" strategies of pedagogues, allowing them to navigate the oppressive system and to protect themselves from potential consequences. Some of these tactics involved adapting and conforming outwardly to official expectations while quietly resisting in private, finding subtle ways to preserve one's dignity and values without attracting the attention of the authorities. It is remembered:

There were some good things, but certainly not many. In the kindergarten, I found like-minded people who had the same opinion about real education, not destroying children. We started to act clandestinely, but we behaved in front of the authorities like all other teachers. In my group, violence, bullying, or anything similar was not tolerated, which I had to observe in other groups (A25);
It was very important to "look good" to the arriving guests or inspectors (A13);

There were various teachers, just like before, and there was no choice but to feel controlled constantly, with no opportunity to choose, so the teachers couldn't help but be quite strict (A26).

On the other hand, some "survival tactics" were quite shameless: for example, children's food was taken by the staff for themselves. There are numerous memories about thefts as well; for example, X (A23) admitted, that she didn't steal food from the kindergarten, because she was young and had no one to carry it for, but the assistant in her group did it every day because she had a large family to feed. Educators often exploited the pronounced social hierarchy of society, as social status of parents was highly emphasized. It is remembered:

Educators had favorites; they loved the children of socially strong parents (A37);
During the Soviet era, it was normal to openly discuss the appearance and behavior of other children and their parents (A6);
Children were often judged based on the positions their parents held (A38).

Stories of the research participants about the interactions prove clear signs of the impact pedagogy, preventing the "voice of a child" from being heard: the dominant teacher, one-way interaction between child and teacher, and also teacher-parent. The social context (e.g., social status of parents, bribes, gifts) directly influenced pedagogical decisions.

Discussion

The study confirms previous research on Soviet pedagogy, which characterized it as normative, collectivist, and result-oriented; at the same time, these insights are expanded as highly specific manifestations of pedagogical practice occur. Based on authentic reflections, it became possible to more precisely identify and more boldly evaluate the specific features of the late Soviet era preschool pedagogy of Lithuania. Although participants in the study mostly recalled and evaluated the practical functioning elements of the system, the broader concept of the child emerged. What was this concept like?

It is important to note that the preschool education system of the analyzed period, which encompassed both methodological foundations as well as their practical recommendations, existed (e.g., Sliužinskė 2015) and were aligned and declared in the preschool curriculum.

The ideologically driven methodology emphasized the comprehensive development of the child, moral upbringing, the harmony of education and instruction principles, attention to health, and corresponding strategies to achieve these goals (*Program for Upbringing and Teaching in Kindergarten* (Lithuanian: *Auklėjimo ir mokymo vaikų darželyje programa* 1982).

However, from today's perspective, these methodological guidelines were limited because they did not create a favorable environment for child-oriented pedagogy; in the late Soviet period, practise of pedagogy systematically turned away from child-oriented principles, and the "voice of a child" diminished. Indeed, the main features of the development of preschool child were not considered: the preschool child was not perceived as an active personality with unique needs, as an independent actor of his childhood. The opportunities for a child to accumulate experiences and explore the world without the guidance of a dominant educator adhering to a strict plan was not available either. Neglected was the child's syncretic perception of the world, which relies on holistic and integrated approaches rather than segmented or subject-based practices. Equally overlooked was the idea that a child's daily experience should not be split into separate "learning" and "non-learning" times.

Since child-oriented pedagogical methodology and practice were not priorities in late Soviet Lithuanian preschool pedagogy, what replaced them? The concept of the child during that time reflected other models: the innocent/naïve/uninformed child (the "innocent child" model) (Sorin 2005: 2–3) and the child as a learner preparing to become an adult (the "copy of the adult" model) (Sorin 2005: 16–17). The child was not viewed as a subject with his own will, but as an object that needed to be given the desired qualities, abilities, and knowledge, which was not yet perfect, and therefore needed to be purposefully improved. The child was "constructed" solely by adults, and he himself was perceived as incapable of creating his own daily life and his own knowledge. Even his behavior was modeled according to the wishes of adults, so the attitudes of behavioral pedagogy were very much alive.

Thus, the above-mentioned correspondence between methodological provisions and the practice implementing them was only imaginary, since the methodological principles of late Soviet preschool pedagogy were often distorted in practice, and the practical forms of pedagogy differed significantly from the declared principles and at times became unrecognizable (e.g., there were no written recommendations in contemporary pedagogical sources to punish children). It can be concluded that from the point of view of the concept of the child, the ideological Soviet doctrine of a "happy childhood" should be

viewed only as a slogan, because its practical implementation was not child oriented.

It is worth refining some points of this discussion: "there was a systematic departure from child-oriented pedagogical principles" and "child-oriented educational practice was not a priority in late Soviet Lithuanian preschool pedagogy." An analysis of institutional early childhood education traditions in Lithuania before 1940 (Gražienė 1998) reveals that a preschool education system — covering methodological foundations as well as their practical application — existed even during the pre-Soviet era. Its distinguishing feature was its orientation toward the child, grounded in the European early childhood education science: individualization of learning, integrated education, recognition of play, the importance of authentic experiences, and more.

Therefore, to achieve a clearer and more objective image of late Soviet preschool pedagogy, its research in Lithuania should be as historically contextualized as possible: on the one hand, to avoid stereotypical evaluations of the period, and on the other hand (paradoxically), to make certain conventional assessments more striking because they would be grounded in research. It would be worth contextualizing not only historically (and in one country level), but also geographically, when studying preschool pedagogy processes in other countries with similar history.

It should be noted that it is worth using a variety of interdisciplinary methods for the research object, not only the educational ones; especially since there are already such examples. The Soviet period has recently been analyzed from many perspectives — philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, art history, etc., and attention to the phenomenon of the Soviet period is still not decreasing. Those who have studied this period deeply and in detail, and have made significant contributions to the field, include Švedas (2009), Vaiseta (2014), Narušytė (2014), Dapšytė (2015), Ramonaitė (2015), Juknevičius (2022), and Leinartė (2022). Most of these studies are characterized by interdisciplinary nature: some of the perspectives are intertwined (e.g., politics and sociology, history and politics, cultural history and social history, art history, anthropology and philosophy). The emergence of original discourses is also conditioned by the fact that as the Soviet era receded, a time distance emerged, which helps to more objectively assess the object of research.

Conclusions

Thematic analysis of the research data across four parameters — preschool curriculum content, assessment of children's achievements,

pedagogical methods, and learning environments and interactions — reveals that Lithuanian preschool pedagogy during the late Soviet era (1964–1988) was characterized by:

- a unified program with standardized educational content;
- normative (rather than formative) assessment of children's achievements;
- an exaggerated emphasis on children's cognitive achievements (knowledge);
- academic, non-integrated, subject-oriented teaching;
- one-sided pedagogy of influence rather than interaction, often accompanied by psychological and physical punishment;
- collective rather than individualized education;
- lack of appreciation for play as the most essential and meaningful form of children's activity;
- a narrow understanding of didactic materials;
- a unified internal and external environment that did not encourage children's activity, creativity, experimentation, or accumulation of experience;
- inflexible group organization and strict rules;
- limited parental involvement;
- strict state and institutional control;
- a social and ideological context that directly influenced pedagogical decisions.

Based on the identified features of preschool pedagogy in Lithuania during the analyzed period, there is little evidence that the concept of the proactive child as an active participant in his/her own childhood was recognized, and child-centered pedagogy was present only to a minimal extent. As a result, opportunities for children to express their "voice" were also very limited. Therefore, this period appears to merit a more critical rather than moderate evaluation.

The findings of the research do not contradict the possibility that more positive practices may have existed. While most participants in the study shared experiences far removed from child-oriented pedagogy, further exploration and interpretation of the diversity of those experiences remains possible, contributing to a more nuanced portrayal of Soviet era preschool education. It is feasible to conduct multilayered analysis, identifying local deviations from strict norms, and examining how educators manoeuvred official pedagogical doctrines and their subtle resistance.

The conclusions of this study remain relevant today, as some practices not characteristic of contemporary pedagogy persist, such as

academic teaching strategies, inflexible planning, and emphasis on "preparing" the child for school.

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