

# The image of a preschool child in socialist Hungary

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## Abstract

When examining the image of children, it must be kept in mind that there are two types of images of children in every era. One is the real child image, which is a knowledge construction based on the individual values of adults in the real world. The other is the ideal child image, which is the image of a child that is expected by society and proclaimed to be perfect. (Nóbik, 2000) The image of the ideal Soviet child, of a child with a strong collective spirit, fosters friendship with children of other nationalities, and last but not least, nurtures a strong love for the socialist homeland. The child can reach the goal and fit into society through education. The basis of their approach is the ideal they want to transform the child into. (Pukánszky, 2003) The miniaturized communist warrior child was therefore the goal of education during the period of socialism. (Kéri, 2003) The kindergarten became the primary scene of conscious education influenced by politics, and the kindergarten teacher became the mediator of the principles. A phenomenon typical of the era is the large-scale development of institutional provision, as a result of which in 1958 only 29% of children of preschool age attended kindergarten, while in 1972 it was already 62%. (Kurucz, 1970 és Kókény, 1983) The pedagogical environment has therefore changed significantly compared to the past. The ideology of all the nations of the socialist bloc was permeated by the theories of Soviet thinkers, norm and performance orientation, individual values and self-realization were replaced by the idea of conformism and collectivism. (Pálfi & Vargáné, 2023) My research covers the examination of the ideal of the preschool child, the transformation of images of children published in the journal *Óvodai Nevelés*, the regulations of preschool activities and the principles of education.

**Keywords:** pre-shool education, preschool child, socialist

## The conception of the child

Modern societies seem to have a clear definition of what childhood is, what characteristics characterize a child, and where it is placed between generations

and in the social value system. This awareness in the 19-20. It began at the turn of the century, when, in addition to doctors, psychologists and educators, the interest of the public was increasingly focused on the fact that questions and problems related to children received more and more attention from the adult society (Szabolcs, 1995). When examining the image of children, it must be kept in mind that there are two types of images of children in every era. One is the real child image, which is a knowledge construction based on the individual values of adults in the real world. The other is the ideal child image, which is the image of a child that is expected by society and proclaimed to be perfect. The existence of the latter presupposes that society considered the child as a person who can be educated and changed. The same connection can be said about the educational method implemented in life and the educational method considered ideal as a critique (Nóbik, 2000). A complete harmony cannot be established between the image of the child and the actual educational practice. Historical sources show how childhood was perceived and how adults saw the child, rather than accurately reflecting specific treatment and everyday events (Szabolcs, 1995). One of the starting points of the children's image is the ideal man, which in the examined era is the socialist ideal of man, which appears as a man who lives, works and thinks in a socialist way in the congress directives of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. More broadly, the ideal socialist man has such merits as devotion to the cause of socialism; love of the socialist homeland; conscientious work for the benefit of society; passionate interest in public affairs; moral purity, simplicity and modesty (Forgó, 1962). From the above, the image of the ideal Soviet child emerges, of a child who has a strong collective spirit, cultivates friendship with children of other nationalities, and last but not least, nurtures a strong love for the socialist homeland. Already in the XIX. the authors of 19th century pedagogical works also mostly treated the child as a future adult. The child can reach the goal and fit into society through education. The basis of their approach is the ideal they want to transform the child into (Pukánszky, 2003). Even during socialism, they were not seen as real children, but as minor communist fighters. At the beginning of the 1950s in Hungary, from the point of view of party ideology, the point was not the child itself, but the possibility of how they could be shaped thanks to the socialist pedagogy and the party state (Kéri, 2003). Under the conditions of a socialist society, new social and pedagogical conditions arise for the child's development and active participation in the process of education. In this society, not only does the child's activity and self-activity exist in principle, but it is also objectively in the interest of society to ensure this (Nagy, 1977). By this time, pedagogical theories and psychological trends based around institutional education almost

completely shape the opinion of the professional and lay public about children (Szabolcs, 1995). The 1963 document establishing the primary school curriculum did contain guidelines for the first four grades of the school, but at the same time it formulated expectations for the education of children, which in this way also affected the kindergarten. The purpose of elementary school is to shape the personality of children so that the communist ideal of humanity can finally be realized in them. In order to achieve this, they found it necessary to achieve uniform and modern general education, to convey communist morality, and to lay the foundation for a man who loves his country and peace and works for society (Tanterv és utasítás, 1963). From the above, we can also see that the creation of a socialist society began in childhood, which is well proven by the ideological background for kindergartens, as well as the ideas about elementary schools based on the curricula.

### **Educational principles**

The 19-20. At the turn of the century, knowledge and views about children became research areas of modern sciences. As a result of the evolutionary theory, the appearance of the development principle in biology and psychology further expanded the knowledge related to the physical, mental and spiritual process of child growth. Freudism, which traces the foundations of personality and behavior from the past, from early childhood. Pragmatism, which considered adaptation to a given life situation as its idea, thus considered an active, active child in the learning process to be desirable. The main concept of behavioral psychology is that environmental influencing factors have a greater influence on actions, and on the actions of children, than genetic, inherited characteristics. So, by shaping the learning environment, it is possible for the child to actively and independently participate in the acquisition of knowledge. The increasingly clear theories of developmental and child psychology provided the scientific basis that led to multi-source pedagogical views. Summarized within the framework of reform pedagogy, these views still have an impact on the socialization of our children and the various elements of institutional education. The common characteristic of reform pedagogies is that they ultimately go back to Rousseau's understanding, rely on the scientific results of psychology and promote child-centricity. They wanted to create educational principles based on the child's nature, tendencies, and abilities, thus creating a new pedagogical method (Szabolcs, 1995). These reform movements tried to implement the new principles into educational practice, however, they only reached a very thin layer of children with their

innovative efforts (Nagy, 1977). During the period of socialism, however, the main goal in Hungary was therefore the reshaping of public thinking along the lines of party ideology. Erzsébet Bélaváry-Burchard, who actively participated in the creation of kindergarten pedagogy in accordance with communist principles and also contributed to the drafting of the 1953 Act on Kindergarten, translated several of Maria Montessori's books into Hungarian before 1945 and ran a Montessori-style kindergarten from 1927 to 1944, and from 1928 to operated a school from 1941 to 1941 in Budapest. He did not allow Soviet pedagogical views and practices to completely displace reform pedagogy from Hungarian kindergarten practice, therefore he ensured the retention of some elements of the Montessori educational system with his methodological recommendations (Báthory & Falus, 1997). Through her work, the "official" image of children also changed: they were increasingly seen as future members of socialist society, who should be prepared for life with purposeful education, strong ideological education, and persuasive conversations with daily political content. Politics infiltrated the kindergarten, and the child appeared in the new kindergarten laws and in the programs governing daily work as an ideologically prepared, politicizing little adult (Pukánszky, 2005). In this period, the communist system determined the main directions of education and upbringing, and attempts were made to transfer the socialist ideology to the kindergarten environment, whose scientific sources were the works of Soviet authors. The pedagogical environment has changed radically compared to before the war. From 1949, they began to copy the Soviet model, and the published literature was flooded with Soviet pedagogical thinking. The importance of preschool education was emphasized as follows: The period before school is very important in a child's life. Later, when the child goes to school, how we can organize the pre-school period and how we can raise the child during this period will have a significant impact (Barakonyi, 1954). The socialist philosophy attached great importance to the education of the rising generation, because it was seen as the key to the reproduction of the system. The ideology of all the nations of the socialist bloc was permeated by the theories of Soviet thinkers, norm and performance orientation, individual values and self-realization were replaced by the idea of conformism and collectivism. The typical educational practice meant ignoring the child's individual interests and needs (Pálfi & Vargáné, 2023). The adult-centered education of the era was not conducive to the individual enforcement of children's rights, even if the declared goal of socialist pedagogy was to ensure the same rights for all children based on equal principles. In the course of collective education, "the community that absorbs the individual was put at the center" (Golnhofer, 2004). The main objective of education is therefore to form community people of the next

generation, who are held together by the unity of the collective society (Bakonyi, Juhász & Tóth, 1965). In summary, it can be said that the complete copying of the Soviet educational philosophy and practice is typical of the early 1950s, which was primarily explained by the need for a political approach and social transformation. The capitalist society was replaced by the communist society, the durability and reproduction of which was seen in the education of the new generations in a communist spirit, for this purpose the education system, including the kindergartens, was radically transformed so that the old thinking and practice were replaced by the new, collectivist ideology (Lenin, 1953). The strength and intensity of the direct central efforts decreased by the end of the examined period, as a result of which the objectives also changed and the ideal of the "politicizing" child was replaced by the education of children "preparing for school" (Pukánszky, 2005).

### **Portrayals of children appearing on the front pages of the Óvodai Nevelés journal**

The journal of the Ministry of Education, Óvodai Nevelés, is the primary press product of kindergarten affairs (Vág, 1964). As a continuation of the journal Kisdednevelejs, which existed since 1948, it was published in 11 issues a year from 1953, since two of the summer months were combined. During the examined period, its number of pages kept increasing. Although it was published as a continuation of the journal Education, with the significant difference that while its predecessor was the press product of the Free Trade Union of Hungarian Teachers, from 1953 it was under the care of the Ministry (Kéri, 2002). Ilona Szabadi, editor-in-chief of Óvodai Nevelés, summarized the difference between the two publications in the way that the Kindergarten mainly collected fairy tale, poem and song materials into a bouquet, while the Óvodai Nevelés already focused on Soviet theoretical and practical pedagogy, which were based on Soviet works (Szabadi, 1953). So it is clear that the magazine conveyed party ideological values. In her article published in 2002, Katalin Kéri researched the children's image in addition to the magazine Nők Lapja, some of the Óvodai Nevelés, more precisely 1953-1954. examining his grade and came to the conclusion that the ideal child in Kindergarten "is a worker and a fighter, and education for work as the main pedagogical goal was therefore the main, prioritized topic of the newspaper's articles". (Kéri, 2002:54) There is no data on the number of copies published in the entire period, because in the 1970s they already relied on the subscriber base and did not indicate the number of copies published. Its importance is exemplified by the 1962 publication entitled "A Guide to Leading

Kindergarten Teachers to Raise the Standard of Kindergarten Management" compiled by a kindergarten teacher, five kindergarten teachers, and three supervisors, which, in addition to the specialized books recommended for the kindergarten library, also covered magazines in its extensive material. First of all, the publication recommends the journal *Óvodai Nevelés* as a reading that every kindergarten teacher should order individually, but at the same time, it recommends that the kindergarten collect the magazine issues subscribed to the institution every year in order to avoid possible omissions. The publication only appears in the Public Education and Culture Gazette after Kindergarten Education, which is considered sufficient to obtain one copy per institution (Vincze, 1962).

At first, only drawn pictures appeared on the front pages of the *Óvodai Nevelés* magazine, mostly snapshots of kindergarten sessions. From 1955, the drawn front pages were gradually replaced by photographs, initially with only two cover photos, with drawn images still appearing, albeit only a few times. From 1956, only photos can be seen on the front pages, with the exception of the December 1964 issue, on which János Kas's drawing of a mother with her child is shown, and on the front page of the December 1967 issue, a picture drawn by Endre Bálint shows a kindergarten yard work. After that, at the beginning of the September 1968 issue, we can again see a depiction of a mother with her child, this time by Picasso, and then again with a mother with her children in the work of Ádám Wütz, who decorated the consolidated issue of February-March 1969. Finally, in January 1972, Picasso's work, with the child of another mother, appeared on the front page again. The subjects of the photographs did not change to a great extent at first, but by the end of the examined period, the overwhelming majority were almost entirely pictures of a child. It is noticeable that during the examined period, almost portrait-like images of only children increased greatly, and we can see that compared to 5% in the 1950s, they already show a value of 29% in the 1970s.



Illustration 1. *The front page of the journal Óvodai Nevelés, May 1961 issue*

### Summary

In summary, it can be said that the examination of the image of children can be divided into two main aspects: the real image of children, which develops according to the values of adults, and the ideal image of children, which reflects the expectations of society. In socialist Hungary, the image of the ideal child was closely intertwined with collectivist values, where children were brought up in the spirit of community spirit, friendship towards other nations and love for the socialist homeland. The aim of pedagogy was not only individual development, but also the training of adults who represented the socialist ideal of a committed, moral and community-minded person. The kindergarten played a key role in this, as it was here that the education of children based on socialist ideologies began, the aim of which was to raise generations useful to society and in line with political expectations.

Examining Soviet pedagogy and its effects through educational principles, it can be established that it emphasized the development of children's personality and collectivity. The 19-20. at the turn of the 20th century, scientific approaches to child development (evolutionary theory, Freudianism, pragmatism) shaped pedagogical views, which led to the guidelines of reform pedagogy, but under socialism the emphasis on children's rights and personality was pushed into the

background. The aim of socialist education was to ensure the unity of the collective society, and education turned towards the community instead of the individual, with strong ideological influences. Soviet pedagogy therefore emphasized the social roles of both educators and children, as well as the connection between education and work.

The change in the front pages of the journal *Óvodai Nevelés* clearly reflects the strengthening of the central role of the child as an individual personality. Back in the 1950s, the front pages were dominated by pictures drawn in the 1950s, which mostly captured moments of kindergarten activities or family scenes. In the early years, the drawings showed more social, interactive images that focused on the relationships between adults and children. However, by the second half of the decade of 1955, photographs increasingly supplanted drawings, and visual representations gradually shifted to individual depictions of children. The photos began to highlight the portraits of individual children, and the visual focus shifted from the adults to the children's unique personalities. In addition to the increase in the number of photographs, the themes also underwent a subtle change: while initially social interactions dominated, later the portrait of a single child became more and more prominent. This process clearly reflects the change in social attitudes, which increasingly directed attention to the individual development, emotional and psychological needs of children, emphasizing the individual values and rights of children during preschool education.

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