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**“I DIDN’T KNOW YOU CAN’T
PLAN SO FAR AHEAD”: SYMBOLIC
LOGICS BEHIND THE CHOICE OF
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN
RUSSIA**

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**“I DIDN’T KNOW YOU CAN’T PLAN SO FAR AHEAD”:
SYMBOLIC LOGICS BEHIND THE CHOICE OF VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION IN RUSSIA²**

This research studies the role of culture in reproducing inequality through educational decision-making (VE) students in Russia. We show how the way they meaningfully map their options affects their decisions and outcomes. We built upon the conceptual approach of Hodkinson, specifically “horizons of action” in studying how young people are restricted by the “horizon of action” in their opportunities to see all the options available to them. We expand Hodkinson’s approach by suggesting that the “horizon of action” is a symbolic structure that renders reality as a meaningful frame of reference which is the result of meanings shaping young people’s outlook. Using this approach, we extract four complexes of meanings which we call “symbolic logics”. We investigate further how “serendipity” and “agency” are woven into young people’s symbolic logics of choice. We show that students rely on a meaningful frame that allows them to be agents enacting a narrative of “bringing adulthood closer”, but they are also highly uncertain about their future and are open to serendipity which plays a large role in their trajectories.

Keywords: youth, transition to adulthood, inequality, decision-making, horizon of action

JEL Classification: Z

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Introduction

In this paper we focus on studying the role of culture in reproducing inequality through educational decision-making among Russian school students. We present the results of an analysis of the decision-making symbolic logics employed by Russian teenagers who decide to enter vocational education (VE) institutions after finishing the 9th grade.

Decision-making in education today unfolds in a new environment: risk society (Beck, 1992) and late modernity (Giddens, 1991), produces individualization and reflexivity, which lead to a destandardization of educational and career trajectories, and poses new problems for young people who do not have readymade solutions. Research on educational decision-making is important because decision-making is one of the driving mechanisms behind the reproduction of inequality. Social inequality is persistent despite major social transformations, and meanings play an important role, as secondary effects show (Boudon, 1974; Beck, Roberts, 2012, Roberts, 2010).

In this article we applied the theoretical approach of “horizons of action”, suggested by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and expanded it by employing the term “horizons”, developed by Zerubavel (1993) in order to study the symbolic logics of educational decision-making among VE students in Russia. We use the data from the longitudinal panel study, “Trajectories in Education and Careers”, and analyzed 24 interviews with VE students from the Tracer Element sub-sample of the national panel. We define and describe four symbolic logics depending on the core meaning making idea: the logic of “marginalization in school”, the logic of “risk management”, the logic of “growing up faster” via starting to work faster, or via leaving school earlier, and the logic of “self-actualization” in a profession, and we present them in the order of the relatively increasing presence of “agentic self” (Silva and Corse, 2018) in young people’s narratives.

We show that Russian teenagers lack access to information, and do not think they even need any about available opportunities, and consequently they end up on a pathway full of risk and uncertainty. They rarely plan their life far ahead and describe the future in vague categories. Eventually they face the reality of adult life and the structural limitations which they had not noticed before, which makes them change their trajectories and adapt to new circumstances. School plays an important role in shaping some of the most fundamental elements of teenagers’ identity and their perception of the world around them. What we observe is that teenagers who went into vocational training consider themselves failures compared to those who stayed on an academic

track. Many of them give up on their educational and professional aspirations, while others do not, but then they lack an understanding of the system and do not have the capability to establish the educational pathway they want.

Theoretical framework: “horizons of action” and “webs of meanings”

Researchers pay a lot of attention to the role of social inequality in educational transitions and focus on external factors that limit the agency of individuals, but the characteristic features of the current social conditions push us to look at the inequality mechanisms that operate on an individual level: symbolic structures help individuals interpret the world around them, position themselves in the world, make decisions and play an important role in reproducing social inequalities.

We ground our research in the approach developed by Hodkinson (Hodkinson, Sparkes, 1997). He introduced the “careership” framework, which treated the decision-making process “as an interaction between the person and the field they inhabit”, which allows us to analyze educational decision-making as a pragmatically rational process, shaped by an individual’s disposition, position in the field, and opportunity structures. He coined the term “horizons of action”, to describe mechanisms which shape and ultimately bind the decision-making process. Using the metaphor of vision, he stresses that horizons “enable us to see anything within them but prevent us from seeing what lies beyond them”.

In developing this approach, researchers focused on different aspects of transitions, and stressed the importance of the serendipity diversity of trajectories within one social class (Atkins, 2017), highlighted the reflexivity of working-class young people (Aaltonen, Karvonen, 2016, Laughland-Booy, et al., 2015), and pointed out that working-class youth are not less aware of their social positioning (Lehman, 2004). Some of the latest research shows that middle-class youth learn to envision and enact the “agentic self” – an orientation towards the future, persistence in controlling one’s fate, while working-class youth learn to passively accept what comes. Working-class youth exchange “agency”, either for confidence in the future or for solidarity with community (Silva and Corse, 2018: 236).

We are expanding upon the cultural and symbolic mechanisms behind the decision-making process and suggest that the “horizon of action” is a symbolic structure that renders reality meaningful, and is a frame of reference (Zerubavel, 1993) that is a result of meanings shaping young peoples’ outlook. The symbolic horizon shapes what is seen as desirable and worth achieving, what are good options and what are the ones to avoid, what is enough and what is not, not entirely unlike the binary logic of culture, as discussed in cultural sociology (Lynch & Sheldon, 2013). Using this approach we extract complexes of meanings which we call “the logics of choice”.

Hodkinson focuses more on the analysis of interaction between the person and the particular field the person is in. Even though he stresses the role of culture, for him culture is a “socially constructed and historically derived common base of knowledge, values and norms for action that people grow into and come to take as a natural way of life” (Hodkinson, Sparkes, 1997: 33). Following the works of Geertz, we understand culture semiotically, as webs of meanings that people themselves span (Geertz, 1973: 5).

To connect this understanding of the individual, we employ the conceptualization of “horizon”, developed by Zerubavel, who states that “horizons limit not only our perceptual field but our conceptual field as well” (Zerubavel, 1993: 397). It filters what an individual considers relevant or irrelevant, and is operating under the rule of exclusion. He stresses that the horizon is a social phenomenon, as “much of what we conventionally consider irrelevant is actually defined as such only in accordance with some unmistakably social rules of exclusion”, which we learn through socialization. For Zerubavel, all the ideas and rules that form the horizons are located in the human mind, and he calls them a “sociomental” construction. We claim that the mechanisms by which meanings operate are not merely cognitive, including the rules of exclusion, but social and cultural, constructed and sustained collectively (Geertz, 1973). The concepts become important as they relate to deeper meaning structures that organize the construction of meaning. “Horizons of action” map and structure, the chaotic present and future which is filled with risks and uncertainties, and when “horizons of action” are merged with particular environments in the process of educational decision-making, we observe “symbolic logics of educational decision-making”.

The choice to leave school after finishing compulsory education in 9th grade includes a wide variety of processes, evaluations and decisions. Individuals apply their own “horizon of action” to reality, and this semantic frame is not universal. Therefore, the decision to leave school is not the same decision as choosing to go to a vocational educational institution. For some adolescents, this

decision is a positive step, for some it is a failure, and for some it is a salvation. We will consider how the same objective parameters become restrictions for some, and opportunities for others. We also consider the role of uncertainty in educational decision-making and how the decision to leave school becomes the decision that allows young people to imagine and enact their identity and exercise their agentic self.

The choice of vocational track in Russia

The Russian educational system includes nine years of compulsory education with no formal tracking. To obtain a certificate of basic general education pupils must take the State Final Attestation (SFA) in four school subjects: Russian, Mathematics and two optional disciplines. After grade 9 the students have the option of leaving or staying in the school system for two more years. The latter path is informally called the “academic track” as it provides the quickest way to university (Kosyakova, Yastrebov, Yanbarisova & Kurakin, 2016). Those who choose to continue to grade 10 must, at end of grade 11, take the USE³ (Unified State Exam). The exam is compulsory in Russian and Mathematics and the student may choose to take additional exams in other subjects related to their desired study program at university, similar to the SAT in the US. The USE serves simultaneously as a school-leaving and a university-entry exam. The higher the USE results, the better chance the students have of entering a competitive university program. Instead of the academic track, another option is to enter one of the VE programs within specialized professional educational institutions, such as a technical college. Lasting from one to three years, primary VE programs offer basic qualifications for workers in manual labor such as builders, welders or railroad maintenance. Secondary vocational education programs usually last longer (3-5 years) and offer mid-level qualifications in technical, service, art and pharmacy industries. Those who choose the VE track cover the school program of grades 10 and 11 grade during their first year of studying but are not obliged to take the USE. In some rare cases vocational students have the option of continuing to university without having to take USE as some universities accept VE graduates on the basis of an internal examination designed and conducted by a particular university.

By choosing the vocational track, we understand the decision that is made about leaving school after grade 9 in order to continue education in a vocational educational institution. Internationally, research on the vocational track and the working-class youth associated with it, is

³ Unified State Exam – an examination at the end of grade 11 which serves both as a graduation exam at school and entering exam for Universities. USE is accepted by all the universities, only a limited number of them can also accept students based on their own entry procedures. It is what can be called a “high-stakes” exam.

widespread, but not in Russia. A mass orientation towards higher education (HE) has shaped the idea that choosing VE is a forced choice, since HE is considered the preferable option. Such a perception is adhered to by young people themselves and by many researchers. This is confirmed by statistics — more often these trajectories are chosen by young men and girls from families with a low socio-economic status (Konstantinovsky (ed.), 2015). Among the motives for choosing VE, young people mention: the path to the chosen profession (57%) and the need to start earning a living as soon as possible (11%) (Konstantinovsky, Popova, 2018: 37).

There is empirical evidence showing that entering vocational education institutions are used to avoid or bypass the USE. The conditions of admission to university after the end of the vocational educational institution in recent years have changed somewhat, and now it is often still necessary to pass the USE in order to enter a university after finishing vocational school, but the path to HE through VE continues to be popular. It was also shown that students from families with different social background use this bypass differently: advantaged families use it to compensate for their children's academic failures (Yastrebov et al., 2018).

Data

For this research interview data from “Tracer Element”, a qualitative sub-sample of the national longitudinal panel study “Trajectories in education and careers”, was used. It allows us to see a wide variety of decision-making logics but it does not allow for studying any of them in detail, since the qualitative sub-sample covers a wide range of cases and does not focus on any type of trajectories or group of young people in particular.

Among the total of 108 interviews collected within the “Tracer Element”, 24 were with students who left school after grade 9. These are biographical interviews with participants of a representative national panel, which were taken separately from the main survey, which touched upon the themes of childhood, different types of education, forms of leisure, plans, goals in life and adulthood. The analysis in this material is based on the 1st wave of interviews conducted in 2013.

Symbolic logics of educational choice

The logic of marginalization in school

In some cases, what plays a crucial role in decision-making, are not grades or plans, but a conflict with the symbolic logics which emerge within school. For some students, school becomes a highly selective institution, developing a perception of “not fitting in”, which diminishes the sense of agentic self, even though they had good grades and could finish grade 11. Conflicts with school and its internal selective mechanisms, can shape future trajectories and the educational decision-making of young people.

In the following case, one girl saw for herself a path to the academic track. She was planning to stay at school after grade 9, but the environment was threatening for her. Her identity was counter-cultural, which generated conflict with classmates and teachers. What happened next unfolded very quickly. When she quit school, she could not enter a different one because of problems with documents, and she ended up in a vocational school. There is a latent fear of staying out of education, especially if the academic track was the first choice and the most desirable option. Decisions are then made on the spot, often with the help of parents, which both reduces agentic self and increases serendipity which young people face.

I: Why did you want [to stay at school till grade 11] and why did your mother want you to enter a vocational school?

R: Well, I don't know if I wanted to or not. Later, my mother wanted to transfer me to another high school, but it was already too late, because I had torn up my school diary. And they required school diaries in all high schools. She sent me to a vocational school which was just close to us. And she chose the food industry, like it's a normal occupation. There are 'PTU' (that provide primary vocational) programs and colleges that provide secondary vocational education programs. I'm in a secondary vocational one, to which she sent me (Olga, Moscow, neither parent has HE).

Neither the girl nor her mother knew about the rules for transferring between schools, and what was most important for the girl was to leave the threatening environment. They were not prepared for any obstacles along the academic track, they did not think about it in terms of making an effort to stay on that track. They thought that it is enough to have good grades to stay on the academic track. The idea is, if one has good grades, the rest will work out by itself.

The judgement the school imposes upon young people affects their perception of themselves as agentic, and the way they imagine their future and the feeling of their control over it. It plays an important role, particularly for teenagers from families where parents do not have HE, who also rely on the perception of “automatic” transfer to academic track once you have good grades but who lack many symbolic means of actually navigating the academic path. Academic school culture becomes alien to them. If you do not fit in at school, either in terms of behavior, identity or grades, you get the idea you are not equipped for a good life in general, the agentic self is reduced to following the set path of not having a normal life. If you have good grades, which depends on many factors including the way the teaching is organized, you have a future and many opportunities in front of you. Entering a vocational school can bring a drastic change to the young people’s sense of agency and identity, as many young people find themselves being re-evaluated.

R: Yes. At first, I didn't think that I would succeed in my studies at the vocational school. Because maybe at school I had passed the moment after which you can catch up, and in the vocational school they started explaining from the beginning. And so I listened attentively and that's how I started to study properly. And at school when I had bad eyesight, I didn't want to wear glasses, it looked dumb. And at the vocational school I started to study and bought lenses (Eldar, Krasnoyarsk, neither parent has HE).

Commitment to studying is a complex process unfolding in time. Here we also see the emergence of agentic self, feeling hopeful, in control of the future, which happened after the young man entered VE. He took a different position towards his educational path. We see that studying at school shapes meanings that young people then project onto their trajectories, which shapes their horizons of action.

School plays a massive role in distributing teenagers across different educational tracks, and it does so through implicit cultural schemes. Teachers decide who conforms with what they define as “fit for academic education”. Their symbolic logic is not explicit, but it is real in its consequences. School is not teaching teenagers how to build careers, or what skills are required on different tracks, how to compare educational institutions or where to find information. It does not help young people understand how to make better decisions – rather, it pushes them in a direction that is meaningful in its internal logic, “promoting” students with high grades and “matching” behaviors and leaving students with lower grades behind. In this context, the narrative of a teenager who grew up in a well-off family is very different.

R: Yeah, I was going to go to grades 10 and 11, but it just so happened that I got five “3’s” and they didn’t accept people with a single “3” at our school at all. They accepted them just with a probation period, maybe a person will become better. And I thought: “Well, jeez, what do I have to lose?” (Ella, Krasnodar, father without HE).

We can see that she speaks about her future without fear, and positions herself towards school as an empowered, agentic individual.

R: Well, I think that it had an effect too. I was told even then, when we came to school, I was told that school wasn’t for me, that I had already outgrown it.

I: And did they explain what it meant? Why? How did you understand it yourself?

R: I remember understanding it in some way. I don’t remember the details already. I think that it was actually true that I never particularly liked to obey, to behave, to follow the rules. And it’s a way more comfortable for me in the vocational school now (Ella, Krasnodar, father without HE).

Here we see a direct influence of a teacher on the girl’s decision-making. The way she unpacks the meaning behind “outgrowing school” is particularly telling, as what she describes is not about grades, but as she puts it, the ability to “behave” and “follow the rules” which appears to be connected with entering the academic track. This might be her rendition of what the teacher would call “perseverance” and “diligence”, but in her symbolic horizon it is about following the rules, negatively restricting herself. In essence, we see here how advice, simple at first glance, is actually heavily loaded with meanings that are used by a teenager to construct their identity, meanings that associate the inability to “follow the rules” with having limited access to well-being.

Managing risks on the pathway to higher education

This symbolic logic is close to what is considered rational, and that is when young people or their parents see the final goal (getting HE), and then strategize the path to it in order to manage the risks. This logic is employed by different social categories of young people. It can be young people from low SES families, whose parents do not have HE themselves, but who do well at school which potentially opens for them an academic path. Or it can be young people from more well-off families, usually whose parents have HE and who consider it a prerequisite for a decent life in the future, but who are not doing so well at school, that transferring to HE could be seen as self-evident. More often, in cases when parents have HE, they are the ones helping their children navigate the

educational system, while those parents who do not participate in the decision-making less; in both cases young peoples' own agency is diminished.

“Risk management” means strategies for overcoming the risk of not passing the USE. The fear of not passing the USE is socially shaped. The sense of a lack of confidence and agency varies between cases. For instance, a girl who lives with a step-dad in a small town, has a different level of confidence in her abilities than a girl from a full family whose mother works in a prestigious job, but they are both scared of failing the USE, and need support in navigating the educational landscape.

R: I just thought that there's no point in doing USE really, because I will not pass mathematics. And I decided to leave after grade 9. I was just scared to take the USE (Evgeniya, Blagoveschensk, both parents have HE).

Fear of the USE can mean also the inability to cope with stress or work under pressure. The pressure, though, is specifically generated by the exam system; it is a hidden by-product and operates as a selective mechanism in itself. The question here is, in what circumstances and how do teenagers start to fear the USE; when do they start to consider the exam as something that is better not to take at all.

R: Well actually I decided about a vocational school a long time ago, I was thinking about university but I was a little bit afraid of the USE. I don't know why. I'd have taken it this year. And when I was thinking about where to go I thought that in these 3-4 years they would change the USE, make it more complicated, absolutely illogical, incomprehensible, because tests are essentially illogical, and it would be hard to understand it. I mean I wasn't afraid that it would become more complicated in terms of knowledge but... how to say this?

I: Do you mean technology?

R: Yeah. That they will make the very procedure more complicated. Because when you come to take an exam, you feel really tense inside, because this is such a crucial moment, you need to do everything right. You're starting to make more of it and – bam! – a mistake. And on the top of it they will make it even more tense by putting camera there or something like that. Teachers will walk around and make it more tense. This is what I was afraid of (Igor, Kazan, both parents have HE).

For many adolescents, reasoning about the future is a complex set of various logics, including arguments about choice. For example, we see the intersection of two logics - the fear of “getting a 2” (the lowest grade), which is in accordance with the logic of “progression” within the academic track, and the fear “not knowing what to do next”, not finding a place for oneself at the

“end”. And both logics in the following case led the girl to choose vocational education rather than HE— somehow she knows what to do in the former, but not in the latter.

I: All teachers told me: “Stay [at school]”. But I was afraid of it. What if I got an unsatisfactory mark? We were threatened that we could be expelled then. I was afraid of it. And also one more thing, I was afraid that if I went to 11th grade, I wouldn’t know what profession to choose. I thought about social sciences and humanities, which means social sciences and geography would be my main subjects in 10 and 11th grade. But I was afraid that when I completed 11th grade, I wouldn’t know which profession to choose. (Olga, Krasnodar, neither parent has HE)

It tells us that HE is not clear for many teenagers, especially for those whose parents do not have HE themselves. It is not completely obvious what HE is, but it is more important for teenagers making decisions, they cannot see themselves there, they do not see it as a place where they can be, it is not in accordance with their meaningful horizon and they fear not fitting in and not knowing what to do. It is very important to acknowledge that, because the common sense of people with a HE background does not allow them to see how it can be unclear what it is, how it works and what should be done with it. Studying and education are understood very differently by people with different backgrounds, and that understanding is embedded in their symbolic horizons, which are built upon their families and social environment, and meaning systems.

There is no reasoning in terms of what kind of education is better for future opportunities, what kind of education is necessary for various pathways and what the difference is between the two types of education. This meaning making is not only present in the narratives of teenagers. In terms of the agentic self, it means a lack of sense of control over one’s future and a lack of connections between actions and their effects. Sometimes the decision is made by taking parental logic into account, which means parents transfer and impose their perception of the education system directly.

R: My mom was strongly against me staying in school. Because she thinks that they will not provide me with a specialization. And that they might have to pay a lot of money for university, because I’m no wunderkind (Nikolai, Moscow, mother without HE).

These are different risks, but it was the desire to avoid some kind of risk that made the option of choosing a vocational school visible and optimal as an alternative. In this sense, this group is not on the fast track to adulthood, as suggested by the literature, even though they choose VE. On the contrary, they are on the slower track to stable employment via part-time higher education, combined with work.

In these cases, teenagers decide on VE, but their plans leave several options open for them. VE is not restrictive and does not determine their future path once and for all (or so they think). They exercise a restricted agentic self, for they do not feel in control of their future, although they have a sense that their actions will bring the desired results, and their common vision of the future is not pessimistic. The main risk that they seek to avoid is the risk of poor USE results. Why the fear of bad exam results, or the exam itself as a stressful environment, becomes such a major factor is not completely clear and requires further research. For example, there is no orientation to “study harder” and achieve sufficient points in the exam. No one is considering the option of retaking the USE in a year, if they fail.

This tells us that VE as it is, is not considered a viable option by some young people. The narrative of needing HE in order to have a normal life is strong. But the symbolic mapping of the USE as scary, the symbolical mapping of themselves as unable to cope with stress, the symbolical mapping of higher education as something too complex to navigate, pushes teenagers out of school.

Growing up faster

We have observed two different logics within one general idea of “growing up faster”. The first logic is directed at getting a job and becoming independent as soon as possible, while the other is less determined and focuses on leaving school in order to enter the “next step” in the transition to adulthood.

Getting a job

For many adolescents, the decision to leave school does not involve an explicit conflict or risk management but it is associated with the desire to start an independent life. There are two categories: some want to leave school in order to start work as soon as possible. Others are not deciding “for” something, but they want to get out of school and try something else because school has become “monotonous” and “boring”. Here we see that a young man does not care at all about his education as long as it formally allows him to work. In a sense, this logic is agentic, but is misaligned with the educational system, and his choice was random, he endorsed serendipity.

R: The funny thing is that I don't know. Basically I don't care what to work as. It's important that I am paid, so that I could live normally and could hang out with friends. It's

just important to work. I need to study just so that I could have this certificate and get a job somewhere (Georgyi, Saint Petersburg, neither parent has HE).

However, the desire to “get to work as soon as possible”, to become independent, to break free from the clutches of the school, is often accompanied by resistance from parents who wish for their children to enter an academic track.

I: And when did you make this decision?

R: In grade 8. But my parents didn't want to let me go. They said: “Do grade 11, do grade 11”. Even the headmaster didn't want to let me go. Like: “He should finish 11 grades”. But her deputy said: “If he does not want to study, he won't study further. He might pass the exams in grade 11, but there is no certainty of that”. But I myself didn't want it. I knew that for sure at that moment, I already had other plans (Aleksandr, Krasnoyarsk, neither parent has HE).

In some cases, adolescents develop an orientation for a blue-collar trajectory, even though parents want a different path for them. In this case, we see a teenager living in an industrial city with a developed system of VE, and with a large selection of enterprises where you can apply your skills. In this environment the non-academic trajectory is largely normalized.

R: Probably in order to start working sooner. I mean, I wanted to leave after grade 9, I didn't plan on going to university. And as I was thinking of leaving school at the beginning of grade 9, so it turned out. My mom wanted me to stay until grade 11, but I was against it.

I: Why?

R: I don't know, I didn't want to go to grade 11. I wanted, in order to start working sooner.

I: And why did you want to start working sooner?

I: I don't know. It was just all coming to this, to work (Maxim, Krasnoyarsk, father without HE).

The informants formulate the thesis that college is better than school, because apart from school education (the programs of grade 10 and 11 which are covered in the 1st year of vocational school), there is also a “professional specialization” taught, for the same amount of time you get “more”. And this is not a rational calculation, because it is not obvious what is counted. It is highly probable that school-teachers would insist that the school program in vocational school is not quite as good as at school, but quality is not important for many teenagers, while the time spent studying is.

I: Why then not finish high school and enter higher education after that?

R: I think it's easier in college, because you finish grades 10 and 11 in one year and then also get a specialization (Artyom, Blagoveschensk, neither parent has HE).

The following case again shows that when making a decision, several logics or horizons operate simultaneously, and one of them is dominant. Based on the “everything faster” logic, both an early school start, and an early leaving school date, become the desired results. The key to this logic is the approximation of “everything else.”

I: How do you think about it yourself? Is it good or bad that you went to school earlier?

R: I think it's good. Because I will finish school faster, I will get a profession faster. If I get a profession faster, I will start work faster. When I start to work faster, I will get the rest of it faster also (Victor, Krasnoyarsk, neither parent has HE).

Regardless of the plan to “start working faster” and achieve independence faster, obtaining a higher education can be considered an inevitable necessity.

R: I mean, I will work for a while, not to depend on my parents, on the contrary, to help them financially, and then if I decide to go for higher education I will start from the second or third year. Of course I will get a higher education anyway, because what can you have without it? You will not be taken even for a lowest administrative position (Olga, Krasnodar, neither parent has HE).

This tells us that among Russian teenagers the symbolic horizon that maps “becoming independent” and “getting a job” faster as desirable is present. The important accent here is on this “fast” aspect of acquiring attributes of adulthood. “I want everything faster” is dominating other options – for instance, getting a better job later, and receiving returns on higher education.

Making sense of educational trajectory in terms of spending less time in education is more noticeable for teenagers in families where parents do not have higher education. We suggest that the transition to higher education is shaped not only by grades and parent's money, but also by meanings that make education not important in general. It is not obvious or in any way rational why and how exactly, VE should be considered as “less” studying and “less” education.

Leaving school

Within this symbolic logic the driving motive is “because”, and not “in order to.” The image of the school as useless is created. In the following case, we see the comparison of two logics. On the one hand, the option of finishing school in her town is being considered, and this option is compared with a logic that takes a different perspective. In the logic of schooling, staying in school means staying “in one place” - time will pass, and you will only be preparing for exams, and this preparation is regarded as stagnation. At the same time, territorial mobility is seen as a step forward in future, in the trajectory.

There was also the situation that I didn't want to stay in school because I knew that in grades 10 and 11 I will spend preparing for exams and this will lead nowhere. I will just live, spend these two years in this town. And this town is so small, that I wanted to get out of here (Svetlana, Krasnodar, mother without HE).

Many adolescents who are on the “fast” track for adulthood get there because the parents do not have enough capital, cultural and social mainly, or symbolic means which would allow them to navigate the system. One way or another, parents with lower levels of education are less involved in managing educational trajectories, which puts teenagers in the position of being responsible for their trajectory, sometimes against their will. In such a situation, the adolescent may not be ready to make informed decisions, but, nevertheless, they accept them, and may later regret them.

I: Okay. And so why didn't you study till grade 11 and then enter a university?

R: I don't know... I just wanted to leave school for some reason. And during the first year of vocational school I wanted to come back to school (Igor, Kaluga, neither parent has HE).

Staying at school gradually loses meaning as this girl thinks about her future. Professions that she thinks about are mixed between those requiring HE and requiring VE. The last argument out of many is the fear of being lost at the end of grade 11 before the many options available, the inability to make a good decision and navigate the future.

R: All the teachers said: “Stay, stay [at school]”. I was afraid of it. I thought, what if I got an unsatisfactory mark, we were threatened that we could be expelled. I was afraid of it. And also one more thing, I was afraid that if I went to 11th grade, I wouldn't know what field to choose. I thought about social sciences and humanities, this means social sciences and geography would be my main subjects in grades 10 and 11. [...] But I was afraid that when I completed grade 11, I wouldn't know what occupation to choose. Accounting is not

my thing, all this paperwork. Teaching is not either, it seems to me. I thought about hairdressing, but you can just finish some courses for that. The only occupation I picked was a cook... a cook, and that was all. And then I thought: "I'd better leave after grade 9. What's the point to stay till grade 11?" (Olga, Krasnodar, neither parent has HE).

In some cases, adolescents show a notable persistence in achieving their goal of "leaving school", exercising their "agentic self". Here we see that the motivation to "get higher education" by itself does not work if the adolescent has no opportunity to make sense of it. In that context, he does not see the difference between vocational and higher education. Perhaps the difference between the types of education is not clearly visible, because in this case the teenager does not see for himself a different future, with a more long-term perspective, than that which his social position and environment allows him to see, even though his grades were good enough to continue to higher grades.

I: No. I mean what higher education? In what field do they want you to get it?

R: They just want me to have it, just higher education, that's all. I don't know...

I: Anything goes?

R: Yes. I don't know why they need it. That's why they sent me to grade 10. But I did everything to leave. Well, I mean, if I didn't want to study in grade 10? How I would study against my will? How could I? I didn't want to and I didn't study (Igor, Nizhnyi Taghil, neither parent has HE).

School is a practice of long-term, monotonous activities with the same group of people (from grades 4 to 9 students stay in one class, sometimes this is the case for higher grades as well) in the vast majority of cases, with the same classmates and the same teachers, and teenagers sometimes start to want something "different" and "new".

R: Well, how does it go? You're just coming to class and you're not studying, not doing anything. It happens by itself somehow. And when I came to vocational school, it became more fun to study here, the subjects are new, and everything is more comfortable, the new teachers, and the new atmosphere, and the new collective (Igor, Nizhnyi Taghil, neither parent has HE).

Teenagers from families where parents have HE have the opportunity to compare the alternatives of education in vocational school and education in grades 10 and 11, finding further arguments in favor of their (already perfect) choice. For example, they make a distinction between preparation for exams and the acquisition of knowledge. Gaining knowledge for the purpose of testing is not considered as gaining knowledge. When focusing on the passing of a test, this test

loses, in the eyes of adolescents, its own quality of the assessment of the level of knowledge. The logic is not that you need to study well, to know a lot, and this will help you pass the test, but that you need to pass the test, and knowledge is something else.

*I: And how was this decision made that you should leave school for a vocational program?
R: No, actually... I passed the SFA (examination in grade 9 at the end of compulsory schooling), and then a girl who completed two years in one, she didn't pass the USE. And all this USE stuff is really serious, and I think, that these two years, grades 10 and 11 they will be spent only on preparation for the USE. Because all I hear now is USE, USE, USE, USE. All these tests, tests. And I think that... well I went to vocational school because I understood that in these two years while they would be preparing for the USE, I would already get knowledge about a profession (Ekaterina, Moscow, both parents have HE).*

For teenagers living in an environment where the path to HE is not self-evident (from families where parents do not have HE), even when the school system “pushes” a successful student onto the academic track, VE is not considered a path to avoid. They make an educational decision “on a whim,” trying to orient themselves in the outside world, trying to get from it a hint about where they need to go.

I liked it and I said: “Mom, why not? Why not try it, I said. I like it. This is, I said, more than what I planned before”. She said: “Well, okay, let's try it”. After that we went there one more time. And then I applied. Now I'm extremely happy that I entered [this vocational school]. Because we started to study social sciences here at vocational school, not such banal topics as at school, but more profound. And I've realized that it's not my thing at all. And I started to think: “Man, and what is my thing then?” And so I started to think: “Maybe it's a real profession? Maybe it is actually my thing?” And it somehow worked out for me that I liked everything. We had soldering practice this year. I liked it very much. I like everything like that. And my parents like that I like it, this is really important.

R: In grade 9 I didn't know that you can't plan as far ahead as I was trying to. At the beginning of grade 9, I had a plan for an ideal life. I had planned everything, how I would go to grade 10 then grade 11, how I will study in such and such department in such and such a university, how many points I need on the exam. But then it just so happened that something pulled me here, to Krasnodar. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, mother without HE)

Families without parental HE provide symbolic horizons that do not allow teenagers the symbolic resources to make sense of education, and HE in particular. The role of education is downplayed. A professional, working trajectory seems to be clear: get your skills and get to work.

Summing up, the symbolic logic of “growing up faster” shows us an agentic individual who decides on a goal and takes actions towards it, the issue, however, is lack of knowledge and skills to actually navigate the educational system and make fully informed decisions – the quality of education lies outside teenagers’ horizons, they do not choose the profession to become good at, they do not think about work as a sphere of development, but rather as something self-obvious and omnipresent. They are faced with serendipity, because they cannot navigate both the educational and labor market environment. After finishing their education, they will find that it does not allow them to “just work” and live the life they want, they will change jobs and postpone the transition to adulthood in the sense that they will not be able to buy a car, an apartment and start a family.

A future in a blue-collar profession

This logic is focused on self-realization and is the most agentic: adolescents who employ it, primarily strive for self-realization, and they see the area of this self-realization as accessible through the path of VE, they take the necessary steps, make an effort and persist in reaching their goals. It is the only logic and horizon of action that normalizes VE, meaning that within this horizon, VE in itself, without any additional or higher education, can lead to success and help achieve an individual’s goals.

In other symbolic horizons, VE has no value in itself. The specialization one gets is not of the highest importance. But here we see young people who purposefully build their professional careers through VE, aiming to become successful professionals in their sphere.

I: And did you have any options besides the Automobile vocational school?

R: No, I didn't. When I graduated [from school], got my certificate, the very next day I brought [the documents] to this vocational school specifically and only to this program, right away, just to this one, which I'd chosen. I didn't apply to any other [program or institution] (Alexey, Ekaterinburg, neither parent has HE).

R: Slightly, yes. I was just interested in the profession of a coach, teacher. And only one kind of sport was interesting to me – gymnastics. I wanted to do it and I still want to (Dmitry, Ekaterinburg, neither parent has HE).

We see meaning-making where geographic mobility becomes dominant over mobility within the education system, the “horizon of action” is shaped by the metaphor of “development”, and development is made sense of in terms of actual geographic mobility. Therefore moving

forward means entering educational institution in another, bigger, city, rather than an educational institution of a higher level.

I: So would you have stayed at school or not?

R: Probably I would have done the same, I would have left after grade 9. I just wanted to do it at that time. Our town is small, there are few opportunities there, and I wanted to move somewhere, to develop myself better physically (Dmitry, Ekaterinburg, neither parent has HE).

What needs to be noted is that the two cases discussed above are both from a city with heavy industry where blue-collar professions are widely normalized, which means that such a pathway is included in the repertoire of normal life, and not only that – it has the potential to build a successful life, which is what makes VE in this case the selected option.

Conclusion and discussion

This article shows that symbolic horizons which help teenagers make sense of the world shape their decision-making in different ways. Education is not seen similarly by everybody. The decision to leave school is never simple – it is always loaded with meanings and is a result of operations of symbolic horizons that attach certain meanings to certain things and ideas in the world around teenagers and about themselves.

The perspective of researching educational decision-making as shaped by symbolic horizons lets us see that HE is not clear for many teenagers, especially for those whose parents do not have HE themselves. It is not completely obvious what it is, but more important for teenagers making decisions – they cannot see themselves there, they do not see it as a place where they could be, it is not in accordance with their meaningful horizon and they fear not fitting in and not knowing what to do. It is very important to acknowledge that, because people with an HE background cannot see how HE could be unclear, what it is, how it works and what should be done with it. In fact, “studying” and “education” is understood very differently by people with different backgrounds and that understanding is embedded in their symbolic horizons, which are built upon their family’s and the social environment and meaningful systems. Families without HE provide symbolic horizons that do not allow teenagers the symbolic resources to make sense of education and HE in particular.

Education is downplayed while a professional, working trajectory seems to be clear – get your skills and get to work. It also allows them to reduce the complexity of the options available.

We have identified four decision-making logics, shaped by different symbolic horizons. “Marginalization in school” is when meanings, generated and circulated in school about who are suited for academic path, contradict the behavior and identity of the students. Adapting to this meaningful conflict, teenagers leave school. “Risk management” is a pathway emerging from horizons that mark the USE as scary and risky and teenagers see themselves as unable to cope with the stakes – this is the group where we identify children from families both with and without HE. Teenagers whose parents have HE choose VE when they are scared of not passing the USE, but they do not plan to stay on the vocational track. The symbolic logic of “growing up faster” is two-fold. Some teenagers share the symbolic horizon that marks “faster” job acquisition as most desirable, even when school grades allow them to continue to the academic track. Other teenager horizons create such self-identity that pushes them out of school as they seek some next steps in life, something decisively different. Finally, there are some teenagers, for whom VE is truly a decision about their future profession and self-actualization, we defined that as the “logic of self-actualization”. These logics vary in the presence of the “agentic self” narrative, which is connected to the level of serendipity in young peoples’ lives. Young people with a stronger “agentic self” narrative feel more in control of their future and take action towards their goals. The largest group of our sample shares the symbolic logic of “growing up faster”, which is agentic, since young people take step towards the goals that they define as desirable, but since they are not familiar with educational and labor market environment, they do not realistically evaluate their situations and the limited opportunities they will have in the future. They do not put much effort into education, either, as they see it as a mere stepping-stone towards independence.

There are some common traits to those various horizons, however. There are almost no teenagers for whom vocational and higher education are equally clear and these types of education are understood differently as pathways and options by teenagers from families with different social background. Some think that VE can give a profession or skills, but do not know what to do for so many years at university, others also do not know what a university does, but it is enough for them to know that you have to be there, some know how to study and like it and want to continue but other factors get in the way.

If adolescents studied well at school and were supposed to stay in school according to all the criteria but went to VE, they might face an unusual learning environment for themselves. Their successful learning experience at school means mastering a certain format of learning, and in VE the learning format is different, and one with which they are not familiar and in which they have no experience of success. This format is characterized by greater autonomy and less attention from teachers. The choice of VE is very strongly shaped by the social context that is created both by the environment in which adolescents live (family, friends, family friends) and the school environment. The school forms ideas about further life opportunities. Leaving school, going to VE, adolescents often find themselves in a friendlier environment, they start learning better, get higher grades, they start to get success in something, they start to get something. When choosing a vocational school, adolescents most often do not refuse HE, on the contrary, the majority believe that this is an extremely necessary thing in modern society. However, they do not understand what distinguishes HE from VE, and they do not understand what opportunities it can give them. Sometimes they fear that they will not “fit”, which shows that self-identity is important in decision-making.

Further trajectories of the teenagers who made the decision to leave school after grade 9 differ greatly. Not all of them enter the labor market immediately or continue their education as planned. The circumstances with which the majority have to deal are different from what they anticipated. They do not have a clear idea of what can be expected from the future and this is a significant factor that reduces their aspirations and expectations and, as a result, their wellbeing.

Further research should focus more on the way various symbolic horizons can limit or empower young people as they create their trajectories. The issue of the meaning of education is of particular interest as it shows us that the meanings attached to education shape practices and efforts and the relative importance attached to it, and it is not governed by the rational choice narratives.

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