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The Parents' Values of Early Childhood Education and Care in Russia: Discovering the Dimensions via Coding and Category Clustering

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Abstract

In this study I explore parents' perceptions of kindergarten as a social institution for the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Global reforms of this important part of the welfare state are a starting point for the research. Redefining welfare ideology and minimizing the social burden on the state leads to the public and scientific debate about the value of early childhood education and its role in investing in human development. In-depth interviews with 30 mothers were analyzed by coding and category clustering. The results show that parents understand the service provided by a kindergarten as 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 be socialized or "learn how to communicate," to resolve conflicts and to find compromises, and to relate their behavior with group-mates and peers followed by 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 her/his 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.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education and Care, Early Childhood Education Policy, Preschool, Parents, In-Depth Interview, Parents' Narratives, Russia

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The Parents' Values of Early Childhood Education and Care in Russia: Discovering the Dimensions via Coding and Category Clustering

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In this study I explore parents' perceptions of kindergarten as a social institution for the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Global reforms of this important part of the welfare state are a starting point for the research. Redefining welfare ideology and minimizing the social burden on the state leads to the public and scientific debate about the value of early childhood education and its role in investing in human development. In-depth interviews with 30 mothers were analyzed by coding and category clustering. The results show that parents understand the service provided by a kindergarten as 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 be socialized or "learn how to communicate," to resolve conflicts and to find compromises, and to relate their behavior with group-mates and peers followed by 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 her/his 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. Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care, Early Childhood Education Policy, Preschool, Parents, In-Depth Interview, Parents' Narratives, Russia

Problem Statement

Over the last 20 years, the subject of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has received growing attention in the area of welfare policy in many countries (Daly, 2004; Daly & Rake 2003; Esping-Andersen et al., 2003; Rapoport et al., 2002) particularly the necessity of the welfare state to respond to gender equality of working parents (Andersson-Skog, 2007) and child well-being (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). 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.

The early childhood education network in Russia has a long history of development beginning in 1917¹. 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 for children aged 2 months to 7 years (Kreusler, 1970, p. 430). The state unified program of preschool education was adopted in the beginning of the 1960s; during the 1970s and 1980s, the network of preschool educational centers was enlarged significantly and was generally available for almost everyone 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 construction and

¹ It started since adoption of the "Declaration on preschool education" on December 20, 1917. The principles of unpaid and available education were defined there.

technical base of preschool education was started several years ago and 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 education². This situation generated a request for the establishment of new ratings and for the evaluation of organizations that provide services to preschool education as well as a rethinking of the significance of preschool education system as a public value and a public possession. A formative type of evaluation (Weiss, 1998) will be one of the steps of the educational reform.

Currently, several projects on Russian preschool evaluation are being conducted by the Moscow Municipal Department of Education, the Institute on Psychological-Pedagogic Issues of Childhood by Russian Academy of Education, and the Institute of Education of NRU Higher School of Economics with a focus on complex multisource index construction based on experts' and professionals' views. However, these projects have not held a focus on the parents' points of view as stakeholders of the program. Moreover, the wider spectrum of social benefits that preschool gives to families and children have been ignored in the rating scales, though many researchers point out the importance of the economic, social, and cultural aspects of preschool education. It is thought that the scope of factors determining parental evaluation of preschool education is distinctly wider than the learning process itself.

To contribute to the further development of quality ECEC, I have asked parents about children's life inside the walls of kindergartens and about the different practices children participate in daily. The main goal of the study was to come to understand what parents think with respect to kindergartens as providers of preschool education and care. The question of inquiry was twofold:

1. What is important in the practices of kindergarten for parents?
2. How do they perceive the educational environment?

Literature Review

Socio-Economic Functions of Preschool Education and Care

What do we know about what the public and parents value about preschool services? What should we know to improve the quality of ECEC and create a valid evaluation of the preschool education system? There has been an increasing world-wide investment in preschool education over the last few decades (Naudeau et al., 2011). There are numerous reasons for this investment with the most important associated with the fight against poverty (Greenberg, 2007), increasing social cohesion (OECD, 2013), the development of human potential (Boyd, 2013; Günindi, 2013), investing in the next generation's learning achievements (Heckman, 2006), and finally, support for families with children (Daly, 2004). The growing range of providers and the increasing number of pupils demonstrate that not only education but also care

² The first Federal State Educational Standard of Preschool Education (FSSES PE) was created in 2013, and as a result early childhood education was 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."

for children, and early childhood development are no longer the private matter of mothers. In addition, services are becoming more open, public, and at the same time professionalized, market-oriented, and funded (Dahlberg et al., 1999).

The global trends in preschool education development have a local specificity. In the Russian context, the socio-economic institutions of preschool education are determined by their purpose—to be a measure of social support for families with children. As a result, there are public funds to subsidize preschool education, and parents' payments play a secondary role in the financing of the sector. Parents' payments for the service are correlated with household income. A typical young nuclear family in Russia is a family with at least two breadwinners. According to Rzhanitsyna (2011, pp. 87-88), typical earnings of two parents can provide only for one child, even in Moscow. Obviously, the living standards of families with many children and single parents are even lower. Therefore, subsidies for early childhood development and preschool care are tangible indirect contributions to the household income.

Another historical socio-economic consideration for Russian early childhood education is women's employment. According to Karabchuk and Nagernyak (2013), "the employment rate of women with children is nearly 10 percentage points higher than among women who do not have children" (p. 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, p. 197; Savinskaya, 2014, p. 167). As a result, 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 to for mothers' psychological health, as shown in the study by Japanese researchers, Kimiko and Lowry (2013). Such research shows the socio-economic impact and value of preschool service for family members as well as for the sustainable development of society in a whole.

Components of Preschool Education Service: Care, Education, and Teaching

Other researchers and experts on preschool education have focused on internal rather than pedagogic processes. What are the internal structural components of preschool education service today? Let us look at the changes that have happened in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Finland adopted a new standard of unifying three components for preschool development and education in the mid-2000s:

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. (NCG ECEC, 2004, p. 3)

Based on the idea that the main goal 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. (p. 15)

A Canadian OECD expert group looked at a united formula for ECEC positively as well. However, they did not find that this is a prevalent practice and were able to highlight the

disadvantages arising from practices in which there is a misbalance across the three-part approach.

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; inadequate learning approaches employed in both child care and kindergartens. (OECD Directorate for Education, 2004, p. 59)

The reconciling of education and care still remains urgent (Katrien et al., 2012; Vandebroek et al., 2010).

ECEC Quality

In the first half of the 2000s, the researchers worked to develop standards for the quality of ECEC. They proposed categories for the concept of early childhood education and care that could be useful for preschool program evaluation. Thus, the Finland standard mentioned above contains three aspects of quality services: the organization of the physical space, a comfortable psychological and social environment (NCG ECEC, 2004, p. 3). The following variables of quality services show the main principles of a holistic developmental process: the role of educator, 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, and support for children with special needs.

The new Russian ECEC standard³ focuses more on the individualization of educational trajectories and the recognition of program variability. For example, a task has been developed to create a story based on a unique family photo rather than from a picture in a book. It helps children feel more comfortable in the kindergarten environment and keeps psychological links with home. Another example is in the creation of a unique set of elective lessons for any preschooler. This is a very important change, because it enables the connection between private and public sides of the education: the skills and values that were learned by children in their families could be repeated successfully in the public context of a preschool center. Diversity in the 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 Mikhaylova-Svirskaya (2014), Gamova et al. (2014), Yakobson et al. (2014), and others.

Researcher Context

As we see above educational methodologists can create interesting programs based on their professional knowledge, new ideas, and previous experiences. However, the “sage” and external view of parents is still out of the professional discussions on program elaboration and evaluation. Being a sociologist, I decided to collect and systematize what is important for parents in preschool service and to share it in the public and professional dialogue.

³ The Russian Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education and early childhood development that was firstly adopted in 2013 has a lot of common principles and values with the OECD standard.

Starting from the analysis of structural reforms in preschool education, I have found that the preschool organizations or kindergartens are considered narrowly as the provider of education or teaching. This point of view is easy to develop based on the opinion of teachers and educators. However, parents see the functions of preschool wider, as a supplement of a family as a social institute. This important “latent” function of the preschool education is one of the focuses of my field of research.

We identified ourselves as sociologists of a leading Russian university that actively participated in the public debates of the education reform. Evaluation of educational programs is an urgent public topic. The given research is a step for evidence-based policy. The result of the given research could help to find evaluation indicators set that could show the goodness of a program.

I do my research in the network of municipal kindergartens as a more popular form of preschool education⁴. “Municipal” here has several contextual meanings: it means that the majority of children of Moscow attended one of the closest kindergartens⁵, the quality of kindergartens varies slightly, the municipal kindergarten education program is free for parents, the payment for care service despite the city districts is relatively the same for all Moscow municipal kindergartens, it is affordable for parents and equal to 40-50 USD per month.

Research Methods

The main research question in this inquiry was centered on learning parental needs and values in relation to preschool service. Parents hold the main responsibility for children and know about their children and can therefore comment on their child’s development both inside and outside of the home. They can see and hence evaluate practices of preschool organization. Based on a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011), I decided to conduct this qualitative research to find parental meanings and explanations of what is happening with their children in a kindergarten or how parents perceive kindergarten service.

Data Generation

The field part of the research was based on convenience-based, purposeful sampling and included 30 individual in-depth interviews with mothers who are considered the more involved parents of 3- to 6-year-old children attending different public municipal kindergartens. Any mother who was walking on the playground in the courtyard with her preschool-age child was kindly asked to participate in the research and to discuss several topics on kindergarten life⁶. Fortunately, the weather of May and June made it a good time for outdoor talking. Recruitment also took place through online social networks using a snowball method. All the interviews were collected outside of a kindergarten. In addition to myself, four other interviewers who were female students within a sociological master’s program, Applied Methods for the Social Analysis of Markets, participated in data collection. Being socially close to our interviewees, it was easy to establish communication and trusting relationships with the mothers.

⁴ According to state statistics, the non-for-profit sector of preschool education is 1,8% in Russian Federation in 2013. Available at www.gks.ru

⁵ There are more than about 2200 municipal kindergartens within the network of preschool providers in Moscow-city in 2013; that is why at least several municipal kindergartens are in walking distance from each household.

⁶ According to the Russian legislation, the sociologist who is talking with an adult does not need to get written approval from an interviewee, oral is enough. The oral approvals for the interviews were obtained in each case. If, however, a sociologist is talking with a child, then written approval from the parents is required.

The interviews were conducted in 9 of 10 administrative districts of Moscow (excluding only the central municipal district). The ages of the interviewed women were between 28 and 49 years. Twelve interviewees had one child and 13 mothers had two children. Five of them were mothers of large families with three or more children. We focused on the story about the youngest child who was age 3 to 6 years.

Since my research was based on the proposition that preschool organization is seen as a wider institute that replaces day-time at home, the interview questions were grounded on parental understandings of what is happening in the kindergarten environment during the full-day service and their reflections on the activities. Therefore, my interview guide (Patton, 2002) contains two temporally ordered lines of questioning: (a) the past regarding the choice to enroll in a kindergarten and the process of the child's adaptation, and (b) the current child activities from morning to evening as a part of a child's life and development. As a result of this, 10 questions were integrated into the interview guide covering,

- enrollment
- preparing for preschool, adopting 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 and parental understanding of teacher professionalism
- the learning process and lessons according to basic educational programming (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 (income, ethnic, gender) tolerance
- common issues of child security

For example, regarding the topic on what the first days in the kindergarten looked like we asked, "What do you remember about the day your child first attended kindergarten? Describe the day in as much detail as possible. How long was your child in the kindergarten that day? Did he/she attend the kindergarten part-time during first month? How often was your child sick during the first year of attendance? If you are working, please tell me how easy or difficult it was to get on a "maternity sick-list" at your workplace? How has your child changed since he or she enrolled in kindergarten?"

All interviews took about 40 minutes and were tape-recorded; each dialogue was approximately 2,500 to 3,000 words.

Rigor

To maintain an ethic of neutrality, I decided to conduct interviews outside of kindergartens in the courtyards of the surrounding areas on children playgrounds. I and my colleagues asked mothers to participate in the research, and if a positive answer was obtained, the interview was started. The interviewee's demographic and socio-economic status was noted to assist with purposeful sampling. *Within-method* triangulation (Denzin, 1970), that is

collection of information from different voices of parents and different researcher and interviewers' views was undertaken for the verification of data generated process and the interpretation of results. To determine the best analytical process, a presentation and discussion in the Moscow-city Public Chamber and two seminars with research scholars and students from two universities (Higher School of Economics and Moscow State Pedagogical University) were conducted. As a part of the debates, the clustering model that is presented below was discussed in detail and reconstructed several times after the critical triangulated discussions with colleagues. It makes the research process more credible and confirmable, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Analysis and Interpretation

The gathered data were coded using a grounded theory strategy (Charmaz, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As Charmaz wrote, "Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means" (p. 46).

Because initial coding sticks closely to the data, all the interviews were divided into meaningful segments which were given codes. Most of the codes were related to the topics of the interview guide, for example, "schedule," "catering," "healthcare," and "diversity," but others grew from the transcripts— "emotional comfort," "I/me identity," "physical activity," "routine experience," "child self-dependence." Other codes came from the narratives. For example, I found an in-vivo code, "learning to communicate," that added value to "spontaneous games." These coding procedures helped me to name the processes and practices that I found occurring in the kindergarten.

In the next stage, focused coding, I constructed sub-categories which are presented in Table 1. I have created 12 sub-categories grouping the initial codes according to their similarity and specificity related to kindergarten education, socialization, and care. That schema is related to the state standard of preschool education and helps to construct parents' views as compared to professional views.

In the third stage of analysis, I tried to find the category that united sub-categories into a whole semantic space. I asked the questions about which terms could widely represent varied sides of children's lives inside of kindergarten and yet be specific enough to describe precisely what is happening inside of a kindergarten. I found one core category, "educational environment," to represent different aspects of child well-being, safety, and motivated activity in the space of kindergarten that account for parents' attention to educational conditions (see Table 1). Later, I decided to add one more core category, "actors," who are the people who create the "educational environment." The category, actors, includes one of most important persons for parents, the teacher. "The teacher" has several identified codes in the parents' narratives, parts of which are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1. The list of sub-categories and initial codes for the core categories "Educational Environment" and "Actors"

<i>Core categories</i>	<i>Sub-categories</i>	<i>Initial codes and quotes</i>
Educational environment	Preparing and adapting to the "educational environment" of kindergarten	Self-dependence - "She learned to eat herself, hold a spoon, dress off, dress on, clean the teeth, go to bed for day sleeping, but I suppose it was natural process before the kindergarten attending" (int. 2). Positive-going adaptation - "She came for half an hour, and was happy. New friends, new toys. She said "I like it a lot. Leave me here, mom, for a long time tomorrow, please" (int. 4).

	Child security	Trusted professionals - <i>"Strangers cannot pass in"</i> (int. 10). Secure outdoor activity - <i>"There is secure equipment on the playground and fence around"</i> (int. 10). Good catering - <i>"The food is good"</i> (int. 10). Secure class space - <i>"There are no acute angles in the class space. Carpets are on the floor, tables have a semicircle, chairs too"</i> (int. 10).
	Schedule	Full-day schedule in the kindergarten - <i>"They have breakfast at 8 a.m. Then they walk. After lessons they have a lunch at 11.30 a.m. then they sleep..."</i> (int. 3). Relation to mothers' work schedule - <i>"If I can't be in time at 6.30. p.m., I ask for a grandmother, and she helps me"</i> (int. 3).
	Catering	Menu - <i>"The menu is displayed in a locker room in a special place. In the evening, when I come for my child, there is already a new menu for the next day"</i> (int. 2). Special catering and dietary - <i>"Allergic children have special dietary needs"</i> (int. 5).
	Communication and spontaneous play with peers	In-group and out-group children - <i>"No one walks in the yard according to their ages. Just one-two. But they need to play"</i> (int. 7). Learning to communicate - <i>"I like kindergarten, yea. There is an opportunity to gather children together and to show them something interesting, develop them. And the communication as a plus"</i> (int. 7). <i>"My child has been changed for the better. He became more focused, is getting along with kids"</i> (int. 15). I/we identity - <i>"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"</i> (int. 5).
	Teaching and preparation to school	Lesson conditions - <i>"I see that there is a board, a lot of didactic material in the class. They do contests and so on"</i> (int. 1). Special therapy lessons - <i>"I don't see the process, but the result. I see that my kid has been speaking clearly and I like it"</i> (int. 2).
	Artistic development	Musical lessons. Performances - <i>"The new music teacher has appeared and they learn by heart a lot of new poetry. She prepared a good performance for March 8"</i> (int. 2).
	Physical activity	Special lessons. Swimming pool. Outdoor activity with parents - <i>"We have "ritmica," swimming pool lessons, aikido, all of these are optional."</i> (int. 1)
	Emotional support	Keeping a good mood- <i>"There is good cheerful music in the morning, they do exercises. They came with smiles every morning and try to cheer the child up"</i> (int. 26). Positive attachment - <i>"He likes his teacher, likes to show pictures (photos) of her when we a looking them at home and smile immediately"</i> (int. 15).
	Physical comfort	Mobility - <i>"They move always. They like to play badminton," roundelay, others moving games"</i> (int. 15). Temperature regime - <i>"There is a special order to dress: no one should wait for others in warm clothing"</i> (int. 11). Medical monitoring - <i>"They have immunization according to age. A nurse looks after every child in the morning"</i> (int. 9).
	Tolerance to social differences	Difference between children - <i>"I don't see differences in my group. At least it is not noticeable for me"</i> (int. 18).
	Openness and parents' participation opportunity	Locker room as space for information change - <i>"Every craftwork is presented in the locker room and we can discuss it. And it is updated constantly"</i> (int. 2). Conditions for everyday short conversations - <i>"The teachers are contacting me every day. They can talk 10 minutes or whatever time I need"</i> (int. 6).

Actors	Teachers	<p>Love for children - <i>“The teacher must love children, I think, 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.”</i> (int. 17)</p> <p>To be modern - <i>“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.”</i> (int. 2)</p>
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Clustering of the Sub-Categories

As I continued to examine the sub-categories, I visualized the data and concepts from the parents’ views of the educational environment and the actors who construct it. To make more sense of their views and to make them more visible, I used the technique of clustering as a fourth step in my analysis process. According to Charmaz (2011),

You gain a way of shifting and sorting your material while you create a pattern about, around and through your categories. Clustering lets you make what lurks in the background jump into the foreground. (p. 87)

Clustering and sub-category visualization led me to realize that some sub-categories should be outside of “educational environment.” Some sub-categories play the role of connectors between “home” and the “educational environment” of kindergarten. There are two sub-categories, “preparing and adapting to the educational environment of kindergarten” (which represents the “past”) and “openness and parents’ participation opportunity” (which represents the current relationships between the parents and the kindergarten).

I put another category, the “teachers, outside of educational environment because they are the main “actors” who adapt and reconstruct the kindergarten environment and relate it to children’s “home” and make space for parent-teacher communication, all of which become the social “space” that surrounds kindergarten. The sub-categories that represent the space and conditions of the education (including the socialization)⁷ are the parts of educational environment. In addition, I saw parents as actors and tried to represent all of the practices that demonstrated parental interest in the activities of their children’s care and education (see Figure 1). All of them are important to parents because they talked about it consistently and with a confidence according to transcripts and quotations.

The 10 remaining sub-categories were united into three thematic groups of “axis”—care, constructing comfort, and educational activities. Educational activities is the first thematic group that related to the main goal of kindergarten: to give preschoolers a preschool education. It links to educational curricula and to parents, teachers, and other actors in the educational process.

The themes, care and constructing comfort, are necessary conditions for educational activities. In my scheme, care supposes the primary conditions for child well-being. I tried to answer the question, “What allows a child to be healthy, vigorous, full, active?” Constructing comfort, the last axis united the rest of sub-categories that addressed bodily, emotional, and social conditions for a creative educational atmosphere. I decided to single out these two groups of sub-categories, because the first group, care, is more explicit in educational curricula, and

⁷ According the Russian Act of Education (2012), “education” is defined as “vospitanie” and teaching. In turn, the Russian word, vospitanie, is defined 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).

constructing comfort is important for parents and only implicitly presented in professional discussion.

As I described above, two sub-categories outside of educational environment, preparing and adapting to kindergarten and openness and participation opportunity, make linkages across parents as actors, home as place, and the educational environment. Although the informants did not talk directly about their own role in creating the educational environment, I put “parents” as another important set of actors along with teachers who constantly communicate via “openness and participation opportunity” to link home and kindergarten for a child. This visualization supports the parents’ positions in preschool education and raises their role and responsibility in the educational process. To be always in contact and able to coordinate with the teachers on the educational process are valuable for parents (see Figure 1).

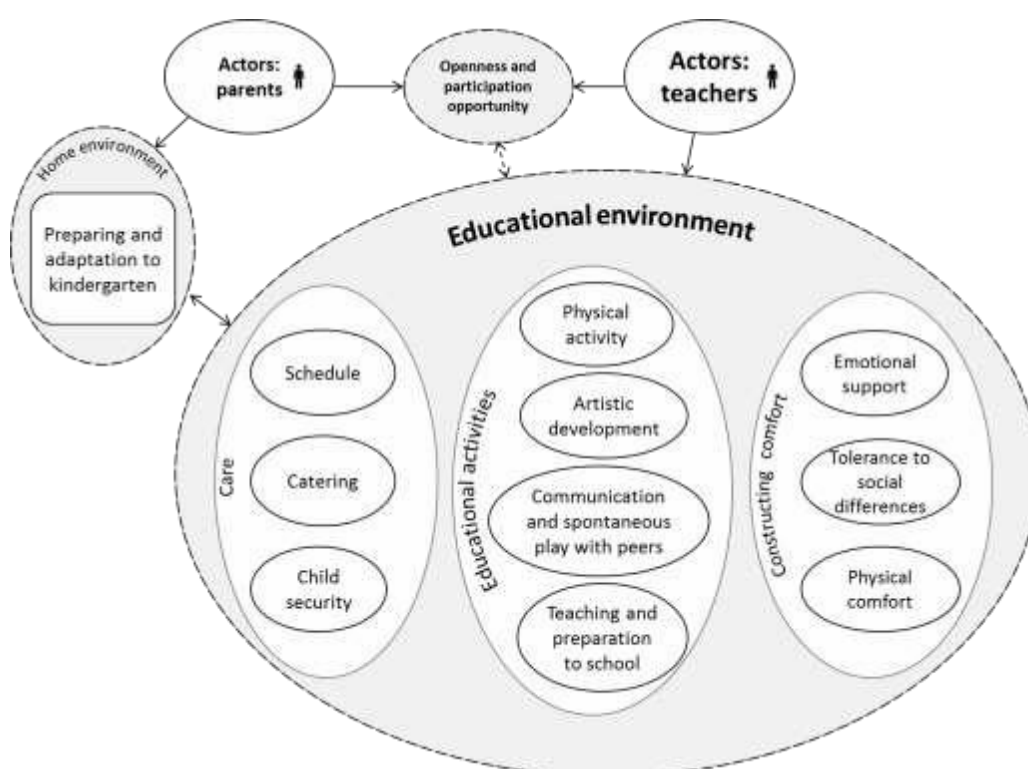


Figure 1. The clustering of parents’ values of kindergarten.

Findings

Conceptualizing the Educational Environment

As you can see, I grouped all the sub-categories within the themes that are part of the common context of the educational environment. Based on quotations and meanings mentioned above I show how parents perceive different practices and activities.

A kindergarten is a specialized facility, traditionally located in a standalone building, with a standard breakdown 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). All these activities are woven into the daily routine and aimed at the progressive development of self-care skills and a healthy way of life.

Care

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? What importance do the parents see in their children going to the kindergarten and in their group as a special environment?

Schedule. The schedule is the main characteristic that defines the specific order of kindergarten environment. If home is more relaxed with more sluggish activities during the day, the kindergarten learning environment is organized as a saturated series of planned and semi-planned events. Following the schedule is associated with a professional's ability to switch the children's attention and motivation, changing activities to achieve educational objectives.

“They have breakfast at 8 a.m. Then they walk. After lessons they have a lunch at 11.30 a.m. then they sleep...” (int. 3) «Keeping up with schedule is an important professional skill, I can't do it at home.” (int. 5)

The length of a kindergartener's day is related to parents' workhours. Usually, a typical Moscow kindergarten operates for 12 hours, from 7.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m., but sometimes this time is not enough to finish a workday, and mothers ask for an additional help,

“If I can't be in time at 6.30. p.m., I ask for a grandmother, and she helps me.” (int. 3)

Catering. 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.” (int. 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.” (int. 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 come there, 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.” (int. 2)

Child security. The basic characteristic of the kindergarten environment is that it is a secure place. The meanings of secure place are complex. The first aspect is related to people. It is the guarantee that only professionals are working with children and any other person in the space of the kindergarten is identified, “Strangers cannot pass in.” (int. 10)

Another aspect concerns equipment outside and inside of kindergarten:

“There is secure equipment on the playground and fence around” (int. 10).

“There are no acute angles in the class space. Carpets are on the floor, tables have a semicircle, chairs too.” (int. 15)

Educational Activities

Physical activity, artistic development, and teaching and preparation to school.

The interweaving of spontaneous and organized activities creates a continuous learning environment. Trusting the preschool teachers, the parents evaluated the learning processes based on a combination of variable activities variability. The opportunity to choose and obtain individual learning paths was perceived as crucial. Discussing these issues, parents turn to the conditions of teaching, which they observe daily:

“I see that there is a board, a lot of didactic material in the class. They do contests and so on.” (int. 1) *“I don’t see the process, but the result. I see that my kid has been speaking clearly and I like it.”* (int. 2)

Parents evaluated their experiences of being participants in their children's performances or sporting events. They mentioned, how children prepare their roles at home, and they look at these activities on the final stage, for example, when the event is coming, how positive, emotionally expressive it is.

“The new music teacher appeared, and prepared a wonderful matinee for March 8. My daughter taught many poems and his role in the play. Everyone tried, singing and dancing. I almost cried, all were very moving.” (int. 10)

Communication and spontaneous play with peers. The parents’ main motive for sending their children to a kindergarten, which they were willing to share 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”). 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 initiative for spontaneous role-playing games, and at the same time, for developing the children’s “collective identity” as a group and the ability to defend his/her friend—boy or girl—to feel the integrity of the group. The parents have a positive view of this complicated move into a new action environment and the subsequent growing-up process accompanying this move. Their reasons are the following:

“Maybe because it is an integral part of children’s life, they should communicate with each other.” (int. 19)

“Of course, the child can be kept at home and closely watched by the mother and grandmother, but even doing our best bringing him/her up, we are unable to compensate the child for his/her communication with the age-mates. And it is simply necessary for children aged 4 to 7. They learn from each other.” (int. 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 should have been done.” (int. 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.” (int. 5)

Constructing Support

Traditionally, the understanding of a good preschool is related to care and education (e.g., the conception of ECEC). However, parental attention to varied aspects of child well-being in supportive environment stimulates me to create a special theme, constructing support, to unite these sub-categories.

Emotional support. The formation of “we” and “I” in the identity structure of the child leads to establishing sustainable positive emotional relationships with the child’s age-mates and the ability to coordinate his/her actions with those of the 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.” (int. 5) “As soon as my daughter went to the 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.” (int. 13)

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 psychological comfort. However, the kindergarten adds its new attributes with their measures such as common interests with age-mates, 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.”

Tolerance to social differences. The comfortable relationships between peers determined by tolerance to children from different social groups (i.e., class and social status,

ethnic groups, religiosity, disabilities). The parents try to contain the neutrality and declare the tolerant attitudes:

“I don’t see differences in my group. At least it is not noticeable for me.”
(int.18)

However, they give a few examples of what could be notable in a child’s appearance.

“If some child who attends kindergarten expresses abusive words and my child repeats it at home, I say that we do not accept it in the family.” (int. 17) “Rich?... It is hard to say. We all are different and have different understanding what is richness. And if you ask about groomed children, I say that there is nothing something like that. Every child neat, clean, and all parents care about their children.” (int. 18).

Physical comfort. The enlargement of the groups in compliance with the new educational norms enacted recently is perceived by the parents as a violation of the educational environment and the principles of its physical 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. ... He in his T-shirt put on inside out may not be noticed there now.” (int. 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. This includes the daily schedule, meals, and the physical activity of the children, such as organized physical education classes or spontaneous daily activity while 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.

Actors: Parents and Teachers

While the word, communication, was present in almost each answer to the question about the reasons for sending the child to the kindergarten, the personality and the role of the teacher remained almost unmentioned either in casual conversations with the parents or when spontaneously asked about the choice of such reasons. However, the role of the kindergarten teacher, and that of all the professionals working in the kindergarten as a whole, 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.” (int. 15)

The subject of 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” is the most important quality of the kindergarten teacher, which was indicated by almost all the informants. 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 qualities of the kindergarten teacher; however, what remains to be important is the integrity of the latter. The basic qualities of the kindergarten teacher’s professionalism are associated by the parents with the teacher’s 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 by getting them carried away by means of a new unifying idea and maintaining positive relationships within the group. The educator’s qualities are to be 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.” (int. 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 hogging the covers.”* (int. 12) *“The teacher must love children, I think, 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.”* (int. 17)

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, to experiment, and to open up new horizons (Shiyan, 2009). The new generations of children call for new professional qualities of kindergarten teachers that can help the 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.” (int. 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 to meet the kids, and they give good thought to arranging the 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 really have a sound mentality.” (int. 15)

The list of subcategories would be uncompleted without two ones that represent the ongoing, continues relationships between the teacher and parent, both as actors of the preschool education.

Preparing and adaptation to kindergarten. It is not easy to enter the kindergarten special environment. It is related to some activities at home that help children reach greater self-dependency and emotional comfort without significant adults.

“She learned to eat herself, hold a spoon, dress off, dress on, clean the teeth, go to bed for day sleeping, but I suppose it was a natural process before the kindergarten attending.” (int. 2)

The parents’ narratives on the process of preparing for kindergarten and the time of adaptation note the home as a first developing environment for a child by comparing home space and kindergarten. Kindergarten should become the continuing and consistent enlargement of a child’s educational space. The kindergarten’s space was evaluated by parents as “better than home,” as it gives children more opportunities for emotional, physical, and social development.

Openness and parents’ participation opportunity. The significance of the broadness of the environment and of the *parents’ involvement in the educational process* shows in the organization of 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 of 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 artworks that they make there 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 child does like it, but on the other hand, he/she can be dissatisfied with himself/herself. For example, the child did not make something the way he/she wanted. So he/she tells about it in detail, describing colorfully.” (int. 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 more 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.

Discussion

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’s 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 child by supporting the first steps of children's autonomy in routines, which is associated with the Russian official discourse of "child care" that is usually expressed in the trinity of “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 within the walls of the kindergarten as a unique environment.

Secondly, parents value the high status of kindergarten teachers. They see them as their main partners in the education of children, as consultants, and as their "support and assistance." The high status of the educator, according to the parents, should be reflected in the salary, which has been increasing recently but still does not meet target levels. Together with increased status and public recognition of early childhood educator, the requirements for persons holding that status are increasing as well.

Surprisingly for me, the parents are good and involved actors, who know the life of children in the kindergarten in detail, can affordably describe different children’s activities, define strong and weaker sides of kindergarten organization. Moreover, the results show that parental views are correlated with the basic principles of the ECEC standard: the organization of the physical space, a comfortable psychological and social environment (NCG ECEC, 2004, p. 3). I combine and enrich the points and create the following classification of “educational environment” elements that reflect parents’ view. They include schedule (space and time), security issues, communication and spontaneous peer games, physical activity, catering, emotionally comfortable climate, art and musical skills development, academic skills development, tolerance to differences, environment openness. The defined 10 sub-categories of the “educational environment” play more instrumental role.

Nevertheless, the limitation of my research is the qualitative sample, which cannot allow measurement of parental views on children’s activities. That is why, the elaborated dimensions of parents’ evaluation can be used for the further construction of multidimensional evaluation scale containing the set of Likert-scale items, which is the subject of my next research.

⁸ It is noteworthy that the oldest and prestigious Russian professional preschool education journal is called *Early Childhood Education* (“*Doshkol’noye obrazovaniye*”) which has been published since 1918.

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