

Olesya Yurchenko and Valery Mansurov

Professionalisation in Early Childhood Education in Russia

Abstract: The dialogue around preschool educators has increased as concerns about the quality of early education have been raised across the world. This paper contributes to a novel historical and contemporary understanding of the professionalisation of Russian preschool educators. This history bears similarities and differences to those of other nations, making this project of interest to cross-cultural comparisons. A particular emphasis is laid on the challenges of, and opportunities for, professionalisation by discussing the issue of professional knowledge and expertise, autonomy, and authority. Data for the study comes from two sources: (1) the historical analysis of preschool educators in Russia; (2) semi-structured interviews undertaken with 25 preschool educators from the major organisations representing them. The research showed the central role played by the state in all historical phases of the professionalisation of Russian early education. It was found that Russian preschool educators are discontented with their current professional standing, and look to the state to enhance it.

Keywords: preschool educators, professionalisation, sociology of professions, knowledge and expertise

Olesya Yurchenko
Department of
Sociology of
Professions and
Professional
Groups,
Institute of Sociol-
ogy of the Russian
Academy of
Sciences

Valery Mansurov
Department of
Sociology of
Professions and
Professional
Groups,
Institute of Sociol-
ogy of the Russian
Academy of
Sciences

Contact:

Olesya Yurchenko
Department of
Sociology of
Professions and
Professional
Groups,
Institute of
Sociology of the
Russian Academy
of Sciences,
117218 Moscow,
Krzhizhanovskogo
street, 24/35,
Building 5
olesya@mail.ru

The political changes that Russia saw in the 1990s and the subsequent trend towards the market have opened up new opportunities for the exchange of research findings in the Western sociology of professions and in Russian studies of professional groups that are part of “the intelligentsia”—an educated human resource within society (Mansurov et al., 2004). Practitioners of knowledge-based occupations requiring higher education and prolonged occupational training are the object of study in both lines of investigation. However, both the methodologies used by Russian and Western scholars and their research experiences differ. During the Soviet period, Western sociology of professions was viewed as having only limited scope for application to Soviet intelligentsia. Within the Soviet Union, sociologists were mostly preoccupied with the study of individual professionals as opposed to the classic Western theories of professions, in which professionals were studied as corporate actors who had acquired privileges and a more or less autonomous social position.

At the centre of Soviet sociological analysis lay the labour and life conditions of the intelligentsia: the creativity of their work, the intellectuals’ special socio-cultural mission, the professionals’ values and their work motivation (Korableva, 2013). However, several important dimensions of the intellectuals’ social standing have been omitted from sociological studies. There was a lack of research on professionals’ position within the power structure and their autonomy—defined in terms of the freedom to control and regulate both one’s decisions and work activities within a particular sphere of competence (Funck, 2012). The area of professionalisation studies was also ripe for development (Yurchenko & Saks, 2006).

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Soviet sociologists could not study the differences in the scope of professionals' social-economic remuneration and their relative power, as the Soviet state was proclaimed an egalitarian society (Radaev & Shkaratan, 1995).

Privatisation and the relative liberalisation of Russian politics have paved the way for research into the professions and professionalisation. There has since been growing interest in applying Western theoretical approaches (Romanov & Yarskaya-Smirnova, 2009; Moskovskaya, 2010). Many excellent case studies of individual professions have been produced over the last two decades. They have proved that some Western theories of the professions and professionalisation are applicable for research on professionals in Russia, although care must be taken to ensure that structural differences in intellectual labour are acknowledged (Yurchenko & Saks, 2006). In this paper we shall broadly draw on the Neo-Weberian tradition in order to assess the power, economic and cultural resources of one particular occupation and its potential for professionalisation in Russia.

The dialogue around professionals and professionalisation within the field of early childhood education has increased as concerns about the quality of early care, education, and professional accountability have been raised around the world (Osgood, 2006; Saracho & Spodek, 2007; Smeby, 2008; Pugh & Duffy, 2009). It is also a hot topic in Russia, attracting much contentious debate in the media and government. However, there is still a lack of social research on the problems of reforming preschool education and on the opportunities for the professionalisation of this occupational group (with some notable exceptions, such as Taratukhina et al., 2006; Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova, 2010). There is also the cultural, historical and political specificity of professionalism as a concept in relation to early childhood education and care (Osgood, 2006). We shall use the history of professionalisation of Russian preschool educators, positing that this history bears similarities and differences to those of other nations, thus making this project of international interest for further cross-cultural comparisons.

We have explored the social standing and potential for professionalisation of both public and private preschool educators, excluding babysitters and tutors. The latter were not included in this study, as they tend to be self-employed and do not usually work with groups of children. Preschool education in Russia is the provision of learning to children in preschool educational institutions, kindergartens, before the commencement of statutory and obligatory education, usually between the ages of two and seven. Most full-day preschool education centres or kindergartens used by working parents are public. Private kindergartens account only for 2% of preschool enrolment (Ministry of Education and Science Report, 2010, p. 7). Learning groups of preschool age children may be also organised in other private educational institutions. Today, private children's learning centres that offer a variety of preschool programmes (e.g. music lessons, drawing lessons) but do not provide full day-care are proving popular. In addition to public kindergartens, there are about 14,000 preschool children's learning centres (Ministry of Education and Science Report, 2010, p. 6).

In the first section of the paper we give a brief overview of the theoretical framework, data and research methods selected by the authors. In the second section we describe a historical background of the "professionalisation from above" of preschool educators in the Soviet period, when the state turned preschool education into a scientifically grounded praxis, requiring special qualifications from vocational or higher education. In the third section we overview the process of deprofessionalisation of this occupational group during the period of political and economic reform in the 1990s. Over that period preschool education turned into a mass occupation with comparatively low entry requirements that offered a low income. In the fourth section we present the current data from research interviews on changes in the social standing of Russian preschool educators.

Theoretical perspectives

We shall follow the Western interpretation of the term “profession,” where a group possessing it can construct a boundary between itself and the outside world which can usefully be conceptualised as a strategy of social closure (Parkin 1979; Murphy 1988). Professions are seen as knowledge-based occupations, where knowledge is abstract, generalised, systematic, and often science-based (Abbot, 1988; Siegrist, 2002; Brante, 2010). The term “science based” signifies practices that are built upon and adhere to scientifically established principles and findings, and that scientific theories are integrated with practices. The professions which call on the authority of science and prescribe norms or standards acquire the greatest share of public influence (Halliday 1987).

Early childhood education is arguably becoming, or seems likely to become, a profession (Freeman & Feeney, 2006; Watts, 2009). Preschool education may be defined as a “semi-profession” (Etzioni, 1969), as it does not correspond to an ideal type of classic professions. We use the concept of semi-profession in a value-neutral manner. The value-neutral use of the term here implies there is no assumption that classic professional practice is better, more valuable, or more effective than a semi-professional practice (Brante, 2013, p. 6). The difference between them is analytic not normative, and merely contends that one practice is to a greater extent based on a robust scientific basis. Russian preschool educators can be defined as a semi-profession in the sense that their practice is built on a less developed body of knowledge and skills. Its members have a lower status than those in the socially idealised professions. They have a shorter training period and a lower level of social acceptance and autonomy.

We rely on a theoretical model of professionalisation that broadly follows a neo-Weberian approach which proved to be helpful in conceptualising occupations based on higher specialised education as *universally recognisable interest-based* groups which may translate special knowledge and skills into social and economic rewards (Larson, 1990; Torstendahl, 1990; Saks, 2012). Professionalisation has been portrayed in different ways: from a process in which professions achieve a legally underwritten monopoly and relative autonomy from the state, to a social mobility project in which occupations strive towards cognitive and social advantage by being resistant to competition and alternative forms of accountability (Collins, 1990; Freidson, 2001; Grossman, 2004). The professionalisation strategies deployed to achieve higher social standing have been different in the Anglo-Saxon context and in other European countries, ranging from successful manipulation of the market by the occupational group (“professionalisation from within”) to domination of forces external to the group (“professionalisation from above”) (McClelland 1990; 1991; Johnson, 1995).

Educational occupations in our country have been, and remain, subordinate to the state and have only been subject to market forces at the margins (Yurchenko, 2013). Similar to the Nordic countries and Continental Europe, negotiations and contracts with the state have been of crucial importance, whereas struggles between occupations and drive for autonomy have not been decisive for the success of professions (Moran, 1999; Svensson & Evetts, 2010; Brante 2013). The powerful role of the Russian state in all phases of professionalisation is quite palpable, making the histories of our professions considerably different from Anglo-Saxon writings. Russian professionalism has largely developed “from above” as a result of collaboration not conflict between the state and professional organisations (Mansurov et al, 2004; Mrowczynski, 2012).

The “professionalisation from above” is generally considered in the social literature as state and organisational regulation undermining professional autonomy (Fournier, 1999; Evetts, 2012). When the discourse of professionalism is constructed “from above,” then often it is interpreted in a Foucauldian mould as a disciplinary mechanism and as a means of control (Foucault, 1986). Evetts argues that

professionalism from above is often imposed and a false or selective discourse is used to promote and facilitate occupational change (rationalization) and as a disciplinary mechanism of autonomous subjects exercising appropriate conduct (Evetts, 2009). However, the realities and implications of professionalisation from above may be very different (Svensson & Evetts, 2010). In this article, we shall consider a dual nature of “professionalisation from above” using historical examples of the professional development of early educators.

We suggest that the effects of “professionalisation from above” may be diverse in different social contexts stemming from the diminished professional discretion to the state-endorsed enhanced status of the profession and its decision-making powers (McClelland 1990; Neal & Morgan 2000). “Professionalisation from above” may be a way to develop professionalism with many of the same characteristics as “professionalisation from within,” where an occupation gets a chance to redefine its social position within Weber's dimensions of power, status and wealth. This article does not aim to assess the balance that is struck between the positive and negative outcomes of the “professionalisation from above” of early educators, as the education reforms are still in the progress. We shall trace the historical changes in the relationship between the state and the profession of early educators. An emphasis will be placed on the professionalisation “take-off” seen as a break-through transformation that involved the evolution of the profession of early educators, its expansion in numbers (quantitative take-off) as well as in social importance (qualitative take-off) (Brante, 2013). Historical take-off will be seen as a consequence of a state ambition to scienticise an occupation (Nilsson-Lindström & Beach, 2013).

Data and methods

The main aim of this article is to present a discussion of selected findings from the recent interview-based research undertaken in four large Russian cities, including Moscow, Samara, Syktyvkar, and Ufa in 2012-2013. We interviewed 25 experts: heads of public and private preschool educational institutions and trade unions leaders. We chose the qualitative approach for developing an in-depth understanding of the professionalisation of preschool educators. The selection of qualitative research enabled us to consciously identify informants who are best placed to answer the research questions (Brannen, 1995). In so far as qualitative methods are employed on non-statistical samples, sampling was conducted on the basis of theoretical criteria. The basic question in “theoretical sampling” concerns which case, or group, to turn to next in the analysis, and with what theoretical purpose (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sampling continues until the point at which additional data does not appear to provide further insights in developing or verifying the theory. This is known as “theoretical saturation.” A balance was struck in this research between the point of theoretical saturation and time constraints.

The first experts were found through reference books and through online data. Then a snowballing technique was used: respondents recommended prominent representatives from other preschool education institutions and trade unions (Maslennikov, 2001). All the interviews were carried out in the workplace of those interviewed. These in-depth interviews lasted about an hour and a half. Interviews were recorded by taking notes and some were audiotaped and transcribed later. The conversations on any one topic were semi-structured: the author only followed the general outlines of the initial interview plan. The interviews allowed preschool educators to identify problems with and share their perspectives on the professionalisation process.

The opinion of the experts, “key informants,” who participated in the interview research was taken as representing the views and attitudes of the rank-and-file preschool educators. We admit that rank-and-file practitioners may have a different

opinion on the best way for their profession to develop. However, with regard to the issues of generalisability, the accounts given by opinion leaders were taken to broadly represent the views of rank-and-file members (Maxwell, 2002). We were less concerned with describing the range of variations between the opinions of preschool educators than with describing in detail what quantitative methodology would not have permitted us to describe—the general assumptions, behaviour, and social attitudes of preschool educators.

In order to provide an in-depth understanding of the historical professionalisation patterns of preschool educators we also drew on some statutory documents and statistical data from the Ministry of Education and Science and other sources. The statistical data on current salaries of early educators was lacking, and therefore we relied on the self-assessment of their financial position.

Pre-Soviet and Soviet: Professionalisation from above

The precursors to preschool profession appeared in the late 19th century (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova 2010, p. 13). It was a time when private preschool education institutions were opened for children from rich families. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the new Soviet state's policies created the basis for the formation and growth of the public education system in the USSR. An important goal of Soviet ideology was equality for women, including their participation in the workplace and public life on an equal basis with men. Creating the public kindergarten system helped them to achieve their goals regarding gender politics. The Soviet system provided a nearly universal preschool service in urban areas, relieving working mothers from daytime childcare needs. The number of public kindergartens and the number of preschool educators grew during the entire Soviet period (Smirnova, 2005).

Professionalisation is a complex process, making it very difficult to determine a specific temporal locus for its occurrence. It may be argued that a historical take-off of Russian preschool educators occurred when the occupation was scienticised through research and by introducing systematic education and training. A new Soviet school of scientific child psychology took shape in the 1950s-1980s (Mazalova & Urakova, 2006). A wide range of problems were studied in research groups under the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, which was founded in 1960 (Taratukhina et al., 2006, p. 4). The results of this research and advanced experience in the field of preschool education were reflected in the Programme of Kindergarten Education (1962). For about 30 years, all Soviet children were educated along the principles of this single, state-endorsed, programme (Smirnova, 2005, p. 48). All preschool educators were trained in this complex scientifically-based Programme of Kindergarten Education, and it had a deep impact on their professional standing. They obtained jurisdictional control over a body of scientifically-based and empirically tested knowledge about how to educate children.

The education of preschool educators has been systematically organised and integrated into colleges and universities. All preschool educators were required to have either vocational education or higher education. They were given a unified approach to pedagogics, didactics, and psychology. Formal credentials for working in this area were introduced. A crucial social base for the professional occupations is the existence of credential-based occupational closures, implying a knowledge monopoly. Soviet preschool educators actually monopolised the function of education and upbringing, sometimes displacing the family (Smirnova, 2005; Taratukhina et al, 2006). The need to work a full day obliged many parents to use kindergartens. Most kindergartens were open for a full-day stay (12-14 hours) and there were also 24-hour groups. Parents believed that preschool educators could provide their children with better education than they could themselves. They often could

not envision themselves as equal partners in their children's education and upbringing, due to their lack of specialised early education.

The early educators' authority was enhanced by the state and strengthened by the fact that they were considered a part of the intelligentsia. In Soviet Russia, the concept "intelligentsia" referred to all workers in knowledge-based occupations who had a vocational education or a higher education (Ilanovsky, 1986, p. 19). All workers engaged in intellectual work were supposed to be involved in the development and dissemination of culture (Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, 1989, p. 83). This special cultural mission of the intelligentsia was viewed as being based on the principles of the dissemination of communist dogmas and state resolutions. That said, it is worth noting that the intelligentsia also had some influence over a wider set of issues, including societal values, social attitudes and opinions (Barbakova & Mansurov, 2007). Preschool educators acted as mediators between the state and the children, playing a leading and guiding role in their upbringing with that came a degree of prestige and authority. The social status of preschool educators was consistent. They had a stable salary, could work one shift, received quality meals at work, and enjoyed an attractive working routine (Kolmakova & Loginova, 1988). The professional and social standing of the group changed during the period of political and economic reforms.

The post-Soviet reforms: Deprofessionalisation of the group

The political changes of the 1990s and the subsequent economic problems that occurred as Russia sought to restructure its economy destabilised existing institutions. Russia experienced a period of rapid and dramatic change (Clark, 2002). The Russian education system has also undergone a series of sweeping changes since 1991. The time of aggravated economic problems resulted in cuts to state financing and the closure of many preschool educational institutions. The number of preschool educators fell. If in 1995 there were 753,300 preschool educators, in 2001 there were only 605,300 (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova, 2010, p. 45). At present the education process in preschool institutions is conducted by 590,000 preschool educators (Ministry of Education and Science Report, 2010, p. 7). The survival of the system of preschool education became the main goal of policy makers in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a consequence of policy reform, preschool educators experienced an intensification of workload. A considerable proportion of preschool educators often had to work two shifts. Due to the shortage of kindergarten places, groups became overcrowded (Taratukhina et al., 2006, p. 5). At the same time, preschool educators' salaries were reduced.

This all resulted in a marked decline in preschool educators' social status. It became more difficult to attract people to work in the profession. Even people who had graduated from school, and who lacked vocational education and specialist qualifications, were recruited to work in public kindergartens (Education Indicators, 2007, p. 98). The less gifted school graduates chose teacher's training colleges and faculties such as Pedagogics and Methods of Preschool Education or Pedagogics and Methods of Primary School Education (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova 2010). Young people realised that people who graduated from teacher's training institutes stood less of a chance of building a successful career than people who graduated from university departments of Economics, Humanities and Natural Sciences. The proportion of students who chose teacher's training institutes and faculties out of the overall number of students in the country gradually declined: 44% of students in 1950, 32% – 1991, 14% – 2004, and just 8% in 2008 (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova, 2010, p. 45).

As a result of the lack of young specialists, the teacher pool continued to age: 54.4% of Russian preschool educators been in work for over 15 years (Education

in Russian Federation, 2008, p. 150). On the one hand, this meant that the profession's core was retained throughout the reforms. Most preschool educators were adults boasting a rich working experience and solid knowledge of children's development. On the other hand, the continuing aging of teaching staff was seen as a negative factor. Many preschool educators were understood as having a low self-perception, being overworked and burned out (Yurchenko, 2013). Entry requirements to the profession fell. As the heads of preschool education institutions in Sverdlovskaya oblast attested, they paid more attention to the inner personal characteristics of new recruits than to their professional competence (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova, 2010, p. 46).

It would be justified to apply the "deprofessionalisation" concept to post-Soviet early education, in the sense that there was a decrease in autonomy and discretion accompanied by an increase in external governance concerning preschool education (Osgood, 2006; 2010). The state legitimated the rationale for enhanced regulation and changes to the early education system. Early childhood services were presented as failing to meet the needs of the new political and ideological regime that strived to enhance the humanist tradition. For all its advantages, Soviet preschool education was politicised and highly centralised, as it was the same for all 15 republics of the USSR. It did not provide many opportunities for encouraging children to express initiative and develop independent decision-making skills. There was a gradual transfer from a unitary education system to a multiple and ethnically orientated education system. The early education community was increasingly oriented towards implementing the principles of the personality-oriented approach to relating to children (Smirnova, 2005). However, all the qualitative changes to the content of preschool education were introduced in a period of unstable social and economic development. Consequently, only principal changes were introduced into day-to-day professional practice, such as depoliticisation and the dismissal of communist rhetoric. Overall, the content of early education remained unchanged until recently (Telegin, 2011).

The current reforms: Perspectives for professionalisation

The current reforms of preschool education have been taking place at social, organisational and financial levels (Ministry of Education and Science Report, 2010). One of the latest major financial reforms in education was the curtailment of financial support for the preschool education system from the federal budget and the delegation of financial responsibilities to regional and local budgets (Federal Law 273 On Education in the Russian Federation, 2013). At present kindergartens, unlike schools, are regulated primarily by regional authorities, which manage education matters within the prevailing framework of federal laws. Under law, local authorities can charge parents no more than 20% of costs, with the rest of the expenditure coming from local budgets.

The differences between the amounts of funds available in local budgets across Russia can be significant (Taratukhina, et al. 2006, p. 9). The delegation of responsibility to the regional and local budgets resulted in increased variation in the preschool education system and in the social inequalities among preschool educators in different regions. The ideological basis for the delegation of these responsibilities to the regional and local budgets was rooted in the concept of liberalising education, which involved decentralising management, providing greater diversity in organisational and legal forms of educational institutions, and introducing the freedom of choice regarding forms and kinds of education. However, that funding changes fuelled inequality in terms of the opportunity to receive good education for children, exacerbating interregional differences and differences between town and country (Taratukhina et al., 2006).

The financial situation of preschool educators in the regions was much worse than in Moscow. According to our respondents, the average salary of preschool educators in the Russian regions was around 9,000-11,000 roubles per month (self-assessment data from Syktyvkar, Ufa and Samara interviews). As one interviewee commented: “We have ridiculous salaries. Only tutors can make a decent living. Other preschool educators have to survive. We often work two shifts, and earn on the side in private centers” (head of public educational institution, Syktyvkar). Moscow-based preschool educators had long enjoyed higher salaries. Their financial standing improved even more as a result of the introduction of per capita funding. The more children Moscow preschool educators had in their groups, the better they were paid. Their salaries had risen from 30,000-40,000 thousand roubles to 50,000-60,000 roubles per month (self-assessment data from Moscow interviews). This partly solved the financial problem of Moscow preschool educators, although their workload had increased. As one of the interviewees commented: “Now one preschool educator has to do the work which three preschool educators did...We are not robots, and we won't be able to work under such conditions for long” (head of public educational institution, Moscow).

A new policy of the Ministry of Education and Science fostered changes in the content of basic and additional preschool education programmes (Ministry of Education and Science Report, 2010, p. 8). It proclaimed the need to change the content of the early education job and to build an open and collegial management system in preschool education. State officials adopted Federal state requirements for preschool education (Decree of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, No. 655, 2009). This document stated that preschool educators needed to retract from a school-type model of education. Instead they were encouraged to create an atmosphere of learning through play, to give children greater freedom of choice and to communicate with children as equals. The Federal requirements were intended to promote initiative and creativity in preschool educators, who were given instructions to create their own education programmes and teaching methodologies.

However, most interviewees argued that the Federal requirements became a straight-jacket for many preschool educators, as traditional lessons and tried and tested educational programmes were outlawed: “It's a dead end. We are not allowed to give lessons the way we used to give them, and we have no clear instructions what to do instead” (head of public educational institution, Moscow). The internal and external criteria for assessing the outcomes of preschool educators' activities were blurred. The most difficult task was the demand to change the type of communication during lessons. Preschool educators, particularly those who had been in the job for a prolonged period, had grown accustomed to the school-type learning model, in which preschool children were seen as pupils rather than children. Many interviewees noted that overcrowded groups of children (30-35 children in a group) were also seen as an obstacle to the introduction of this new paradigm of preschool education. They felt that their professional competence and professional knowledge were at stake. They were seen not as skilled professionals or experts in children's development but rather as baby-sitters or surrogate parents.

The inability to identify the differences between mothering and teaching creates tensions between early childhood educators and the families that entrust their children into their care (Watts, 2009). Our interviewees felt that these differences needed to be made more clear and accessible to the general public: “There's such a negative image of the profession. We do wish there was more respect for our competence, patience and care” (trade union leader, Moscow). On the one hand, parents expected that, by school-age, their children would be able to read, write and know the basics of mathematics. On the other hand, the essence and the boundaries of the expert knowledge in preschool education became indistinct. Several interviewees said that some parents tended to think that preschool educators did not

possess any special professional knowledge, which was not consistent with aspects of parenting.

It was argued that state policymakers' control over this professional work grew, as did that of the parents who made higher demands of preschool education. One interviewee said: "Parents are becoming increasingly consumerist. They have all the rights, whereas preschool educators have no rights... We are so vulnerable" (head of state preschool educational institution, Moscow). Moscow preschool educators also mentioned that parents' increased control was reflected in the popularity of a hot-line opened by the Moscow Department of Education. Parents could call a hot-line to lodge a complaint about any particular preschool educator's work openly on the site of the Department of Education.

The above mentioned current state policy concerning the changes in the system of education and management can be interpreted as "professionalisation from above" which meant to stimulate early educators' professionalism. However, the professional community was discontented with the implications of diminished discretion and imposed changes in the cognitive base of the profession. As an antidote to this situation, peer interactions and informal autonomy served to strengthen early childhood educators' esteem and confidence. An important aspect of the informal autonomy was the ability to determine working conditions such as work plans and the pace of work. Preschool educators confessed that when there was no control exerted by the management body, they could introduce changes in the essence of their work, alter their work routine and its tempo. The scope of informal autonomy enjoyed by rank-and-file preschool educators depended on their relations with those in the relevant managerial bodies. Early educators looked to their education colleagues for informal support, whereas the role of professional organisations was less pronounced and mostly confined to trade-union concerns. They were not strong enough to redefine the social and occupational status of the group.

Peoples' perceptions of the status or prestige of occupations have remained very stable over time and vary little from country to country (Svensson, 2012). The profession of preschool educator has never occupied a top position in terms of prestige in Europe. However, it can be counted as a profession in a wider sense in some industrialised countries and in some historical periods. In Sweden, for example, preschool teaching is referred to as a profession (Svensson & Ulfsson, 2009). However, it is attributed lower status, on a par with social workers and librarians, as opposed to physicians, lawyers and professors who belong to high status professions (Svensson, 2012, p.13). What is important is that, compared to the question of what status occupations *should* have, teachers in Sweden were found to be clearly undervalued.

As our research showed, Russian preschool educators no longer believed that their knowledge was valued, as compared to Soviet preschool educators who felt that their knowledge was an important wellspring of their social respectability. This profession experienced a negative shift in prestige. In the Soviet era, intellectual professions were considered as forming the cultural elite. Most school graduates aspired to become doctors, scientists, engineers or teachers. Intellectual occupations enjoyed greater prestige than manual ones did in Soviet society, just as in the West. Most interviewees were dissatisfied with the prestige of their profession. This corresponds to a recent research which showed that every second preschool educator was concerned about the lack of professional prestige (Korableva, Kuzmenko, & Antonova, 2010, p. 127). In the city of Yekaterinburg, only 5% of preschool educators stated that their profession was prestigious and only 6% believed that the profession was valued by the wider public.

In the new Law on Education in the Russian Federation, preschool education is proclaimed to be the first education stage (Federal Law 273, On Education in the Russian Federation, 2013). This means that preschool education may be growing in importance. This new perspective aims to equalise the initial learning opportunities

of all children at primary school entry stage, and increase the overall quality of education. Another recent Ministry of Education and Science initiative is the introduction of the Professional standards for preschool educators in 2014. One of the demands of the Professional standards would be obligatory higher education for all public preschool educators (Decree of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, No. 1155, 2013). Implementing these initiatives may result in the growth of the prestige of preschool education and preschool educators. International research has shown that when early childhood educators hold higher qualifications there is a greater chance of quality programmes and better outcomes for children (Pugh & Duffy, 2009; Sylva et al., 2010).

Preschool educators in the private sector enjoy higher prestige, income, and relatively high autonomy. They have greater chances for upward social mobility. Private preschool educators are usually people no older than 40 years old with higher teacher's training or psychological education. They often acquire several credentials and regularly take refresher courses. Among them there are many preschool specialists, including speech-therapists, psychologists and defectologists. As some interviewees stated, private preschool educators were 'more open to reforms', 'more creative', and 'more flexible'. Their working conditions and pace of work were more satisfactory. They were provided with support personnel and all the necessary equipment: educational toys and study aids. Preschool educators in children's learning centres often had efficiency wage. The more children were enrolled in the group, the better they were paid, although private groups were never overcrowded, with about 6-10 children per group.

At the same time, the private sector has not offered its employees any guarantees. Many children's learning centres did not provide their workers with labour contracts, as they did not want to pay for sick-leave, holiday pay, or maternity leave. Most preschool educators interviewed did not give up their job at a public preschool institution, as this might lead to the loss of their social and welfare benefits. Another reason given was the importance of retaining registration as an employee in a public preschool institution in order to maintain their work record and qualify for a pension. Importantly, the research showed that the Soviet work ethic (Clark, 2002) endured, particularly among elder people in public kindergartens. It involved not only a commitment to the profession, but also an attachment to the labour collective as what many workers referred to as their second home. The Soviet sense of the labour collective, shorn of its communist rhetoric, continued to be a factor. Preschool educators felt empowered and affirmed when they were able to share information with and learn from their colleagues.

Similar to public preschool educators, private early educators often came across the problem of the indistinct nature of their professional expert knowledge. As we discovered, many children's learning centres did not give their employees much freedom of choice regarding learning programmes and working routine. Many large private children's centres employed unified programmes using a teacher's book that gave an outline of lessons. The role of preschool educators was confined to the reproduction of a particular learning programme. As a result, the authority of private preschool educators in the eyes of parents and managers of children's learning centres was not high enough. Nevertheless, the subjective self-perception of autonomy in the private sector remained higher than in the public one, as there was no daily managerial scrutiny. As our interviewee related: "I have more freedom and more chances to fulfil my potential in the private centre... The managers come to my lessons once in a quarter of a year" (private preschool educator, trade union leader, Moscow).

Our interviewees from the private sector felt that they lacked a sense of collective identity and common interests. Working and life conditions in various private children's learning centres varied greatly. The dominant form of professional associations for public preschool educators was the trade-union type organisation pri-

marily concerned with protecting its members in dealings with organised users of professional services. Private preschool educators had no dedicated trade-unions. The only type of professional association they considered possible for themselves was “the learned society,” using Burrage's terminology, which gave primacy to developing the profession's knowledge base and could be seen as a place for sharing ideas and educational achievements (Burrage, Jarausch, & Siegrist, 1990, p. 208). Although some interviewees had doubts about the need to create any professional association for private preschool educators, as they saw their colleagues as “rivals” rather than as partners. The private sector provided an opportunity for professionalisation at an individual level, while the status of occupational group remained unchanged.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to research on the professionalisation of preschool educators, in an attempt to remedy the lack of studies on this issue in Russia. It presents a historical description of the development of the professional group, and discusses the effects of state reforms. This analysis suggests some key conclusions.

First, the findings indicate that, to date, preschool educators are attributed a relatively low professional status, scant autonomy, authority and prestige. The situation was quite different during the Soviet period, when preschool educators enjoyed complete responsibility for bringing up and teaching children. Their knowledge base was understood as being scientifically grounded, ideologically complete, and endorsed by the Soviet state. Preschool educators had respectable wages, a stable social standing, and authority. With the economic and political reforms introduced in the 1990s, the social standing of preschool educators started to decline. This negative tendency continues to this day, although private educators have acquired greater prestige and control over the content of their work and their working conditions. Their income has increased compared to that of employees in the state-sector. However, private practice in preschool education still lacks any clearly defined economic and political status. Most private preschool educators do not give up their jobs at state preschool institutions, as this might lead to the loss of social benefits. We have not identified a collegiate culture among private practitioners or the potential to develop a professional ideology and professional associations.

Second, this study shows that Russian preschool educators have always been subject to professionalisation from above. Government initiatives have focused firmly on increasing the quality of the early childhood workforce. We acknowledge the positive and negative outcomes of these state efforts. The positive implications were evident in the Soviet period, when the state turned the preschool education system into a scientifically grounded praxis. Early educators' knowledge and expertise were enhanced. Since the post-Soviet period there have been efforts to alter the content of preschool education, with a particular tendency toward introducing a humanistic and personality-oriented approach to engaging with children. However, fundamental reforms to this form of education have never been discussed with the professional community of early educators, who see them as forced and ill considered. The disciplinary nature of the current reforms is reflected in the inability to influence decision-making in preschool education which worries many early years practitioners, who are no longer seen as legitimate experts on education matters in this area.

Finally, to date, early educators have distrusted professional associations, the role of which is confined to trade-union matters. They alone are not strong enough to redefine the group's social and occupational status. As was discussed, Russian professionalism has developed as a result of collaboration not conflict between the state and the professions. Preschool educators still look to the state to enhance their

social and professional standing. Many interviewees aspired for favourable terms for cooperation between state officials and preschool educators, which could change the stigmatised social image of preschool education as a profession. Given these realities, state reforms are now likely to have the most critical influence on the professionalisation of preschool educators. The state may improve the remuneration of preschool educators and establish higher standards for professional practice. The professional standards developed by the Ministry of Education and Science may revise the accreditation process introducing higher educational and personal requirements for applicants. Fine-tuning the overall knowledge base of early childhood educators could help raise the level of professionalism and facilitate changes within this field of education.

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