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**THE PARENTS' VALUES OF
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
AND CARE IN RUSSIA: TOWARD
THE CONSTRUCTION OF
EVALUATION TOOLS**

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THE PARENTS' VALUES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN RUSSIA: TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION OF EVALUATION TOOLS³

This article describes the development of tools for parental evaluation of the quality of services in municipal kindergartens. The parents' point of view is required as part of a complex evaluation of the quality of educational services in order to make an evidence-based educational policy. We emphasize the importance of a preschool educational institution and its complex role in the implementation of the principles of the welfare state: it has not only an educational, but also a social function, providing governmental support to families with children. This statement is discussed in the literature review which emphasizes the importance of full day educational services. These services allow parents of preschool children to exercise their right to work, as well as perform the socializing role of a kindergarten. Qualitative methodology was used in the research. The empirical base of the study is 30 in-depth interviews with mothers as more involved part of parents. The results show that parents understand the service provided by a kindergarten as a complex, aimed primarily at daytime children's education and development in a specifically organized educational space, performed by professional educators. The greatest parental value is children's opportunity to "learn how to communicate", to resolve conflicts and to find compromises, and to relate their behavior with group-mates and peers. The second most important value of education in a kindergarten is the development of life skills, surviving with routines, as well as the associated skill initiative. At the same time, the main professional competence of the educator is seen in their ability to create a positive emotional climate, an atmosphere of openness for the realization of a child's individuality and to create a space for comfortable communication with parents.

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Problem Statement

Over the last twenty years, the subject of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has received growing attention in the area of welfare policy in many countries (Esping-Andersen 2003; Daly, Rake 2003; Daly 2004; Rapoport et al. 2011). It is a necessary component of a welfare state responding to the gender equality of working parents (Andersson-Skog 2007), child well-being (Duncan 2013), and investing in the next generation's learning achievements (Heckman 2006). Keeping up with global trends, Russian educational policy for preschoolers attempts to overcome post-soviet omissions and make structural reforms that improve the value of preschool services.

Early childhood education in Russia has a long history of development since 1917³. Historically, state public organizations were the main force in providing standardized services of ECEC. A new type of a preschool organization 'nursery-kindergarten' was founded in 1959 that establishes the child age is 2 months to 7 year old [Kreusler, 1970, 430]. The state united complex program of preschool education was adopted in the beginning of 1960s. During the 70s and 80s, the network of preschool educational centers was enlarged significantly and was generally available for almost everyone who of kindergarten age. In the post-Soviet years, a wide network of pre-schools, which were built during the last decades of the Soviet period, shrank to two-thirds. A new federal program to restore the constructions and technical base of preschool education was started several years ago. 100 billion rubles (or about 3 billion USD) was allocated for the repair and construction of new buildings in 2013-2014.

At the same time, a structural reform of education took place. The new Act on Education came into force in September 2013. It was the first time that pre-school education was positioned as the initial stage of primary education⁴. This situation generated a request for the establishment of new ratings and for the evaluation of organizations that provide services to preschool education. It proposes a rethink of the significance of preschool education system as a public value and a public possession. Hence, a formative type of evaluation (Weiss, 1998) should be one of the tasks of the educational reform.

³ It started since adoption the 'Declaration on preschool education' on December 20, 1917. The principles of unpaid and available education were defined there.

⁴ The first Federal State Educational Standard of Preschool Education (FSSES PE) was created in 2013, and as a result early childhood education is implemented by the system of educational programs. At the same time, a new requirement of quality control of both the development and implementation of these programs was established. The Presidential Decree №597 of 05.07.13 "On measures to implement the state social policy" was published which contains the following task: "k), together with non-governmental organizations, to ensure the formation of an independent system for the performance evaluation of organizations providing social services, including the definition of performance criteria of such organizations and the introduction of public ratings of their activities".

Currently, several projects on Russian preschool evaluation are being conducted (Moscow Municipal Department of Education, the Institute of Psychological-Pedagogic Issues of Childhood Russian Academy of Education, the Institute of Education of NRU Higher School of Economics); however, all of these have some limitations. First, no specific research focuses on the parent's point of view as one of the main stakeholders of the program. Second, it ignores the wider spectrum of social benefits that preschool gives to families and children. Many researchers point out the importance of the economic, social and cultural aspects of preschool education (e.g. Andersson-Skog 2007; Il'ina 2006; Galaskiewicz et al. 2012; Duncan 2013). It is thought that the scope of factors determining parental evaluation of preschool education is distinctly wider than the learning process itself.

The study focuses on how parents evaluate kindergartens as providers of preschool education. We see two important reasons to develop the comprehensive parental evaluation of preschool. Firstly, as was mentioned above, it is an "historical" reason. For many years, preschool education functioned only in the state public sector. Traditionally parents' opinion had a weak impact, whereas the state, or regional and local executive authorities, was considered to be the main "customer" of education. In the post-Soviet period, parents' opinions have been gaining importance in the decision making process. Parents have become increasingly united by common interests and represent their views in the public sphere.

Secondly, this is the methodological reason. Current principles of evaluation suggest clarifying all stakeholders' opinions (O'Sullivan 2004). Parents were and still are the main actor of "public demand" for educational services because they have the primary responsibility for their children. In studying their opinion, it is also important to take into account the contexts in which these opinions are formed (Karlsson 2013).

Literature Review

An increasing worldwide investment in preschool education has been noted over the last few decades (Naudeau et al. 2011). The reasons for this are many: the fight against poverty (Greenberg 2007) and increasing social cohesion, the development of human potential (Günindi 2013; Boyd 2013), support for families with children and, finally, the impact on the growth of fertility and population policies are the most important. The growing range of providers and the increasing number of pupils demonstrate that not only education but also care for children and early childhood development are no longer the private matter of mothers, but services that are becoming more open,

public, and at the same time professionalized, market-oriented and finally paid (Dahlberg et al. 1999).

Socio-economic institutions of preschool education are determined by their purpose – to be a measure of social support for families with children. That is why parents' payments for the service should be correlated with household income. A typical young nuclear family in Russia is a family with at least two breadwinners. According to Rzhantsyna, typical earnings of two parents can provide only for one child even in Moscow (2011, 87-88). Obviously, the living standards of families with many children and single parents are even lower. Therefore, subsidies for early childhood development and pre-school care are tangible indirect contributions to the household income.

Another historical traditional for the Russian socio-economic aspect of early childhood education is the support of women's employment. According to Karabchuk and Nagernyak "the employment rate of women with children is nearly 10 percentage points higher than among women who do not have children" (2013, 26). This leads to a conflict of social roles of working mothers (Il'ina 2006; Savinskaya 2011), because mothers are still mainly responsible for caring for preschool children (Gurko 2008, 197; Savinskaya 2014, 167). However, full-day preschool services make parental gender roles more equal (Savinskaya 2014). The growth of out-of-family, professional child care is becoming increasingly popular not only among working parents, but even among the non-working mothers, because this type of service is needed for mothers' psychological health, as shown in the study Kimiko and Lowry (2013) in Japan.

Many authors have recently found preschool education to be the working mechanism of investing in the human capital of next generation, in their intellectual and physical potential. For example, the research of Heckman (2006) shows that investing in the preschool education gives the most visible return. He established that "early inputs strongly affect the productivity of later inputs" (Heckman 2006, 1900). The later a child is given an educational environment and development training, the harder it is for them to catch up with their peers. This is why early childhood is becoming a priority issue for social scientists and social policy makers.

What are the structural components of pre-school education to gain in social, cultural and teaching values nowadays? Let's look briefly at the changes that have happened in the OECD countries. Finland adopted a new standard for preschool development and education in the mid-2000s, where basic definitions are specified in the unity of the three components of the educational service: "Finnish early childhood pedagogy combines care, education and training into a single whole, realized in the course of day activities. Pedagogical principles of early development depend

on the age of the children, elements of care, education and teaching into a whole that is realized in daily activities” (National curriculum guidelines... 2004, 3). Based on the idea that the main target of early childhood education is the child’s well-being, the principle of combining the three components is developing further: “ECEC is a whole comprising the intertwining dimensions of care, education and teaching. These dimensions receive a different emphasis according to the age of the child and situation. The younger the child is, the greater the extent to which interactions between the child and educators take place in care situations” (National curriculum guidelines, 2004, 15). The following variables of quality services show the main principles: the role of educators, a developing environment, the pleasure of learning (entertaining learning), language development, types of children's activity (games, physical activity, art and artistic experience and expression), research / study, the involvement of parents, support for children with special needs.

A Canadian OECD expert group looks at a united formula of ECEC positively as well. However, they do not find a prevalence of those practices. Rather, they highlight the disadvantages arising from this rift. “The division between child care and early education gives rise to: under-investment in child care, as if toddlers were not moving through a critical developmental stage with time-limited windows of opportunity; policy and service delivery confusion with different staff training levels and much poorer qualification levels and working conditions required of child care staff” (OECD Directorate for education 2004, 59). The problem of education and care still remains urgent (Vandenbroeck et al. 2010; Katrien et al. 2012).

Developing standards in the first half of the 2000s, the researchers also offer methods and concepts for early childhood and preschool program evaluation. The Finnish standard mentioned above contains three large dimensions of quality services: the organization of the physical space, a comfortable psychological and social environment (National curriculum guidelines 2004, 3).

The evaluation criteria proposed by Peisner-Feinberg and her colleagues develop the psychological and social dimensions in connection with teaching. They define emotional support (the ability of the tutor to support the emotional and social climate in the group); organizing the room / class (processes in the group associated with the management of behavior, time and attention to children); and instructional support (how learning activities allow children to develop cognitive and language abilities) (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2013, 10-11).

The Russian Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education and early childhood development that was first adopted in 2013 has a lot of common principles and values with the OECD standards. Recognizing the importance of education, teaching and care, it focuses more on the individualization of educational trajectories and the recognition of program variability.

This is a very important change, because it connects the private and public sides of education: the skills and values that were learned by a child in the family space could be repeated successfully in public contexts of a preschool center. Diversity in education methods and individualizing the path of gaining knowledge are an important step of Russian preschool education, which now finds itself in the midst of developing new educational programs elaborated by Michaylova-Svirskaya (2014), Gamova et al. (2014), Yakobson et al. (2014).

Methodology and Method

The main research question refers to the opportunities and limitations of parental evaluation of early childhood and preschool services. Only the visible part of the “iceberg” is evaluable for parents, but what is visible? From the other side, it is connected with the question of public demand for the service. How do parents see the main value of preschool education? What is more important for them and how is it embodied into educational programs? The constructivist “Grounded theory” approach (Charmaz 2006; Cresswell 2013) was chosen to answer these research questions. It gives the strategy to generate the substantive theory on values of early childhood education and care.

The research program included a qualitative stage of 30 individual in-depth interviews with mothers as more involved part of parents of three- to six-year-old children attending different public municipal kindergartens. The interviews were conducted in all ten administrative districts of Moscow. The ages of the interviewed women were between 28 and 49 years old. Five participants of the survey were mothers of large families, who have three or more children. “Municipal” here has several contextual meanings: it means that the majority of children attended one of the closest kindergartens⁵, the quality of kindergartens varies slightly, the municipal kindergarten education program is free for parents by law, the payment for care service despite the city districts is relatively the same for all Moscow municipal kindergartens, and it is affordable for parents and equal to 40-50 USD per month.

Interviews were conducted on the playground in the courtyard (fortunately, the season – May and June – made it a good time to talk outside), through online social networks, and by snowball method, in all cases outside the kindergarten. This allows us to consider the parental views as un-biased, however some desirable responses are presented. This desirability is not perceived as a serious lack of interview situation; it is perceived as the constructs and discourses that are prevalent among parents. This was the focus of the interviews.

⁵ There are more than about 2200 municipal kindergartens contains the network of preschool providers in 2013.

Ten topics are embodied in the interview guide:

- enrollment,
- preparing for preschool, adapting to a new schedule and stage of life,
- the daily routine in preschool, the reconciling of working hours of a preschool center and a parents' work, whether the timetable matches other routines, for example additional lessons outside preschools,
- teachers in a preschool, parental understanding of teacher professionalism,
- the learning process and lessons according to the basic educational program (academic, artistic and musical skill development, physical activity, speech therapist lessons), performances before main holidays, additional paid lessons in the preschool,
- catering and issues of children's diet and preferences,
- healthcare in the preschool (immunization, cardio diagnostics and exercise),
- preschool as space for children's communication and spontaneous role playing,
- issues of diversity tolerance (income, ethnic, gender),
- common issues of child security.

The gathered data was coded using the “Grounded theory” strategy (Glaser, Strauss 1968; Charmaz 2006), and then classified to identify the scope of the criteria and the verbal description of them. The parents' meanings were conceptualized via memo-writing for generating theoretical assumptions. The study of these parentally important aspects and their subjective meanings create the semiotic base for the second part of the research.

Results

The combinability and the flexibility of different activities in the kindergarten leads to complex dimensions of how parents value education. How consistent are different trends in the implementation of the state education development program? Is short-term teaching, which has spread widely last years because of government structures, really popular among parents and does it respond to their needs and even lifestyles? Our results indicate that some mismatch is observed. Considering “full-day education” parents mean first of all the socialization of the child⁶, not the teaching and training in “academic skills”.

⁶ According the Russian Act of Education (2012), the “education” is defined as ‘vospitanie’ and teaching. In turn, Russian word ‘vospitanie’ is defines as ‘personal development, creating conditions for self-defining and socialization based on socio-cultural and moral values and norms and rules existing in the society in the interest of human, family, society and state’ (article 2).

Educational environment

According to the legally established rules (Construction Standards and Regulations – SnIP – and Sanitary Regulations and Standards – SanPiN), a kindergarten is a specialized facility, traditionally located in a standalone building, broken into different areas used for specific types of activity within each “group unit”, i.e. playing, sleeping, taking meals, changing clothes, walking within a specially designated area, etc. All these activities are woven into the daily routine and aim to progressively develop self-care skills and a healthy way of life, which, according to the new 2013 Federal Educational Standard for Pre-School Education, is one of the goals of pre-school education.

At the same time, this facility and its harmonized activities provide for a specialized educational environment – an environment for development, exploration, interaction, and befriending. How do the parents define this environment? How is it different from “home”? What importance do the parents see in their children going to a kindergarten and in their group as a special environment?

Parents’ main motive for sending their children to a kindergarten, which they shared in their interviews, is the desire to teach their children how to communicate, to live together with their age-mates, to find common interests and share their discoveries, not to be afraid of conflicts as “workplace situations”, where the children learn how to find amicable solutions and compromises (a “common language”). A recent public opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center also confirmed the emphasis parents have on the importance of the ability for their children to communicate⁷. Taking the child away from the family environment and putting him/her into a fundamentally different place, i.e. into the playground environment of the kindergarten’s “group unit”, brings about significant changes in the child’s life. The latter is a varied environment, where the child is to able to gain life experience through being together with other children, acquiring independence not only in performing routine matters, but also in developing the child’s own opinion of his/her age-mates’ behavior. This is an environment for providing the child with the initiative for spontaneous role-playing games and, at the same time, for developing a “collective identity”, giving the ability to defend their friends – boy or girl – and feeling the integrity of the group. Parents have the positive view of the subsequent growing-up process. Their reasons are the following:

“Maybe because it is an integral part of children’s life, they should communicate with each other.” (Interview 19) “Of course, the child can be kept at home and closely watched by the mother

⁷ <http://www.levada.ru/20-10-2014/nravstvennoe-vospitanie-detei>

and grandmother, even doing our best bringing him/her up, but we are unable to compensate the child for his/her communication with the age-mates. And it is simply necessary for children aged four to seven. They learn from each other.” (Interview 3) “I think the conflicts they are having now are necessary for them to learn how to resolve them by themselves. In other words, if my child comes home and complains about something, we analyze the situation and find out what and how it should have been done.” (Interview 7) “When the kiddies go to the kindergarten, literally in a month it is already noticeable they more often say ‘we’ and ‘us’. Not ‘I’m going’, but ‘we’re going’. This kind of team spirit pops up instantly. She begins to look around and notice much more. But it was the word ‘we’ that just instantly appeared in my daughter’s speech.” (Interview 5)

Socialization at kindergarten points to yet another special advantage. It is communication in the course of spontaneously playing a role-playing game or another game that appears among the age-mates. The children have no backing from their parents’ “super ego” to support them. On the contrary, their play is controlled by the pre-school teacher acting as a third party. Such situations motivate the children to form their own points of view and build their self-identities.

“Now there is practically none of their age-mates walking around in the courtyard [at home]. Just one or two kids; they lack communication. The older girl is five and those playing in the courtyard are much younger. And my daughter needs to play.” (Interview 7)

The formation of “we” and “I” in the identity structure of a child establishes sustainable positive emotional relationships with the child’s age-mates and the ability to coordinate his/her actions with age-mates, i.e. to develop friendship, however, the parents may not yet call it friendship as such. The first friendship experience is the result of the kindergarten’s broad and free-to-communicate environment, which is highly important for the well-being of the children and their healthy development.

“It so happened that all of them have been together for a long time, and the toys were about the same, as well as the games and the pastimes. Not that they are friends... they just feel great being together.” (Interview 5) “As soon as my daughter went to kindergarten, she became very active. Well, she had been active before as well, but she was not very eager to make contacts with other kids. But now she is unstoppable. She has many friends and she began to talk a lot. Before kindergarten, she had a speech delay diagnosis; now she has no speech problems at all and talks incessantly about everything.” (Interview 13) “She begins to look around and notice much more. The impression is that she used to look only one way, and then suddenly began looking around, in all directions. It is not only my opinion; we have talked with some people about it and they agreed.” (Interview 5)

Parents' discourses on kindergartens also include such categories as the educational environment, in terms of the special developmental atmosphere, which can be compared to the atmosphere at home. Home is the first place explored by the child, the reference point for measuring his/her physical and psychological comfort. However, the kindergarten adds its new attributes with their measures, i.e. common interests with their peers, the optimal number of peers for age-specific interpersonal interaction and the playground atmosphere, which makes it possible to call the kindergarten a place that is "better than home."

"She awfully loves it there. I mean, from the very start the kindergarten is somewhat better than home to her. There are kiddies there, there is play there, and there is constant communication there. At our kindergarten it is like at home: a small group of six children, 20 were enrolled, but not all of them are attending." (Interview 5)

The enlargement of the groups in compliance with the new educational norms enacted recently (Executive Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013, No. 1014) is perceived by the parents as a violation of the educational environment and the principles of its physical, physiological, and psychological safety.

"The groups have become very large and it is a flaw. We have a group of 25 people. What a shame – 25 people of that age is way too many. ... The kid who put his T-shirt on inside out may not be noticed there now." (Interview 18)

This quotation also shows the connection between the fabric of the environment and the corporeality of the child and his/her perception of that environment through the routine experience of the body and his/her physical comfort and physical activity. The state pre-school education standard (2013) connects these categories with the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle, to which considerable attention has been paid. This includes the daily schedule, meals, and the physical activity of the children, such as organized physical education classes or spontaneous daily activity – taking walks, for example. Medical support is also associated with corporeality and includes vaccinations, screening for head lice, and morning inspections on acute upper respiratory infections. The parents' stories about the life of their children in the kindergarten are consistent with this formal professional discourse and often make reference to the upbringing of the child through the bodily exploration of the environment, i.e. in the kindergarten, he/she is learning how to eat, dress, fall asleep, prepare for his/her classes, and take care of personal hygiene. These physical practices are arranged and fit into a rather tight schedule of activities to be exercised during the day, with a lot of external formal regulations to be observed (as per the Sanitary Regulations and Standards). These practices streamline the daily activities not only for the children, but for their parents as well.

For example, in every kindergarten there are menus placed at the entrance and in each group's locker room, which makes it possible for the parents to adjust their evening menus at home.

“There is a menu on the wall. I always read what they have for afternoon snack to know how to feed them later, how well-fed they will be when they come back home, so that I don't give them too much to eat or demand that they eat it all.” (Interview 3)

Also, there are rules for parental participation in the kindergarten's food products quality control.

“Any parent can come into the kitchen if he/she has a health book. A parent, for example, can take part in checking on the foodstuffs that are brought in every morning – whether the apples are OK, whether the foodstuffs are not spoiled. Any parent can do that. But not all of them do.” (Interview 9)

And finally, the feeding of children has also become a point for active parents' actions, even leading to some positive changes after their civil protests.

“Yes, I'm aware that the menu is posted in the locker room in a special place. In the evening, when I arrive, the menu for the next day is already there. One year, the children were fed very badly. There was a problem with cereals. There was little soup, too. And then the moms put up a picket demanding that the children's menu be changed. Their voice was heard by our government, and the next year (in 2012 or 2013, I think) the menu was changed.” (Interview 2)

The broad environment and of the parents' involvement in the educational process shows children's handicrafts exhibitions. Such permanent mini-exhibitions are held in the locker rooms, which are designed as a common space for both parents and children and arranged by the kindergarten staff as a kind of information center. However, any new information and impressions obtained by the child becomes a subject for discussion in the child's daily experience.

Respondent: “Then the handicrafts are put in the locker room on top of the lockers in specially designated places; in addition, there are many stands too. In other words, everything is exhibited; all the works can be picked up. All the artwork that they make can be seen and picked up. And all the exhibits are updated regularly, not just once every half year.”

Interviewer: And do the children like it themselves?

Respondent: Yes. On the one hand, the children like it, but on the other hand, they can be dissatisfied with themselves. For example, the child did not make something the way he/she wanted. So he/she talks about it in detail, describing it colorfully." (Interview 2)

Perhaps it is somewhat contrary to the stereotypical understanding of the role of the kindergarten, as well as to the official discourse on the new law "On Education in the Russian Federation", but the subject of preparation for school found little response whatsoever. This subject was perceived by the parents only as a part of the general educational classes, along with physical education and music classes that have an overall educational potential; that is, to make the children learn how to stick to the "in-class" behavioral patterns, to be able to hear and perform the tasks without being distracted. Thus, education *per se* turned out to be less important for the parents. However, a wide range of educational practices is still called for by the parents⁸. Moreover, pre-school education, as viewed by the parents, is a joint educational process whereby both the parents and the professional kindergarten teachers are engaged.

The actors

While the word "communication" was present in almost each answer to the question about the reasons for sending a child to the kindergarten, the personality and the role of the "kindergarten teacher" remained almost unmentioned either in casual conversations with the parents or when spontaneously asked about the choice of such reasons. The role of the kindergarten teacher, and that of all the professionals working in the kindergarten, was defined by one of the parents as follows: "*here our children are being professionally prepared for grown-up life; this is the strong point of the kindergarten.*" (Interview 15) The professionalism of preschool educational institutions as viewed in contrast to the education and upbringing of children in the family environment is essential. As noted above, although a good kindergarten is similar to a "home", the first provides for a fundamentally different learning environment. It is formed professionally through the efforts of the staff members, with their expertise and sound personal qualities that provide for their professionalism. The trend towards advancing the degree of professionalism can be seen in other countries as well. The significance of this trend is noted, for example, by Boyd (2013).

"Love for children" was the most important quality in a kindergarten teacher as indicated by almost all the female respondents. Most often, this versatile speech marker was not subjected to interpretation, for it was expected that the semantic framework in question was understood by both interlocutors. Some semantic shades of this cliché can be seen in further reflections on the role and

⁸ It is noteworthy that the oldest and most prestigious Russian professional preschool education magazine is called "Early Childhood Education" which has been published since 1918.

qualities of the kindergarten teacher; however, what remains important is the integrity of the latter. Parents associate the basic qualities of the kindergarten teacher's professionalism with their ability to create a positive emotional background for the learning process. "The teacher must love children", have a "good psyche" and become a "second Mom." The friendly atmosphere of support should be the basis for the moments of contextual short-term strictness and the ability to discipline the children, make them pull themselves together to perform the tasks assigned, without which the education and upbringing of children are inconceivable. Also mentioned during the interviews were such qualities as: the ability to listen to differing views and opinions, to help resolve conflicts, to control and dampen down irritation, to display patience, and to change the emotional tone of communication between the children with a new unifying idea and maintaining positive relationships within the group. The educator's qualities are reflected in his/her ability to achieve patient and incremental, yet flexible conflict resolutions, in his/her total immersion in the work and life of the group, and in his/her creative approach and initiative.

"I definitely like the fact that they are engrossed in their work. I have never heard them raising their voice at the children, nor has my child ever mentioned that to me. There have been no complaints that the children were called bad names. Everything's very polite. Conflicts among the children are settled gently. They take much care of the children and entertain them. They really do. They don't just observe." (Interview 8) *"Oh, I think patience is the greatest trait. Because one should be a brave and patient person to deal with 24 little rogues, yelling and rushing around."* (Interview 12) *"I think the teacher must love children, know how to get along with them, have a way with the child, and also have the energy and desire to come up with something, find non-standard solutions."* (Interview 17) *"As to me, I really like the teacher very much. When you are looking at her, she is soothing you (the interviewee laughs). Well, she has the whole program well thought over. But perhaps that's what the children need. They are happy."* (Interview 7)

The parents can see the ongoing changes in the values pertinent to pre-school education and the role of the educator in modern socialization through the development of a new generation of children, who grow up in a world more open than their parents' world and who wish to form and express their own views, experiment, and open up new horizons [Shiyan 2009]. The new generation of children calls for new professional qualities of kindergarten teachers that can help a child feel his/her own individuality and creativity and develop them.

"Today's children tend to prove their opinions – they argue. The educator must be able to entertain them with something. If there is a conflict, punishment is out of the question by all means. The teacher can say "sit down, relax", but it's better to offer something interesting to do."

(Interview 2) *“I like them because they are very inventive. They come up with new games, they are preparing, and it is clear that the teachers spend their leisure time preparing for meeting with the kids. And they give good thought to arranging celebrations and events. When there is a celebration or an event and someone begins to cry or something happens, one lady is keeping an eye on the situation, another is placating the child; in other words, everything is so tender and gentle. That’s what I love. These people are really with a sound psyche.”* (Interview 15)

Special attention should be paid to discussing the opportunities for communication between the parents and the kindergarten teachers. First of all, we are talking about the openness of both parties to daily communication with regard to monitoring the day-to-day changes in the behavior and the mood of the child and his/her new knowledge and skills. Such brief conversations make a parent feel that the child is being taken good care of and, eventually, the parent begins to feel that his/her child is safe and sound. *“The teachers are constantly in touch and willing to talk. When I come there in the evening, I ask them questions. They can talk for 10-15 minutes; they would spend as much of their time as I may need.”* (Interview 6)

Some teachers make photographs of the daily activities of the children, which their parents cannot observe, to later allow the parents to visualize the kindergarten space and have a feeling of intimacy with their children. *“Yes, there are photos there: the educators take pictures of the group for us and of the children when they are taking a walk or playing games. At least we can see in the pictures what the children are doing.”* (Interview 17)

Other professionals working with the children, e.g. the music teacher and sports trainer are positioned by the parents as equal to the kindergarten teachers. Their roles are even somewhat intermingled in the stories about music or sport events. They appear to be equal in both designing and conducting the event. In contrast, the nurses and janitors are not the key personnel and they have a lower standing. Such positions are occupied by immigrants from the CIS countries; in our case, Tajikistan citizens were most often mentioned. When the parents described the workers occupying those positions, there was a restrained yet overtly positive attitude of the parents to the performance of their work. The below quotations show the parents’ awareness of the sensitive nature of the subject, which makes their assessment more expressly positive.

“There was a nurse called Dinara. I think she was Tajik. Just wonderful. We loved her so much. She treated the children just as if they were her own-. She would dry them all after the pool and dress them neatly so that they didn’t catch a cold going up the stairs. So, she was like a real nanny to us. It was a pity that she left.” (Interview 10) *“We have amazing cleaners. Well, they are Tajik. They must be exceptional people. They would open the door for you, always say hello, always*

with a smile. And they clean the premises so wonderfully as if their brooms are vacuum cleaners, we don't have a single leaf on the ground, nor there is any mud or puddles. We are very happy." (Interview 15)

In general, it should be noted that the assessments of the educators are positive. The parents appreciate the professionalism of the kindergarten teachers, consider them as "theirs", and try to protect them when speaking about them. At the same time, they also note the positive changes that have taken place in the system of pre-school education over the last decade.

"To tell the truth, I believe that all of those horror stories about kindergartens date back to the perestroika times. Now everything is OK with the kindergartens, at least in Moscow (maybe in some regions the situation is different); yes, everything's fine with them. And there you have teachers really taking care of and entertaining the children. Whoever I talk or chat with, even on the Internet website where I have a blog about children, many people say they have good teachers. That is, such horrors like 'I won't send my child to a kindergarten! The teachers there yell at them, beat them, they're hungry and cold there' don't exist any longer." (Interview 9)

Discussions and conclusion

What are the educational values most clearly highlighted in the stories of parents or in the discourses that these stories represent? The dominant semantic field of parent's kindergarten worth is an appeal to children socialization, establishing a positive emotional climate in the environment of a kindergarten, supporting creativity and the initiative of children, and the development of a healthy lifestyle. Another significant issue is the physical and physiological comfort of a child, supporting the first steps of a child's autonomy in routines, which is associated with the Russian official discourse of "child care" that is usually expressed in the trinity "catering, walking, and day sleeping". The teaching itself or the development of academic skills has a lesser value, especially for the early years. Primary socialization and the development of self-care practices create a special developmental space in early childhood education, realized by a team of professionals with specific competences.

However, the current system has disadvantages. The parents consider the development of additional education and teaching important at day-care. It eliminates the question of special availability. The demand and the lack of additional education and teaching at kindergarten is the most popular topic in parental narratives; the gap between supply and demand is obvious.

The need for additional education points to the lack of variability and flexibility at kindergartens. Emphasizing the choice of activities as an advantage of additional education, parents figure out the need for further implementation of the individualization of children's education as a principle of the new preschool program: it is important not only to have a single and common daily rhythm but a multiplicity of schedules in parallel, which combine the close interests of different children. That is, additional educational services inside of kindergarten would create new challenges in the organization of education.

An appeal to the subject of additional education also indicates the spatial and temporal unavailability of additional education beyond the walls of the kindergarten. This indirectly raises the issue of parental paid and unpaid employment, as well as employment in the household by other family members. The kindergarten schedule satisfies the respondents as a whole, however, classes outside of kindergarten are a topic of concern and not feasible for some parents.

And finally, parents value the high status kindergarten teachers. They see them as their main partners in the education of their children – consultants, or their "support and assistance." The high status of the educator, according to the parents, should correspond to the payment which has been increasing recently but is still not enough. Together with increased status and public recognition of early childhood educators, the requirements for people holding that status is raising as well. This situation has established a challenge for educator development and finding new horizons for professional standards.

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