

## Article

# Between Action and Awareness: Exploring Reflective Pathways in Preschool Education

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## Abstract

Reflection, as a key component of the educational process, strengthens the child's sense of identity, self-awareness, and ability to learn consciously. Although the theoretical foundations of reflection are widely studied in educational science, its practical application in the context of preschool education remains fragmented and under-researched. The aim of this study is to reveal how preschool teachers understand, apply, and model the reflection process in educating 4–5-year-old children, to reveal the role of reflection between pedagogical action and conscious perception of education. The study is based on a qualitative methodology, applying the semi-structured interview method and the principles of qualitative content analysis. The study involved preschool teachers and educational support specialists working with 4–5-year-old children. Data analysis made it possible to identify the fundamental directions of the concept and application of reflection in pedagogical practice. The results of the study showed that reflection in preschool education acts as a link between action and awareness, that is, a process that allows both the teacher and the child to reflect on and transform the educational experience. It manifests itself through emotional awareness, self-assessment, professional growth, and adaptation of activities to the needs of children. Reflective practices integrated into daily education promote children's metacognitive and emotional abilities, strengthen their self-awareness and motivation for learning, and provide teachers with the opportunity to purposefully improve their professional practice and improve the quality of education.

**Keywords:** preschool education; reflection; reflective pathways; educational process; teachers' experiences



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## 1. Introduction

The updated preschool education documents (*Preschool Curriculum Guidelines, 2023*) identify reflection as a key component of the educational process, strengthening the child's sense of identity, self-awareness, and ability to learn consciously. One of the key tasks of teachers in preschool education institutions is the ability to recognise the individual needs of each child, consistently assess their progress, and create conditions for the development of self-reflection. Based on the guidelines of the *Preschool Education Program Guidelines (2023)*, in each of the eighteen areas of child education (learning) achievements, six steps of child achievement are identified, showing the child's progress from birth to six years of age

and helping to draw attention to the differences and needs of child education and needs in order to achieve the best personal results. In addition, the importance of reflection in the development of creativity, children's experiential activities, the development of children's learning skills, etc., is highlighted. The guidelines for the [Preschool Education Program Guidelines \(2023\)](#) state that the purpose of the guidelines is to present essential agreements on the education program for children from birth to 6 years of age to ensure high-quality preschool education and continuity of education. They also set out the principles of education, one of which is the principle of reflective education, where the teacher and the child reflect on activities, emotions, results, and further action. This document also emphasises that children aged 3 to 6 are already capable of reflecting on their experiences. The reflection process not only strengthens the learning to learn competence, but also helps the child develop critical thinking, self-esteem, and social skills.

It is progressive that the national-level document ([Preschool Education Program Guidelines, 2023](#)) emphasises the importance of reflection by instructing educators to apply the principle of reflective education: the teacher, together with the child, reflects on the child's experiences through emotions and actions; together with the children, their emotions, activities, and results are reflected upon according to their abilities, and further action is planned; teachers consider the authentic experiences of children, the quality of their activities, and the impact of their pedagogical decisions on the education of children. This is an excellent strategic step in preschool education policy, drawing attention to the importance of teaching young children to reflect on their activities and experiences, why they are interesting to them, and so on. However, this innovation causes considerable concern for practicing teachers, as questions arise about how to organise reflection, what practices to use, and what methods of reflection to choose.

The concept of reflection was extensively developed by [Schön \(1992\)](#), who defined reflection in-action and on-action. According to him, reflection is not just a retrospective assessment, but also the ability to become aware of one's actions in real time and adjust them. This theory is particularly relevant in preschool education, because when working with young children, teachers must be able to respond flexibly to their spontaneous initiatives and emotional needs, while at the same time helping children become aware of their actions. Subsequent studies have expanded this concept, emphasising that reflection has three dimensions—technical, practical, and critical—that allow the teacher to systematically evaluate the educational process and the child to better understand his or her own experience ([Jay & Johnson, 2002](#); [J. J. Chen, 2023](#)).

Empirical research confirms that reflection in preschool age has a dual effect, both for the child and the teacher. [Syslová's \(2019\)](#) study found that teachers who consistently include reflection in education achieve higher quality results because they are able to more accurately identify children's needs and adapt educational methods. Reflective pedagogical practice contributes to children's engagement and motivation, strengthens their self-esteem, and develops collaboration skills. The conducted studies emphasise the ability of children to reflect on their experiences. Preschool children can name their successes, difficulties, and learning process if the teacher offers appropriate methods. [Bassachsas et al. \(2020\)](#) observe that by organising reflective discussions, children reached a higher level of development of individual critical reflection than initially expected. Reflection makes it possible to identify 'invisible' or difficult-to-express challenges for the child, which gives the teacher the opportunity to adjust the educational process in time. This is particularly important for developing children's self-esteem, because reflection not only strengthens feelings of self-confidence, but also forms metacognitive skills, which become an important prerequisite for further learning ([Narengaowa & Tungalag, 2024](#); [S. Chen et al., 2025](#); [Eberhart et al., 2025](#)).

Despite the benefits of reflection, many studies show that this field is still not given enough attention in the practical context of preschool education. Jay and Johnson (2002) noted more than two decades ago that teachers usually understand reflection only as a technical procedure focused on planning activities or discussing results; however, they do not reach a deeper critical level of reflection that would allow them to question the very goals, values, or social contexts of education. This insight is still relevant today, because even in modern practices, teachers tend to focus on superficial aspects of their activities rather than on broader issues of educational processes and the social environment (J. J. Chen, 2023). Research reveals that this problem is exacerbated by several interrelated factors. First, teachers' heavy workloads and lack of time limit their opportunities to reflect regularly, both individually and collectively (Bassachsas et al., 2020). Second, preschool curricula often do not include clearly defined reflection methods or guidelines; therefore, reflection is often left to the teacher's initiative and becomes fragmented. Third, some education systems still adhere to a traditional educational paradigm focused on achieving results and testing rather than on analysing processes and giving meaning to children's experiences, which is why the culture of reflection remains on the margins.

It is also important to mention the aspect of teacher training. Although in many countries reflection is declared as one of the key competencies of teachers' professional development (Schön, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 2014), in practice, beginning teachers often lack specific tools and strategies that help them systematically reflect on the educational process. This means that reflection often becomes a 'formal' procedure, carried out due to institutional requirements, rather than as a meaningful part of professional activity (Grushka et al., 2005). The solution to this problem is associated with the need to systematically integrate reflection into preschool education practice, creating conditions for teachers to reflect not only individually, but also at the community level. Researchers emphasise that reflection becomes more effective when teachers have the opportunity to carry it out in cooperation with colleagues, discussing educational situations, analysing practical cases, and sharing experiences (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Such collective reflection helps not only to assess the effectiveness of education, but also to take a critical look at pedagogical decisions, social norms, and institutional contexts that shape children's experiences. In the scientific literature, reflection is defined as a cognitive and metacognitive process that allows a person to reflect on their activities and learning, as an emotional process related to the recognition, naming and self-regulation of feelings, and as a pedagogical practice that helps a teacher consciously evaluate and improve the educational process (Denham et al., 2012; Decker et al., 2021; J. J. Chen, 2023). Even though the phenomenon of reflection is widely studied in educational science, most studies are focused on its individual dimensions—cognitive, emotional or professional—and are usually analysed in the contexts of general education or teacher education (Jay & Johnson, 2002; Nolan et al., 2023). In the field of preschool education, reflection is more often described as a methodological or emotional activity, but there is a lack of research that conceptualises it as a holistic process that combines pedagogical action and conscious experience, encompassing both the teacher and the child's perspective (Syslová, 2019; J. J. Chen, 2023). In addition, the sources still lack empirical evidence on how reflection is consciously modelled in everyday preschool education practice when working with 4–5-year-old children and how this process affects pedagogical decision-making and the development of children's self-awareness in a specific national curriculum context. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining reflection as an intermediate process between action and consciousness in preschool education, revealing its significance for both children's experiential learning and teachers' professional practice.

In summary, it can be stated that although reflection is recognised as a key element of professional development and quality education, its implementation is limited by structural, cultural, and methodological factors. Therefore, in the preschool education system, it is necessary not only to promote the practice of reflection, but also to create real conditions for teachers to apply it by providing time, methodological tools, and opportunities for cooperation, which would allow reflection to become a permanent and meaningful part of the educational process.

The study aims to explore how reflection functions as a connecting process between action and awareness in preschool education—linking teachers' professional practices and children's experiential learning. It seeks to understand how preschool teachers conceptualise, apply, and model reflection in working with 4–5-year-old children, and how this process contributes to both pedagogical quality and children's self-awareness.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following core research questions:

RQ1: How do preschool teachers conceptualise the meaning and significance of reflection within their pedagogical practice?

RQ2: How is reflection applied and modelled in the education of 4–5-year-old children, and what forms or strategies support its integration into daily learning?

RQ3: How does reflection—understood as a process between action and awareness—create pathways for mutual learning and growth between the teacher and the child?

## 2. Materials and Methods

*Methodological approaches of the research.* The conducted research is part of a comprehensive study, the aim of which is to reveal the experience of preschool teachers in applying and modelling reflection in the educational process of 4–5-year-old children. A qualitative research approach was chosen, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon of reflection and the context of pedagogical activity in a natural environment. Such a methodological orientation is particularly appropriate when seeking to examine phenomena related to personal and professional experience, social interaction, and the dynamics of educational practice. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to reveal not only objective facts, but also subjective experiences and interpretations; therefore, it is considered the most suitable for analysing the realities of applying children's reflection in everyday pedagogical activities. The chosen methodological approach also responds to the latest trends in educational research, emphasising that reflection processes are best revealed through natural contexts and authentic narratives of participants. In this way, data analysis not only makes it possible to identify the structural manifestations of reflection, but also to reveal how teachers conceptualise the meaning of reflection in the educational process and how it integrates into the teacher's daily activities.

**Research context.** The study was conducted in one of the largest counties—Vilnius County. The need for the study was implied by the need to clarify teachers' experience in applying reflection in the educational process, because from 2025, according to the legal acts of the Republic of Lithuania, the application of reflection in preschool education is not a good practice, but a necessity important for the quality of the preschool education process.

**Data collection method.** The study used a semi-structured interview method to explore the experiences of preschool teachers and educational support specialists in applying reflection in the educational process of 4–5-year-old children. A semi-structured interview was chosen due to its flexibility and the possibility for the researcher to deepen the answers by asking additional questions. This method allows for a combination of pre-planned questions with spontaneous ones that arise during the interview and is therefore

particularly suitable for research that analyses participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations in a natural educational setting.

The research instrument is an interview questionnaire, designed based on the research aim and theoretical framework. The questions were grouped into thematic blocks:

*Block I—understanding the concept and importance of reflection.* The questions in this block aim to clarify the informants' understanding of the meaning of reflection and its role in the educational process and personal pedagogical practice. The questions are formulated on the basis the works of Rolfe and Freshwater (2020), Belobrovy (2018), Bubnys (2012), and Žibėnienė and Indrašienė (2017), which describe reflection as a complex process that combines thinking, emotional perception, and analysis of activity. These approaches coincide with recent foreign research, which defines reflection as an interactive, socially constructed process that strengthens professional identity and the teacher's ability to adapt to various educational situations (J. J. Chen, 2023). In this way, the aim is to reveal how teachers perceive the importance of reflection not only for children's but also for their own professional growth.

*Block II—application of reflection in the preschool education process.* This block aims to find out how teachers organise reflection in the educational process, what methods and forms they use when working with children. The questions were constructed on the basis of the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (2023), which identify reflection as part of a consistent educational process. Integrating reflection into daily activities contributes to the growth of pedagogical quality and helps children become active participants in the learning process.

*Block III—reflection opportunities in educating 4–5-year-old children.* The questions in this block aim to understand how teachers perceive and apply reflection processes in early childhood groups. The questions were prepared based on the works of Žibėnienė and Indrašienė (2017) and Lastakauskienė (2015). The logic of the study is based on the fact that children aged 4–6 are already able to initiate metacognitive processes that are closely related to their learning outcomes and the development of social-emotional skills. Reflection helps children of this age better understand their actions, recognise emotions, and form the foundations of self-regulation.

*Block IV—teacher's activity in modelling reflection in the educational process.* This block aims to delve into the role of the teacher in planning, structuring, and supporting reflection processes in the educational environment. The questions were prepared based on the insights of Lastakauskienė (2015) and the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (2023). This line of research is complemented by recent foreign works, which reveal that the reflection process becomes a tool for the teacher to create social and emotional support for children and promote cooperation in the educational environment (S. Chen et al., 2023; Hooper & Johnson, 2025). In this way, reflection is perceived not only as a methodological practice, but also as an important factor in creating professional interaction and a learning culture for children.

**Data analysis method and validation.** The research data were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. The methodological framework is based on the principles of qualitative content analysis, described in detail by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), Bengtsson (2016), and Mayring (2015), which emphasise a systematic course of analysis, theoretical justification, and the maintenance of contextual meaning.

This method is based on a systematic and contextual text analysis process, during which semantic units are identified, grouped into categories and subcategories, and then summarised into conceptual analytical units. In this way, the aim was to reveal the main research themes, their interrelationships and semantic dimensions. Qualitative content analysis allows for maintaining a close connection between empirical material and theoretical context, ensuring consistency in data interpretation and the reliability of the research. The

process of analysis involved several stages: reading and familiarising with data, isolating semantic units, coding them, forming categories and subcategories, and interpreting them. The preparation phase involves repeated reading of the data. This helps the researcher become deeply familiar with the content and context and gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. At this stage, the researcher determines the unit of analysis and decides whether an inductive or deductive approach aligns with the research aim. The next stage is the identification of meaningful or semantic units, where the text is divided into segments that directly relate to the research questions and convey distinct meanings. These meaning units are often condensed, but their essential message is kept, to help systematic analysis. In the coding stage, each meaning unit is assigned a label that captures its core idea and stays close to the original data. Codes are continuously compared, refined, and adjusted as the researcher's understanding develops. Following coding, codes are grouped by similarities and differences into subcategories and broader categories. These categories represent a higher level of abstraction, and they must be internally coherent but clearly distinct from each other. Finally, in the abstraction and interpretation stage, categories are further conceptualised and integrated to answer the research questions. At this level, findings are interpreted considering the research context and existing theory, while remaining grounded in the empirical data. This method is widely used in modern educational research, when it aims to reveal teachers' experiences and the meaning of professional practice in a natural environment.

Validity was ensured by applying a systematic analysis process, carried out in accordance with the specified stages and principles of qualitative content analysis. The involvement of the entire team of researchers in the analysis of the data and their critical evaluation, re-reading helped to better understand the content and reduced the risk of superficial interpretation. Continuous comparison of meaningful units, codes and categories ensured internal consistency and rigour of the analysis. Clear documentation of analytical decisions and the formation of categories strengthened the reliability of the study. Interpretations were illustrated with excerpts of empirical material, which demonstrated the validity of the conclusions with the data and increased the reliability of the study results.

**Research participants.** To form the research sample, criterion sampling was used, which is based on the purposeful selection of participants according to predetermined criteria to collect high-quality data that are relevant to the research. This method is widely used in qualitative research, when the aim is to gain a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study in a natural context, rather than to generalise data from the entire population (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The sampling criteria were as follows:

- participants are preschool teachers and educational support specialists;
- at least two years of work experience with children aged 4–5;
- practical experience of applying reflection in the educational process.

Pedagogical experience was chosen as a significant criterion because experience allows the teacher to try various reflection methods and reveal how they affect the quality of children's education. Such sampling ensured a diverse range of insights and allowed for the analysis of the phenomenon of reflection from different professional perspectives. The study participants discussed the application of reflection before, after, and during educational activities, providing an opportunity to reveal the impact of reflection on the educational process.

The study also applied the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until new interviews no longer provide additional information or new insights into the phenomenon under study. This principle makes it possible to ensure the quality of the data and the completeness of the study by emphasising the value of information content rather than sample size (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Once data saturation is reached, conducting

additional interviews is no longer considered expedient. In the initial stage of the study, we planned to interview more than 20 study participants; however, after data saturation, when information began to be repeated during the study and no new information was received, the sample formation was discontinued.

The study involved 12 informants selected from six different preschool institutions. After providing the research information to the heads of institutions and obtaining their consent, they recommended teachers who met the selection criteria. Each participant was contacted individually, the aim of the study was presented, confidentiality was ensured, and verbal informed consent to participate was obtained.

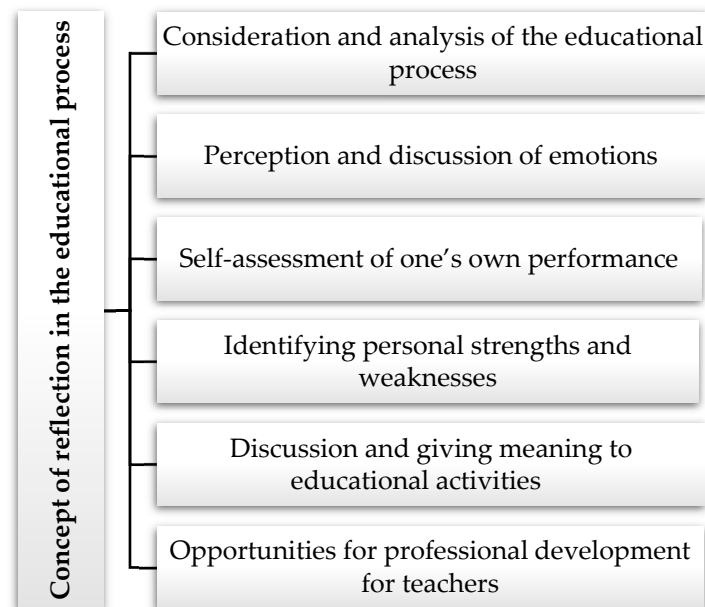
**Research ethics.** The research consistently adheres to the basic ethical principles of voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, protection, and justice (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Kaiser, 2009). The principle of voluntariness means that preschool teachers are included in the study only on a voluntary basis; they receive clear information about the meaning of the research, its implementation, and the use of the data, and have the right to refuse to participate or not to talk about questions they do not want to answer or do not know the answer to at any time. The principle of confidentiality ensures that no data collected during the study will allow the identification of informants, and their personal data will only be used for generalisation. The principle of privacy states that the data provided by informants are used only for research purposes and will not be published elsewhere. The principle of anonymity means that informants are coded (e.g., A1, A2, etc.) and their identity remains concealed throughout the study and in the publication. The principle of protection ensures that informants are not exposed to harm during the research process: it is checked that no research activity violates their dignity or emotional state, and only paragraphs relevant to the topic are used in the interpretation of data. The principle of justice means that all informants are given equal rights to participate or withdraw from participation without consequences; the research aims not to restrict their freedom and clearly emphasises the benefits and moral basis of participation.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Preschool Teachers' Attitudes Towards Reflection*

The study participants were asked how they understand children's reflection in the educational process and how teachers perceive reflection in their work. The data analysis made it possible to identify the category 'Concept of reflection in the educational process' and six subcategories: consideration of the educational process, perception and discussion of feelings, self-assessment of one's own activities, ability to understand difficulties and strengths, discussion of activities, and the opportunity for teacher development (see Figure 1).

*Consideration of the educational process.* Teachers primarily associate reflection with purposeful analysis of the educational process. Reflection allows them to understand how much the educational activity met the goals, how much the children were involved, and what benefits the organised experiences provided: 'It is conscious thinking over the learning process <...>' (A1). 'For the teacher, it is thinking over his or her work and children's engagement <...>' (A3). 'Children's reflection is data recorded by the children themselves during the topic being taught, and they contain children's feedback, which states what I, as a teacher, should change and what should be left <...>' (A7). In this way, reflection becomes not only a methodological tool for assessing the progress of activities, but also an indicator of the quality of learning. This approach can be interpreted as revealing an intention to use reflection as feedback, helping both the teacher and the child learn from their experiences.



**Figure 1.** Categories and subcategories revealing preschool teachers' attitudes towards reflection.

*Perception and discussion of feelings.* From the point of view of some of the study participants, reflection is related not only to knowledge or discussion of activities, but also to the expression of emotions. When reflecting, children name the feelings they experienced, and teachers reflect on how the activities affected both the children's and their own emotional state: 'I think that children's reflection is a discussion of the child's experiences and feelings <...>' (A5). '<...> as well as discussing children's feelings and emotional experiences' (A7). 'I think that the teacher's reflection is a process where I think about how the children felt, how I felt as a teacher <...>' (A5). 'Reflection, I think, would be <...> awareness of our feelings, how we feel after performing a certain activity' (A3). This concept makes it possible to understand that reflection is an integral part of social-emotional education, helping to develop empathy, the ability to recognise one's own emotions and understand the experiences of others. This shows that reflection helps develop not only cognitive but also emotional abilities, which are extremely important at an early age.

*Self-assessment of one's own performance.* The teachers emphasise that reflection is closely related to the ability to self-assess. Through reflection, children learn to think about what they liked or what they failed at, what new knowledge they gained, and how they could use it: 'Reflection, I think, would be self-assessment <...>' (A3). 'Children in our kindergarten, in the group, reflect on their crafts, they evaluate how they liked or disliked the task, what new things they learned from that task, where they could apply it' (A6). 'This is reflection, in my opinion, this is <...>, allowing children to assess their own progress <...>' (A11). This process is important for teachers because it allows them to observe how children perceive their learning and how their ability to consciously evaluate the results of their activities is being formed. Interpreting this, it can be stated that reflection becomes a tool for developing children's self-awareness and metacognitive skills and it gives teachers the opportunity to understand what stage of development each child is at.

*Ability to understand one's own difficulties and strengths.* The study participants see reflection as a process that allows children and teachers themselves to identify their weaknesses and strengths. 'Reflection, I think, would be discovering your weaknesses, strengths. <...> to understand your strengths, weaknesses' (A9). 'Reflection, I think, is <...> discovering one's own weaknesses and strengths' (A3). 'Well, at least I understand it as <...> what

worked, what didn't, how things went during the activity or just during a conversation with the children' (A4). Through reflection, children learn not only to notice failures, but also to acknowledge their successes, and teachers learn to identify areas in which they themselves should improve. This concept of reflection shows that this process can be important for the formation of self-esteem, because learning to identify difficulties and strengths develops the courage to take responsibility for one's actions and the ability to accept mistakes as part of learning.

*Discussion of activities.* Reflection is also understood as a discussion of the activities that have taken place. The teachers emphasise that activities are discussed both during the process and after completing the tasks or the educational cycle: 'A discussion where the child tells what happened and thinks about what could be done differently to make it even better' (A5). 'Reflection is like a summary, or a discussion of some game, or all the activities of the day or the week' (A2). 'Children tell us whether the topic was interesting and relevant to them, or they didn't like it, what they didn't like, why they didn't like it, we talk to the children' (A6). Children can share their experiences, say what they liked, what was interesting, and what caused difficulties. This allows teachers to better understand children's needs and interests. It can be interpreted that the dialogue between the teacher and the child during reflection is a prerequisite for creating child-centred education, because teachers receive a direct signal of how children assess their experiences.

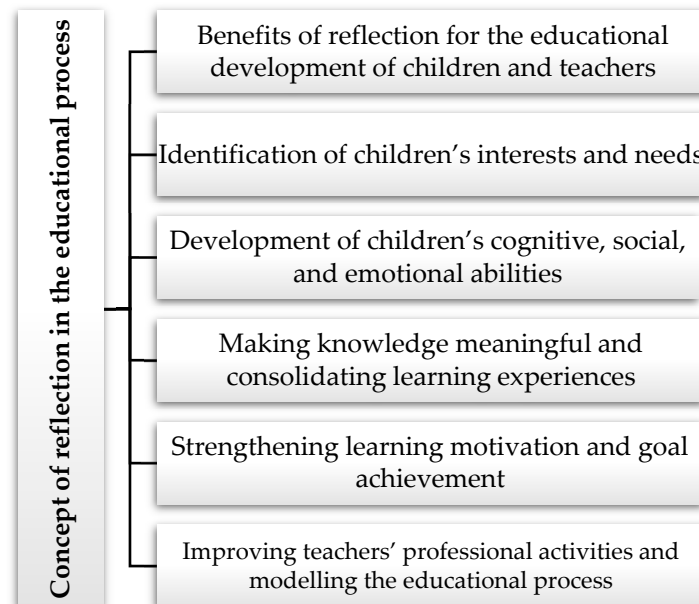
*Teacher development opportunity.* Some teachers perceive reflection as a personal tool for professional growth. By reflecting on educational activities, they notice what worked and what needs to be improved, discover new methodological solutions, and gain a deeper understanding of the specifics of their work: 'It's a process where, returning to my previous activities, I think. And most importantly, when I notice things that went wrong and try to find a plan B so that next time everything goes as smoothly as possible' (A12). '<...> arguments on how to improve the educational process and how to make it effective <...>' (A7). '<...> Reflection, in my opinion, can help teachers refine their personal style, understand how to work with specific children, and creates conditions for achieving such learning outcomes for students that both they and the teacher can be proud of' (A7). This concept shows that reflection is a two-way process: it not only helps children understand their learning path but also helps the teacher become a more conscious practitioner. In this way, reflection becomes part of professional identity, strengthening the teacher's ability to adapt to changing educational needs.

In summary, it can be stated that the results of the study reveal the multifaceted nature of the concept of reflection: it includes cognitive, emotional, and professional dimensions. On the one hand, reflection helps children develop self-awareness, critical thinking, and the ability to self-assess; on the other hand, for teachers, it becomes a tool to improve the educational process and develop professional competence. This concept shows that reflection in preschool education is not just an additional activity, but a key element that helps to coordinate the learning needs of children and the professional growth of the teacher.

### 3.2. Preschool Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Importance of Organising Reflection

The study participants were asked what importance they attach to organising reflection in the education of 4–5-year-old children and what arguments they base their opinions on. The data obtained revealed that the organisation of reflection in preschool education is perceived by teachers as a multifaceted process that has significant benefits for both children's educational development and teachers' own professional activities. The qualitative analysis made it possible to identify six subcategories describing the importance of reflection: benefits of reflection for the educational development of children and teach-

ers; identification of children's interests and needs; development of children's cognitive, social, and emotional abilities; making knowledge meaningful and consolidating learning experiences; strengthening learning motivation and goal achievement; improving teachers' professional activities and modelling the educational process (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Categories and subcategories revealing the views of preschool teachers on the importance of applying and organising reflection.

*Benefits of reflection for the educational development of children and teachers.* The teachers perceive reflection as a process that benefits both the child and the teacher at the same time. '<...> I think reflections are very useful for both adults and children' (A3). 'Really eager to get involved <...>' (A2). 'I think this is very important because it will be easier for them to enrich their learning skills at school afterwards' (A10). 'Reflecting improves the educational process and helps children regulate their emotions and behaviour, and in the long term, it will help children achieve their goals both at school and in life' (A7). 'Reflection helps children better understand their learning path' (A8). 'Children reflect so that they can speak, express their thoughts, so that there are no ambiguities for them, so that they are not afraid to speak about what is unclear to them, and this is extremely useful for the child' (A6). This shows that reflection is a complex phenomenon that strengthens children's readiness for formal education, helping to develop self-awareness, social and emotional maturity, and communication skills. At the same time, for teachers, reflection becomes a means to evaluate the success of the educational process, assess the level of children's engagement, and make decisions about further methodological actions. This two-way benefit allows reflection to be seen not only as an additional educational activity, but as a key process that creates conditions for ensuring a quality learning environment.

*Identification of children's interests and needs.* Reflection becomes a diagnostic tool for teachers, helping to more accurately identify which activities are attractive to children and which do not arouse interest. '<...> for example, some kind of hide and seek, you can discuss what you liked more, hiding or seeking, and they discuss it and say, seeking or hiding, or something else <...>' (A2). 'To see <...> what they liked the most <...>' (A5). '<...> we usually talk to the children about what they found interesting, what they enjoyed, what they succeeded at, and they just tell us everything' (A4). Such reflective situations allow children to identify their own interests and allow teachers to create child-centred activities that are not only more motivating but also help achieve educational goals more

naturally. The reflection process in this case becomes an important tool in individualising education and considering the needs of each child, which are extremely diverse at this age.

*Development of children's cognitive, social, and emotional abilities.* Reflection is considered an effective mechanism that helps children develop various competencies: from the ability to understand and name their emotions to critical thinking and social courage. 'It's just that sometimes children have a hard time understanding their feelings, and they sometimes either judge themselves too highly or too poorly, so they learn through reflection' (A3). 'Fear overcomes in front of an audience, then, well, they can do it, they can evaluate their work, whether it was successful or not, what they would have done differently, problem solving already emerges. If something didn't work out, they can talk about how they would solve the problem differently, how they would do it, how they would do that work differently to succeed' (A6). '<...> develop self-regulation, critical thinking <...>' (A7). Such observations suggest that reflection helps children develop the ability to evaluate themselves more objectively, solve problems, overcome stage fright, and develop the courage to express their thoughts publicly. These are important skills that build children's self-regulation, strengthen their self-confidence, and help prepare them for future learning challenges.

*Making knowledge meaningful and consolidating learning experiences.* Reflection helps children not only acquire new knowledge, but also structure and make sense of it through personal experience. 'Somehow like a consolidation of knowledge, maybe even' (A4). 'Then, when reflecting, they can ask for additional work to absorb that information, because without reflecting, if the child didn't succeed, well, then he just leaves that work, he didn't succeed and that's it, but when he reflects, he sees it, compares it with other friends <...>' (A6). 'At that time, reflection can help the child not only process this information, but also structure it, and understand how children mentally review their actions, or reflection is guided, where teachers or other adults help the child analyse experiences in a structured way, taking into account the child's age and abilities, children begin to understand information better <...>' (A9). '<...> it is through reflection that they learn, and this is how they learn how to use it later in life' (A3). Such responses show that reflection becomes a bridge between knowledge and practical life: it helps children process information, compare themselves to others, and develop the ability to apply new experiences to real-world situations. This is especially important in preschool age, when children, on the threshold of transition to formal learning, must learn not only to accumulate knowledge, but also to understand its meaning.

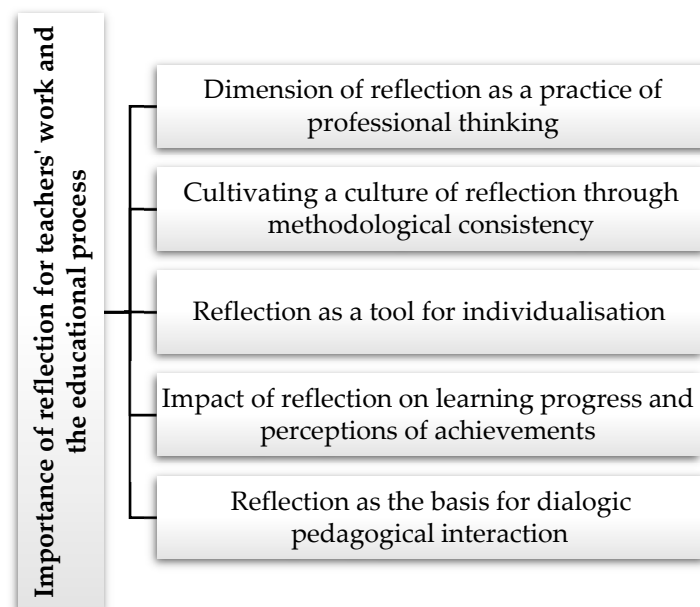
*Strengthening learning motivation and goal achievement.* Reflection becomes a means to promote children's intrinsic motivation and develop their habit of consistently achieving goals. 'Children are very happy when teachers praise and encourage them. I think it's important to them, too' (A2). 'It also motivates to strive for progress, and this is especially important in speech therapy, because children must understand for themselves how and why they do it, why they need to learn a certain pronunciation or expression of speech' (A11). 'And reflection, presented in a fun way, becomes not just a fun activity for them but without even realising it, children get used to it and can contribute even more to their education <...>' (A5). It is observed that reflection evokes positive emotions in children, which not only strengthen short-term engagement, but also help form a long-term attitude towards learning as a process, where it is worth the effort. This internal motivation becomes an important prerequisite for the child's readiness to move on to other stages of education.

*Improving teachers' professional activities and modelling the educational process.* Reflection gives teachers the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their activities and adapt the educational process to the needs of children. 'Most often they arise from all the children's ideas, they draw what they saw, how they perceive it. Then we, the teachers, analyse what

they saw in that topic' (A3). '<...> we discuss every day, and of course with my colleague, how things went, how things went wrong, how something went well, or the children's behaviour, or how the morning circle was, what needs to be changed' (A12). 'I think it is very important to organise children's reflections, because four- or five-year-old children are very receptive, learn quickly, and their vocabulary is already quite extensive, making it really easy to communicate' (A5). 'Well, that reflection is actually useful for teachers themselves, because they can understand how the child understands the learning process itself and how perhaps the teachers themselves should improve somehow so that the child understands better or perhaps educational methods should be applied more effectively' (A10). '<...> It is not always the teacher who chooses the method, it is possible to choose the methods that suit the child, because perhaps he or she absorbs some information better through flashcards, and other information better by playing there using tablets or collaborating with a friend, these are the methods, that is why it is important <...>' (A6). These responses show that reflection becomes for teachers not only a tool for assessing children's learning, but also a space for professional development, in which they can rethink their methods, discover new ways of working, and create a more personalised educational environment.

### 3.3. Significance of the Application of Children's Reflection for the Activities of Preschool Teachers and the Educational Process

The study aimed to find out what teachers think about the importance of reflection organised/applied to 4–5-year-old children in the educational process. The data obtained revealed that organised reflection of children helps the teacher to improve, creates conditions for improving pedagogical activities and the educational process. Qualitative analysis revealed five subcategories that describe the importance of children's reflection in the context of preschool education: reflection as a tool for pedagogical self-assessment; as a method of developing children's reflective abilities; as a tool for individualisation; as an enhancer of learning progress, and as the basis for dialogical interaction with the child (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Categories and subcategories revealing the importance of children's reflection for the activities of preschool teachers and the educational process.

*Dimension of reflection as a practice of professional thinking.* The results of the study revealed that children's reflections encourage teachers to reflect on the organisation of their educational process, evaluate the measures applied, and plan changes. The teachers acknowledged that children's opinions provide valuable information about the suitability and interest of activities. One study participant emphasised: 'It seems to us, adults, that we have come up with very interesting ideas, prepared interesting tools, but when you talk to the children, you hear that they don't like it at all, they like other activities' (A2). Children's reflections become the basis for teachers' self-assessment and improvement of the quality of education. 'We discuss it all the time, ask what they liked about the day, what was more difficult, and there are definitely opinions that you hear that the children didn't like something' (A2). Such moments of insight encourage teachers to plan activities more flexibly: 'When preparing for the next week, when writing plans, I take those reflections into account—I foresee other aims and objectives' (A2). According to the teachers, children's expressions during reflection help create more engaging contexts and encourage creative planning: 'Sometimes they offer their own ideas, and this is how engaging activities and contexts are born' (A5). The teachers emphasise that during reflection they rethink their methods and adapt them to the characteristics and abilities of children because 'it is important to apply reflection flexibly to four- and five-year-old children, considering their abilities and needs' (A9). Thus, reflection acts as a professional thinking practice that strengthens teachers' ability to evaluate and improve their own performance.

*Cultivating a culture of reflection through methodological consistency.* The study revealed that teachers aim to apply the reflection process systematically, as consistent repetition allows children to gradually learn to reflect. One teacher observed: 'Children aged 4–5 can already reflect with the help of a teacher. Some of the children in my group do this independently, but it happens because of constant reflection' (A12). The teachers agree that reflection is difficult for children at first, but consistent application and teacher support help develop this ability. As the informant noted, 'they are taught to reflect, however, the very beginning is very difficult because the child is not yet able to understand what the teacher wants' (A6). Therefore, the teachers are looking for ways to start reflection in a playful manner, using simple forms: 'The reflection of four- to five-year-old children is still at an early stage, but it can be encouraged in playful ways' (A1); 'For younger children, reflection began with simple questions: how did you do in your activities today? what was the most interesting thing? did anything go wrong?' (A7). The teachers also emphasise the importance of methodological consistency: 'The reflection process must be structured, considering the children's capabilities' (A7); 'The most important thing is to choose the right methods according to the characteristics of the children in the group' (A5). Thus, the culture of reflection in preschool education is formed consistently, on the basis of playfulness, structure, and consistency, which allow children to gain experience of self-reflection.

*Reflection as a tool for individualisation.* Data analysis revealed that the reflection process helps teachers better understand each child, their strengths, difficulties, and interests, and therefore becomes an important tool for individualising education. The teachers notice that children's personal characteristics, particularities of communication, and learning styles emerge during reflection. As one informant noted, 'I noticed that some children simply cannot speak during morning circle, so I reflect with them individually and ask questions personally' (A5). Other teachers emphasised that 'when activities are taking place, not all children express themselves, but during reflection, you allow everyone to speak individually' (A4). Such conversations allow teachers to notice the child's emotional state and learning needs. Data obtained during reflection help to plan more targeted activities: 'Reflection makes it easier to organise the process because we see what gaps children have, what they lack, and what knowledge they have already acquired' (A3); 'Then I can choose

topics that develop the skills that are most lacking and see what interests the children the most' (A5). In this way, reflection helps teachers create more personalised education, tailored to children's abilities, experiences, and emotional needs.

*Impact of reflection on learning progress and perceptions of achievements.* The research data revealed that the reflection process positively affects children's learning motivation, self-regulation, and ability to perceive their own progress. According to the teachers, reflection develops children's awareness and self-control: 'Applying reflection helps a child develop awareness, self-control, and motivation to learn' (A1). Children consolidate knowledge through reflection and learn to reflect on their achievements: 'Reflection helps to consolidate knowledge, discuss with children what they have succeeded in' (A4). The reflection process promotes self-regulation: 'It helps children better understand the learning process and increases their engagement' (A1). Children also learn to recognise and name their emotions: 'They learn to name their feelings, understand what worked and what was difficult' (A1); 'I reflect with the children, asking them to draw their experiences, feelings, and what they liked about the topic' (A5). The teachers emphasise that the practice of reflection takes time; however, it yields long-term results: 'It takes effort, but at the end of the year, the children can reflect perfectly well on what they liked, what they didn't like, why, and what they would do differently' (A6). In addition, reflection helps teachers collect data on children's achievements and progress: 'Reflection helps to see children's achievements, conduct assessments, and have evidence for parents during achievement discussions' (A7). Thus, reflection becomes part of not only children's learning, but also teachers' assessment practices, strengthening the quality of education.

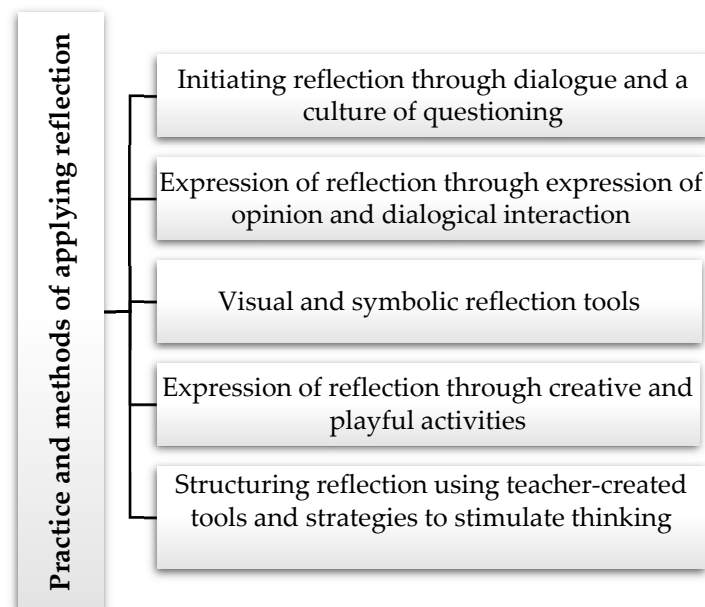
*Reflection as the basis for dialogic pedagogical interaction.* The study revealed that the reflection process strengthens the pedagogical relationship with the child and builds mutual trust. The teachers emphasise that even when discussing failures, reflection remains supportive and encourages collaboration: 'Some children get disappointed if they don't succeed at something, some think too highly of themselves, but we, teachers, are facilitators, we help by continuing to work with the child' (A3). Such conversations help children feel safe, learn to accept failures, and see them as opportunities for improvement. During reflection, there is an opportunity for deeper, more meaningful conversations: 'During the conversation, children can talk more extensively and express their thoughts coherently' (A6). Older children, according to the teachers, can discuss even more consciously: 'They can be encouraged to have deeper discussions about how they were successful in solving problems, whether they understood certain concepts, and how they would act in the future' (A11). In this way, reflection becomes the basis for dialogic pedagogical interaction, i.e., it strengthens the bond between the child and the teacher, promotes mutual understanding, cooperation, and emotional closeness.

### 3.4. Reflection Practices and Methods Used in Preschool Institutions When Educating Children

After conducting a qualitative data analysis, five subcategories emerged, revealing how preschool teachers apply reflection when educating 4–5-year-old children. The data showed that the reflection process is mostly based on dialogue, expression of opinion, creative and visual means, as well as strategies for stimulating thinking. The teachers' statements show that reflection is becoming an integral part of the educational process, encouraging children to be active, self-aware, and more consciously involved in activities (see Figure 4).

*Initiating reflection through dialogue and a culture of questioning.* The research data revealed that reflection based on questions and answers is the most common practice used by the teachers to encourage children's involvement in the educational process. Reflection often takes place during morning circle time or after activities, when teachers ask children

about their knowledge, experiences, and impressions. One teacher emphasised that ‘during morning circle, children are most often asked if there is a specific topic. We asked them, what do you know about this topic? For example, Lithuania—which countries and cities have you visited, what did you see there, what do you know about that city?’ (A3). Other informants pointed out that during reflection, children are asked questions about their experiences, emotions, and achievements: ‘you ask the child: how did it go, what did you like, what do you remember, what worked, what didn’t work?’ (A4), ‘usually in my group, where four- and five-year-old children are educated, we do reflections in a question-and-answer format: what did you like, what did you remember, what was unclear, what would you like to do next time?’ (A5). The teachers emphasised that during reflection, children learn to express their thoughts themselves, and conversation becomes a natural part of the educational process. As one teacher says, ‘we discuss a lot, and reflections often happen naturally—in the form of conversations or questions and answers’ (A9). Such practices allow the teacher not only to assess children’s experiences, but also to promote their ability to reflect on their own learning.



**Figure 4.** Categories and subcategories revealing reflection practices and methods in educating 4–5-year-old children.

*Expression of reflection through expression of opinion and dialogical interaction.* The data of the analysis showed that teachers seek to promote children’s ability to freely express their opinions before, during, and after educational activities. Such free-form reflection allows children to name their thoughts, emotions, and self-assess their achievements, and allows teachers to better plan educational content. As one teacher says, ‘children express their opinions, express themselves, and then we already know how to model that educational process—what more we should add for them, what less, what they already know, what needs to be re-learned’ (A3). During reflection, children name the difficulties or successes they have experienced: ‘he says a few sentences about his work there, for example, I had difficulty saying a word with the sound ‘r’ and I will try again’ (A10).

The teachers emphasise that reflection is becoming a normal part of children’s behaviour: ‘children are already used to the fact that when the activity ends, they want to have a say’; ‘for them, it’s like a normal process to express their opinion a little, to say something’ (A4). Some organise reflection in small groups so that everyone can have a say:

‘if we fail to talk to the whole group, then we talk in small groups and discuss’ (A6). This form of reflection promotes children’s engagement, openness, and cooperation.

*Visual and symbolic reflection tools.* Empirical data show that teachers widely use visual and symbolic tools that help children evaluate their own performance and emotions. Such tools allow for reflection not only verbally, but also non-verbally, closer to the world of children’s experiences. As one teacher pointed out, ‘we have a traffic light—children attach their name to a colour: whether they liked it, whether it was unclear, whether they would like to change anything’ (A7). Another informant explained that ‘according to the traffic light principle, when a name is placed next to the corresponding colour, it means green—I succeeded, yellow—I didn’t really understand, red—it’s completely unclear’ (A5). Emotion cards or gestures are also used for children’s reflection, helping them to show the feelings they experienced: ‘I use emotion cards where children can show how they felt while doing the task’ (A12); ‘if they give a thumbs up, it means everything went well for them’ (A1). Such symbolic tools help children recognise their emotions, name them, and learn self-assessment. Some teachers creatively adapt the reflection process by incorporating cultural elements. For example, one teacher said: ‘children enjoy telling never-ending fairytales, when everyone says one word from the topic. For example, we talked about Kaziukas’ Fair, and the children continued the story: ‘there were lots of bagels, everyone was dancing and singing...’ (A5). Such storytelling games help reflect on experiences in a playful and creative way.

*Expression of reflection through creative and playful activities.* The study participants emphasised that reflection often manifests itself through creative activities, such as drawing, acting, or playing. Although these forms are used less frequently than conversation, they give children the opportunity to reflect on their experiences through forms of artistic expression that are familiar to them. As one teacher noted, ‘children reveal themselves in their own way during free play—they act and reflect on their acquired knowledge’ (A3). Another informant stated that ‘children draw what they see, how they perceive it, and the teacher writes down their thoughts’ (A7). Such creative methods allow children to convey experiences through images and allow teachers to gain insight into children’s thinking processes and emotional relationships with activities.

*Structuring reflection using teacher-created tools and strategies to stimulate thinking.* The study data revealed that the teachers actively develop individual reflection tools and use various strategies that help systematise children’s achievements and promote thinking about learning. As one teacher says, ‘we have certain tools, children evaluate themselves: good, average or bad’ (A3), another teacher adds that ‘we use progress charts where the child assesses how well he or she has done’ (A1). In addition, some teachers use thinking development strategies that allow for a deeper level of reflection: ‘we tried using thinking hats, keys, thinking maps’ (A7). Such methodological solutions help children analyse their experiences, understand the learning process, and develop their ability to make decisions.

#### 4. Discussion

The study revealed that preschool teachers have different understandings of reflection: some associate it with discussing feelings, others with reflecting on activities or personal development; however, the totality of all their concepts is essentially consistent with the definitions of reflection in the scientific literature. Reflection is usually understood as a complex process that includes thinking, perception of feelings, and analysis of experiences, allowing not only to look retrospectively at one’s actions, but also to predict what would have happened if the activity had been performed differently (Rolfé & Freshwater, 2020; J. J. Chen, 2022, 2023). This concept is based on the idea that reflection is a key condition for conscious learning, as it provides the opportunity to recognise mistakes, learn from

experience, and form new strategies for the future (Bubnys, 2012; Žibėnienė & Indrašienė, 2017; Belobrovy, 2018).

The study participants described reflection not only as a means for the child to self-assess, but also as a process that allows the teacher to improve. They emphasised that reflection helps to discuss feelings, assess one's strengths and weaknesses, and make decisions about further development. This approach closely coincides with the dimensions of reflection distinguished in international literature: technical, practical, and critical (Jay & Johnson, 2002). Decker et al. (2021) and J. J. Chen (2023) emphasise that reflection in the context of preschool education is not just a methodological activity, it is a part of pedagogical culture that strengthens the teacher's ability to make conscious decisions and gives the child the opportunity to participate as an active participant in the learning process.

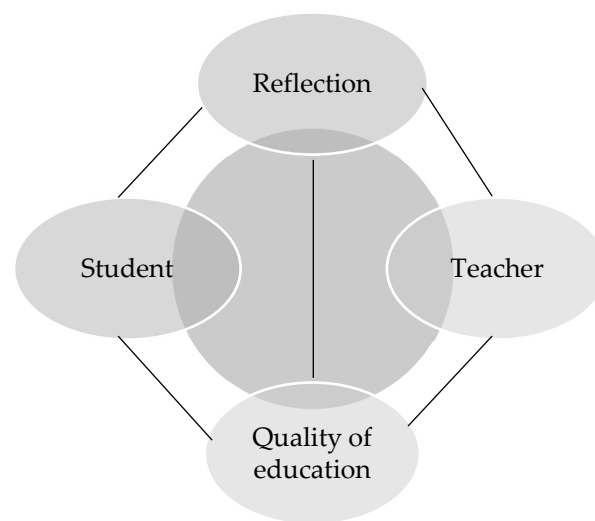
The importance of reflection is particularly evident in preschool age, as it is during this age period that intensive cognitive, emotional, and social development takes place. Žukauskienė (2012) notes that 4–5-year-old children are characterised by rapid development of speech, thinking, memory, imagination, and emotions. They are already able to understand the emotions of others, begin to become aware of their own emotions and learn to manage them, which makes it possible to integrate reflection into their educational process. Denham et al. (2012) point out that preschool children strengthen their social and emotional skills by engaging in reflective processes; meanwhile, Venninen et al. (2012) emphasise that reflection helps them understand the learning process and develop metacognitive skills.

The research data show that teachers perceive reflection as beneficial for both the child and the teacher. The six subcategories of importance of organising reflection identified during the study correspond to the functions of reflection mentioned in the scientific literature: it helps to discuss knowledge and consolidate experience, develops abilities, reveals children's interests, motivates to achieve goals and provides data to the teacher for further modelling of the educational process. This study additionally revealed that the application of reflection in preschool education includes not only instrumental, but also conceptual significance for teachers' activities. Referring to the qualitative analysis, teachers view reflection as a practice of professional thinking, a means of developing methodological culture, a tool for individualisation, a reflection of learning progress, and a basis for dialogical interaction with the child. Such dimensions show that reflection is not just a discussion of the child's experience, but a process that systematically affects the entire educational structure. Referring to children's reflections, teachers reflect on their actions, adjust educational planning, and create conditions for individual growth. This multi-layered role of reflection is consistent with the views of Schön (1992) and Rolfe and Freshwater (2020), who argue that reflection is an expression of maturity in professional thinking and a guarantor of the quality of education. In this way, the results of the study not only complement previous theoretical approaches but also show how the process of reflection becomes part of the pedagogical culture, ensuring mutual improvement for both the child and the teacher. For example, research by Carr and Lee (2019) in New Zealand showed that the Learning Stories method, based on the practice of reflection, allows children to understand their learning path and enables teachers to differentiate educational activities according to children's needs. Similarly, *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* recognises reflection as one of the cornerstones of teachers' professional practice, as it helps not only to record children's progress but also to adapt teaching methods to meet individual needs (*The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2023*).

Another important insight is that teachers perceive reflection as a tool that strengthens the child's voice in the educational process. This is in line with the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (2023)*, which emphasise child-centred education, providing for active participa-

tion of children in reflecting on educational content, discussing their experiences, and expressing their emotions. Studies by Bassachsas et al. (2020) and Myklebust and Fagerbakke (2024) confirm that the process of reflection in the form of dialogue develops children's ability to express their thoughts clearly, increases their self-awareness, and at the same time strengthens the sense of community.

In summary, it can be said that the results of the study confirm the insights expressed in the literature about the complexity of reflection and its importance in early education. Reflection affects both children and teachers: it helps children to understand their experiences, identify their feelings, strengths, and difficulties, while helping teachers to improve their practice. Both processes directly enhance the quality of education, as reflection becomes an intermediary between the child's experiences and the teacher's professional practice. The integration of reflection creates a two-way interaction in which the child becomes an active participant and the teacher becomes a constantly learning professional (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Model of the interaction between the application of reflection, the child, and the teacher in preschool education.

Reflection in preschool age becomes not only a method, but also a cultural principle of education that helps children understand themselves, strengthens their emotional and cognitive development, develops metacognitive abilities, and gives teachers the opportunity to continuously improve and model the educational process according to the needs of children (Weinert & Ebert, 2024; Kolloff et al., 2025). The model depicts the interaction between reflection, the child, and the teacher, revealing the role of reflection as a connecting link between the participants in the educational process and the final quality of education. Reflection is a central process that works in two directions: on the one hand, it helps children to become aware of their experiences, identify emotions, strengths, and difficulties, and evaluate the results of their activities, which strengthens their self-awareness, critical thinking, and motivation to learn (Denham et al., 2012; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012); on the other hand, reflection gives teachers the opportunity to critically consider their actions, observe how children receive educational content, and differentiate methods according to individual needs (Syslová, 2019; Nolan et al., 2023; Ginner Hau et al., 2023). In this way, reflection becomes not only an auxiliary activity, but a cornerstone of professional practice, allowing teachers to continuously improve (Schön, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). These dimensions of reflection are interconnected and directly influence the quality of education: children gain the ability to actively participate in the learning process, while teachers receive data about children's interests, experiences, and achievements, which they can use to model the educational process. The result of this interaction is child-centred,

flexible, and high-quality education, during which children become active creators of their own learning path. Therefore, reflection in preschool education should be interpreted not only as a methodological tool, but also as a systemic principle that guarantees the continuity and quality of education.

The results of the study make it possible to view reflection in preschool education as a process that takes place between action and awareness, i.e., between spontaneous everyday educational activities and the realisation of their meaning. This intermediate space, where the teacher and the child meet to reflect on experience, reveals reflection as a living, dynamic phenomenon that combines emotional experience, cognition, and analysis of activity. This opens up 'reflexive pathways,' i.e., internal trajectories of learning and professional growth that strengthen awareness, encourage self-reflection, and create a more meaningful relationship between activity and its aim.

Teachers participating in this process become not only organisers of education, but also constant researchers of their own activities: they think, listen, and learn together with children. The analysis of teachers' concepts shows that the understanding of reflection is not static, it evolves from spontaneous discussion of activities to a purposeful process of self-regulation. This change shows that teachers' reflective awareness grows stronger along with their professional experience and ability to critically evaluate their practice; therefore, reflection becomes not only a methodological but also a value-based part of professional culture. As the results of the study showed, children's reflections help teachers identify individual abilities, emotional needs, and motivation to learn, while giving children themselves the opportunity to participate more consciously in the educational process. The research data show that integrating reflection into everyday activities is most effective when teachers can combine playfulness, dialogue, and emotional response. In this way, reflection methods become a bridge between spontaneous action and reflection, they help children move naturally from experience to awareness and help teachers create a conscious and flexible learning environment. This two-way interaction reflects the metaphor expressed in the title, 'Between Action and Awareness', it shows that reflection is a process that combines experience, perception, and relationship, in which both the child and the teacher create a shared meaning of learning.

Although the research results and literature confirm that reflection in preschool education is an essential process that strengthens children's self-awareness and teachers' professional practice, its implementation faces considerable challenges. One of the main problems is that teachers often limit themselves to a superficial, technical level of reflection, where only the completion of tasks or the results of activities are evaluated, but no deeper critical reflection on educational goals, values, or the broader social context is sought (Jay & Johnson, 2002). Another important challenge relates to the professional preparedness of teachers. Although reflection is declared as one of the essential competencies of a teacher (Schön, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 2014), many teachers lack practical tools and methodological recommendations on how to apply reflection in everyday situations. As a result, reflection often becomes a 'formal' procedure carried out due to institutional requirements rather than as an authentic tool for professional development and children's learning (Grushka et al., 2005). Furthermore, some education systems still adhere to a traditional, results-oriented paradigm that emphasises academic achievement over children's experiences or emotional growth (Edwards-Groves, 2018). In this case, reflection becomes a secondary activity, although it should be treated as one of the main principles determining the quality of education.

Thus, although reflection is extremely valuable in the context of preschool education, its implementation is limited by structural (workloads, lack of time), methodological (lack of clear guidelines and tools), and cultural (traditional educational paradigm) factors. These

challenges show that the personal initiative of teachers alone is not enough—a systematic approach is needed, including the integration of clear reflection methods into curricula, ongoing teacher training and support, as well as the orientation of education policy towards process-based rather than solely results-based quality of education. Only in this way can reflection become a consistent practice rather than a fragmented one, ensuring the growth of both children and teachers and the long-term quality of education.

The study revealed that educators describe reflection differently, but the totality of their concepts reveals the concept of reflection in scientific literature: reflection is a complex process consisting of thinking, feelings and imagining what happened in the past and what would have happened if things had been done differently and provides opportunities to follow one's own educational actions, understand wrong steps from reflection (Rolfe & Freshwater, 2020; Belobrov, 2018; Bubnys, 2012; Žibėnienė & Indrašienė, 2017).

Preschool educators understand the importance of applying reflection and believe that it is important to organise the educational process of 4–5-year-old children. This is revealed through the selected subcategories.

Reflection is an important process in preschool age and an integral part of successful education, which means reflecting, improving, and analysing activities. The application of reflection in preschool age is based on the Guidelines for the [Preschool Education Program Guidelines \(2023\)](#), which emphasise the child's participation in the educational process, child-centred education, and adaptation of educational content to the child's individual needs. Reflection is one of the means of implementing the principle of reflective education in practice, strengthening the voice of children in the educational process. The study participants revealed that reflection in the preschool education process, when educating 4–5-year-old children, is important for them. This was revealed through the six subcategories identified: useful for children and adults; noticeable interests of the child; contributes to the development of children's abilities; discussion, consolidation of knowledge; motivation to achieve educational goals; assistance to the teacher in modelling the educational process.

The aspects of the study participants are related to the observations of scientists about the characteristics of 4–5-year-old children. Žukauskienė (2012) observed that the development of children aged 4–5 has certain characteristics that allow us to state that children of this age group can reflect. The development of children of this age group changes rapidly and perception, memory, thinking and language, as well as the expression and cognition of emotions, develop intensively. Children aged 4–5 develop the fastest in the field of language and imagination, they are already able to communicate, understand the feelings of others, begin to understand their own feelings and learn to manage them. Thus, this shows that reflections can be applied to children of this age group in the process of education.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the study revealed that reflection in the preschool education process acts as a link between action and awareness, i.e., between pedagogical practice and its consideration. It is not just a technical or emotional form of discussing activities, but a complex process combining cognition, emotions, and professional growth. The process of reflection helps both children and teachers to go beyond the limits of direct activity and become aware of the meaning and goals of education. Teachers perceive reflection as a multi-layered phenomenon involving the analysis of feelings, experiences, and activities. It helps to evaluate the quality of education, plan further steps, and strengthen professional awareness.

The data showed that the use of reflection in the education of 4–5-year-old children helps to develop self-awareness, emotional awareness, and linguistic expression. The

most effective forms of reflection are playful and based on everyday dialogue, allowing children to experience the process of reflection as a natural part of learning. The process of reflection creates a two-way learning interaction, i.e., the teacher learns from the child's experience, and the child learns from the teacher's questions, reactions, and example. This mutual connection strengthens pedagogical cooperation, creates a trust-based educational environment, and allows children to become active creators of their own learning paths.

Reflection in preschool education is not only a teaching method, but also a path to the development of professional and personal awareness, in which the teacher and the child act as partners, jointly creating the meaning of learning. Integrating reflection into the daily educational process strengthens both children's metacognitive abilities and teachers' professional awareness and can therefore be considered an essential factor in ensuring high-quality, child-centred education.

The limitations of the study and future research prospects are related to the limited sample size and the chosen research context; therefore, the data reflect a limited range of teachers' experiences and cannot be widely generalised at the national level. In addition, the study was based on teachers' narratives; therefore, the expression of children's reflections in practical situations was not directly observed. In the future, it would be worthwhile to conduct broader studies covering different regions and a larger group of teachers, and to include the perspective of the children themselves. Long-term research would also be promising to assess the impact of reflection on child development and the effectiveness of different reflection methods on the quality of education. It is also expedient to analyse how educational institutions create conditions for the development of a culture of reflection, and what managerial and organisational decisions can help to establish reflection as an integral part of professional activity.

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