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Original article

Male Educators in Pre-School Education: Recognition or Anxiety?

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Abstract

Introduction. Some parts of the education system, especially the pre-school and primary phases, remain almost exclusively “female” professional niches, and for years this dramatic gender imbalance in the educational workforce worldwide has been considered “natural” and not worthy of research. The situation has begun to change in the last two decades, as more and more researchers internationally have begun to study various aspects of male participation in early childhood education and care. The Russian academic community has been slow to join the debate, and Russian publications on males in Early Childhood Education and Care are next to naught.

Materials and Methods. The authors used a diverse pool of primary and secondary information sources, such as official statistics, open source publications (content analysis of the texts of the “Kindergarten Dads” project) and newly collected empirical data (survey of 142 students of the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology of Education of the Moscow City Pedagogical University (2022 year) and the vision of the Institute’s director, Professor A. I. Savenkov), to explore the following questions: 1) How many male educators work in the pre-school sector and in what capacity? 2) How are male educators represented in public and professional discourses? 3) What strategies have been used to attract more men into the sector and how successful have they been?

Results. Despite the limitations of the available statistical data, some general conclusions can be drawn: the proportion of male pre-school educators in Russia has always remained extremely low. A peculiar combination of references to classical masculinity and gender equality in the construction of the image of a male educator. Summarizing the main results of the study, perhaps the most important point to highlight is the complexity and heterogeneity of teacher trainees’ perceptions of the profession, their future, and male teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion. Overall, our statistical analysis suggests that while barriers to more men entering the pre-school teaching profession are still prevalent and continue to create obstacles, they may not be as insurmountable as hypothesised and can be reduced, if not overcome, through targeted educational policies. Our case studies show that to be successful, recruitment and retention strategies need to address a range of common and male-specific barriers. These include changing the social image of pre-school sector as a female domain, improving pay and career prospects for some, if not all, types of jobs in the sector.

Keywords: sociology of professions, sociology of education, preschool teacher, male educator, Russian pre-school education, gender stereotypes, Early Childhood Education and Care, male workers in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Оригинальная статья

Мужчины – воспитатели детского сада в России: признание или тревога?

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Аннотация

Введение. Дошкольный и начальный школьный этапы образования остаются почти исключительно «женскими» профессиональными нишами и в течение многих лет такой резкий гендерный дисбаланс в образовательной среде во всем мире считался естественным и не заслуживающим исследования. Ситуация стала меняться в последние два десятилетия, когда все больше исследователей на международном уровне начали изучать различные аспекты участия мужчин в дошкольном образовании. Российское научное сообщество не спешит присоединяться к дискуссии, и российские публикации по данной теме практически отсутствуют. Цель статьи – представить результаты обзорного исследования актуальной ситуации и основ российского дискурса о мужчинах – воспитателях дошкольных учреждений.

Материалы и методы. Авторы использовали разнообразные первичные и вторичные источники информации – официальную статистику, публикации из открытых источников (контент-анализ текстов проекта «Институт групповых пап») и собранные эмпирические данные (опрос 142 студентов Института педагогики и психологии образования Московского городского педагогического университета (2022 г.), мнение директора института А. И. Савенкова) для изучения следующих вопросов: сколько мужчин-педагогов работают в секторе дошкольного образования; как мужчины-воспитатели представлены в общественном и профессиональном дискурсах; какие стратегии применялись для привлечения большего количества мужчин в сектор и насколько успешными они были?

Результаты исследования. Несмотря на ограниченность имеющихся данных выявлена низкая доля мужчин среди воспитателей в России. Для публичного дискурса важно отметить сочетание ссылок на классическую маскулинность и гендерное равенство в конструировании образа мужчины-воспитателя. Мнения студентов отличаются сложностью и неоднородностью взглядов на профессию, их собственное будущее и мужчин-педагогов. С помощью целенаправленной образовательной политики препятствия для прихода мужчин в профессию педагога дошкольного образования могут быть уменьшены. При этом стратегии набора и удержания персонала должны устранить специфические для мужчин барьеры – изменение социального имиджа воспитания и обучения детей в дошкольном образовании как женской сферы, улучшение оплаты труда и перспектив карьерного роста для некоторых видов работ в секторе.

Обсуждение и заключение. Полученные авторами выводы вносят вклад в развитие таких направлений научного знания как социология профессий и социология образования, предлагая новое направление анализа и оценки кадров в дошкольном образовании. Материалы статьи могут быть полезны ученым и практикующим специалистам в дошкольном образовании, а также представлять интерес для родителей воспитанников и государственных служащих, так как позволят по-новому посмотреть на традиционно «женскую» профессию.

Ключевые слова: социология профессий, социология образования, воспитатель дошкольного учреждения, воспитатель-мужчина, российское дошкольное образование, гендерные стереотипы, образование и уход за детьми в раннем возрасте, педагоги-мужчины в воспитании и обучении детей раннего возраста



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Introduction

Gender diversity matters greatly for the future of the education workforce, yet some parts of the educational system, notably pre-school (for children up to the age of 6) and primary school (for 6–11 year-olds) phases, remain almost exclusively “female” professional niches. This is true for state- and privately-run establishments in nearly all parts of the world. Experience shows that even with targeted campaigns and policies, the number of male educators choosing to work with preschool children remains very modest. Russia has one of the lowest rates of male staff in pre-school education. According to the most recent international statistics, in 2018 the number of male preschool educators in Russia was less than one percent, while in Germany, for example, the corresponding figure was 4.5% and in France 8.9%. The countries with a similarly negligent share of male preschool educators were Italy (1.1%) and the Republic of Korea (0.7%). The proportion of male primary school teachers was similarly low in Russia (0.6%), while internationally the picture was mixed: from 35.6% in Japan and 25% in Canada to only 4.5% in Italy¹.

For years this dramatic gender imbalance in the educational workforce worldwide was viewed as ‘natural’ and not worthy of research. The situation has begun to change in the last two decades as more researchers internationally, though not yet in Russia, have started examining various aspects of male participation in early childhood education and care

(ECEC)². The Russian academic community has been slow to join the debate, and Russian publications on the topic of males in ECEC are almost non-existent. For example, a search in the largest Russian academic electronic library “eLIBRARY.RU” using the keywords “male kindergarten teachers”, “male preschool teachers”, “male workers in ECEC” yielded no suitable results. This is in contrast to the global scientific discourse, where the pool of literature on this topic is constantly growing and branching out into several research areas.

Literature Review

The following literature review is structured accordingly. Instead of using a historical approach to depict the evolution of the foreign academic discourse on the topic, it describes the main directions of the current research. This approach allows not only to present the international evidence base on the topic, but also to reflect on its relevance to the Russian context and identify promising areas for researching the topic in Russia. The review covers the following core thematic areas: (a) male role model; (b) diversity of cultural contexts; (c) children’s views on male educators; and (d) analysis of recruiting and retaining policies. Each of them offers a unique perspective on the topic, and by bringing these perspectives together, we can build a more complex and realistic vision of the phenomenon. Still, it is worth noting that when it comes to assessing the impact of male educators, all debates boil down to the fundamental question

¹ Table 5.2. Proportion of female teachers by country: 2018 (Percentage). By level of education. In: Gokhberg L.M., Ozerova O.K., Sautina E.V. [Education in Numbers: 2021: A Brief Statistical Collection]. Moscow: Higher School of Economics; 2021. p. 84–85. (In Russ.) Available at: <https://www.hse.ru/primarydata/oc2021?yclid=Ij2iuaj0lj563459180> (accessed 18.06.2023).

² ECEC is the official term used in the EU and UK which describes formal and informal teaching of young children up to the starting age for compulsory primary education (which fluctuates in different countries between 4 and 7 years old) (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/early-childhood-education-and-care/about-early-childhood-education-and-care>). In the Russian context the term ECEC is used similarly and includes various providers of preschool education, but first and foremost kindergarten.

of whether male presence in the world of pre-school education brings some unique value (good or bad) or whether the gender of the educator is irrelevant as long as this person has professional competencies and skills. For those who deny any unique value, the inclusion of male educators can still be a positive thing simply because it increases the pool of talented people going in the profession, which in turn improves the quality of teaching. Importantly, views on this question sometimes cut across the thematic area lines, making the debate messier and more confusing.

Male Role Model. Many researchers note that the role of preschool education is not limited to academic teaching and some even argue that teaching social and cultural norms, including gender roles, at this age is even more important than subject learning. This, however, has implications for how freely and independently teachers, both male and female, can express their personal gender identities, especially as role models in society become more complex. For instance, Martino [1] demonstrate how teacher identities are constantly adjusting in response to shifting social expectations. Martino raises questions about the politicized function of the male role model discourse within the context of the “moral panic” in the contemporary western society, the declining number of male teachers in primary schools, problematisation of male teachers’ lives and professional identities. At the end of the 20th century, male involvement in education was welcomed as a means to resist ‘feminisation’ of schooling. It was believed that male way of teaching and behaving is essentially different from how females teach and act, hence having more males in education would bring more discipline and order and improve the overall quality of education. At the same time male teachers themselves became victims of reverse sexism and their masculinity was called into question because of their choice of a typical “women’s career”.

Agreeing with Martino, Sargent [2] also notices that males working in ECEC are often looked with mistrust and put under more scrutiny than female educators. Underneath there is an implicit suspicion of deviant motives for joining the profession, such as paedophilia, as well as an expectation of having inferior

abilities in childcaring by default. Such social attitudes make it harder for male educators to engage in close affectionate interactions with children, which in turn can reinforce the prevailing perceptions of males being second-rate child carers. As a result, male educators reproduce hegemonic masculinity as reluctant role model [2; 3].

According to Brian Sevier and Catherine Ashcraft [4], there is no consensus on what exactly “male role model” means. They argue that men should undoubtedly teach at all levels of the education system and that the gender identity of a teacher should not be relevant to one’s status as a “good teacher”. The authors leave open whether gendered role models are needed at all, focusing instead on the importance of modelling good personality traits and actions [4]. Finally, male ECEC professionals are also analysed in relation to their ability to role model fatherhood. It is believed that having more male educators can help children to form better relationships with their fathers [5].

Cultural Diversity. Comparative research across countries and cultural contexts shows that regardless of the location males working in the ECEC sector face similar challenges – social stigma, prejudice, suspicion, and low pay, – yet local context may affect how these problems are manifested and prioritised. For instance, the research shows that in Turkey, male teachers, even if they want to work with pre-school children, would not choose to work in nurseries for the fear of being socially ostracised. Even those who work in primary school reported being shunned away by their families and friends [6]. In Sweden, male ECEC professionals commonly face two gender-specific stereotypes, “fun guy” and “possible perpetrator”. Both stereotypes create an extra barrier for engaging in child-caring activities that require close physical contact with a child. The exception is made for sports or other physical activities where male presence is tolerated and even welcomed? since sports is traditionally associated with masculinity in many cultures [7].

More broadly, researchers from United States, Canada and United Kingdom name the following typical entry barriers to the profession: limitations of traditional gender roles, concerns of being seen as homosexual, fear



of sexual abuse accusations, low salaries, and social ostracisation [8]. Analysing the reasons for selecting this unorthodox professional pathway, they point out that male educators in different countries particularly value the opportunity to support children's social and emotional development [9]. An interesting observation is made about parental attitudes to male educators: overall, parents see it positively, although rigid gender stereotypes that portray men as inept child carers continue to linger and make some parents nervous about leaving their children with male educators [10; 11]. More recently, a collaborative international research project across 12 countries investigated how males negotiate their career trajectories into and/or out of ECEC. Among other things, the research found that male involvement in ECE was problematized as being unorthodox both at the individual level – including by the very males who work in the sector, – and at the institutional level [12]. The latter means that in addition to social challenges, male ECEC staff faces tacit institutional discrimination and pressures to leave the profession or move into more acceptable posts.

Children's Views on Male Teachers. As children are the main beneficiaries of education, it makes sense to explore their views and perceptions, and this strand of research offers interesting insights by looking at the issue through children's eyes. For example, Harris and Barnes conducted a study with a group of four-year-olds to understand their views of female and male teachers and to learn more about the role of stereotypes in shaping such views. They found that while children thought teachers of both sexes were capable of doing their job well, they also described male teachers as having more authority in the classroom than female teachers and as being more likely to lead sports activities. Boys and girls tended to identify the teacher of the same sex as someone with whom they felt more comfortable communicating. Reflecting on this stereotypical thinking at such an early age, the researchers raised concerns that simply having more male ECEC staff may not be enough and may even serve to reinforce traditional male hegemony [13].

Another study of 7–8 year old primary pupils in England looked at the relationship

between teachers' gender and pupils' motivation and engagement in learning. They found little apparent relationship and concluded that the quality of teaching was a far more important factor in pupils' attitudes to learning than the gender of their teachers [14]. Similarly, the research does not support the once dominant view that male teachers are particularly beneficial to boys' learning and behaviour. According to this view, boys are more likely to identify with male teachers and emulate their behaviour, so having a positive role model in the classroom will encourage them to try harder in their learning. After analysing over 300 interviews with primary school children, researchers pointed out that boys were equally likely to identify characteristics of both male and female teachers that they would like to emulate – nice and kind, smart and funny – so what they really need are good teachers, both male and female [15].

Recruitment and Retention Policies. Martin Mills argues that strategies to attract male teachers are often highly controversial and often infective because of the fear of showing explicit gender bias and because they can ultimately work against women's emancipation by reintroducing discrimination in pay and career progression. The author advocates a social justice approach to recruitment and retention in ECEC, arguing that diversity and inclusion are better ways of achieving a balanced workforce than positive discrimination [16].

Kreitz-Sandberg's paper on gender inclusion in teacher education in Sweden provides a good overview of different teacher education strategies and dilemmas related to gender issues. According to the paper, teacher training in Swedish universities presents a contradictory image of working in the ECEC sector. On the one hand, the work is positioned as inherently "women's work". On the other hand, the need for a male presence as a counterbalance to the female dominance in this part of the education system is openly acknowledged [17]. This disjointed image of the ECEC workforce reinforces traditional stereotypes and continues to create barriers to the recruitment and retention of male educators.

Finally, of all the factors, low pay is recognised as a common reason why ECEC educators, both male and female, leave the

profession. However, this factor is arguably more important for male educators given the social expectation, still prevalent in many societies, that men should be the main breadwinners in their families. As a result, male teachers are under greater pressure from their families and society in general to earn a good income, at least as much as their partners. It takes a particularly committed person to be willing to compromise their wealth and social status to do what they enjoy, but many others are unwilling or unable to make that choice [18].

How relevant are the four areas of international research to the Russian context, and which of the approaches presented above are most appropriate to the Russian situation? Applying the international findings to the Russian context shows that some are more relevant than others. For example, a quick review of policy papers and legislative acts related to ECEC confirms that the gender composition of the ECEC sector is not a priority for the federal government. As we will show later in the paper, some regional authorities may take a different stance and try to influence the number of male educators in ECEC. Their interesting experiences and achievements could be a potential topic for future research, just as it would be interesting to investigate the private and professional views and attitudes of decision-makers working in educational authorities at all levels of the system. However, neither of these topics is high on the research agenda due to the lack of general knowledge about male educators in Russia.

More interesting and relevant to the Russian context might be a study of how male educators are perceived by children and their families, including the perceived impact on the educational environment and outcomes. The latter question is hotly debated in chats and online communities of parents and educators, but has yet to receive attention from the academic community. Equally, exciting would be a comparative study that looks at the experiences of male educators in Russia through the prism of cultural diversity, comparing experiences in different cultural contexts both within the country and internationally.

Before embarking on a more complex comparative or attitudinal study, one needs

to have a good situational understanding and grasp of the basics of the Russian discourse on pre-school male educators, which is what we attempt to do in this paper. In this respect, the 'role model' literature offers the most relevant insights, although we also draw from other thematic pools where appropriate.

Materials and Methods

Given the novelty of the topic in Russia and the scarcity of information, we have kept the overarching research question of this situational analysis study relatively broad: What can we learn about male educators working in the Russian pre-school sector? More specifically, we used a diverse pool of primary and secondary information sources, such as official statistics, open source publications and newly collected empirical data, to explore the following questions 1) How many male educators work in the pre-school sector and in what capacity? 2) How are male educators represented in public and professional discourses? 3) What strategies have been used to attract more men into the sector and how successful have they been?

To answer the first question, we looked at statistical data from Rosstat, the Russian Federal State Statistics Service. Some of the statistics were available on their website and some were sent to us on specific request. For the second and third research questions, we used three types of data: online publications describing an educational initiative in the Moscow region to bring male educators, so-called "Kindergarten Dads", into preschool settings; a small survey conducted in September 2022 among students at the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology of Education of the Moscow State Pedagogical University; and an expert interview with the current director of this institute. More detailed information on each data source and methodology can be found in the results section below.

As the topic is new to the Russian research, it was important that we drew from an eclectic range of quantitative and qualitative data and used a mixed methods approach. This helped us to look at the phenomenon from different angles to overcome the limitations of each approach. Statistics provided an overall picture and trends but could not answer the



why and how questions. A thematic narrative analysis of the online publications offered useful insights into the official discourse, while the views and opinions collected from the student teachers and the educational expert nicely complemented the official position and deepened our understanding of the complexity and peculiarity of the Russian discourse.

It should also be noted that the authors have addressed general issues of public and private preschool education in Russia in their previous research [19; 20] and were able to draw on their findings when interpreting the new findings.

Results

Pre-School Educators: Statistical Trends.

After reviewing the available statistical data, we limited our analysis to the period after 2007, the earliest year for which data on the gender of the pre-school workforce is available. The lack of statistics for earlier years makes it difficult to comment on the gender balance of the pre-school workforce before 2007, although qualitative data collected for this and previous research, including interviews with education experts and long-term pre-school workers, suggests a continuity of recruitment and retention policies throughout the late Soviet and post-Soviet period. According to these experts, pre-school has always been seen as a traditionally female sector of employment, and men working in it were seen as an oddity.

From 2007, the Russian statistical agency Rosstat had began to include gender information in the annual census of the education workforce. Over the years, however, there have been some institutional and organisational changes in pre-school education that have affected the educational workforce quantitatively and qualitatively, and consequently led to some methodological changes in the way the workforce census data are collected and presented. For example, the pre-school sector was reformed in 2013 and its definition was extended to include pure childcare facilities, i.e. childcare facilities that do not provide educational services. The other important change was administrative: kindergartens were incorporated into the school education system, with management posts being absorbed into the school teaching staff.

Structural changes, combined with Rosstat's own reforms, have affected the way statistical data are compiled. For example, in some years the number of preschool educators included kindergarten group assistants and managers, while in other years these categories were excluded. Similarly, we found that the data on early childhood educators contain only aggregated data obtained by combining individual level data. Unfortunately, the data do not allow a more systematic comparison for all groups of educators, so we cannot say anything about the percentage distribution of male pre-school educators by level of education or by years of experience and age. However, the data available was sufficient for our general analysis and clearly showed the overall trend: although the number/percentage of male educators has fluctuated over the years, overall men have consistently remained a tiny proportion of those employed in the pre-school sector.

Figure 1 shows the total number of group-level educators working in the pre-school sector in the period 2007–2021 and the percentage of male educators among them. As can be seen from the graph, the share of male educators went up and down, sometimes seeming to follow the fluctuation of the total number of group-based educators and sometimes moving independently of it, but never exceeding a meagre 0.5% of the total. Interestingly, the number of male educators recorded in 2008 was almost seven times higher than in the previous year. Given that 2007 was the first year of collecting such data, it is possible that part of the discrepancy is due to methodological inconsistencies in the way the data was collected or analysed, or to the fact that 2008 was the peak year of the financial and economic crisis of 2008–2010, with the largest drop in the number of vacancies on the labour market in Russia in the period from 2008 to 2020. In 2012 and 2017, the share of males decreased significantly while the total number of educators increased, and we are not sure what could be a reasonable explanation for this.

To get deeper insights on male workforce within the pre-school sector, we need to look at how males are distributed across different job roles and subject areas. The data is available for every year, but we located and compared figures for 2007, 2014 and 2021 which are presented in Table 1 below.

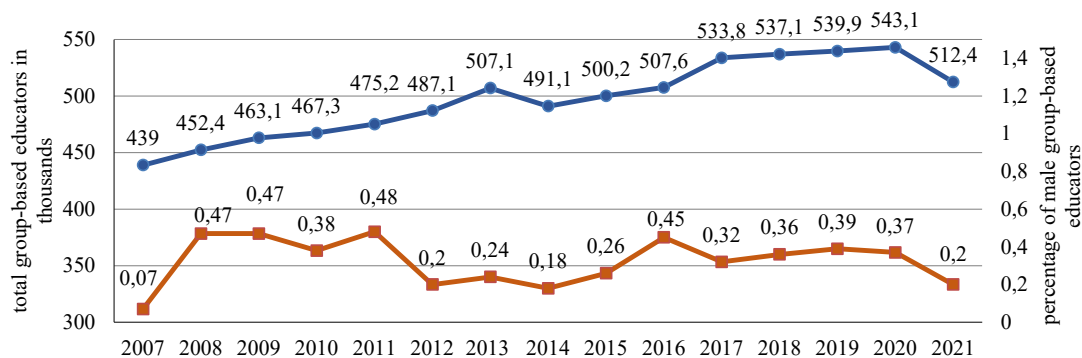


Fig. 1. Overall numbers of group-based educators working in pre-school establishments in Russian Federation (in thousands) and corresponding percentages of male educators among them

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of Rosstat data.

Table 1. Distribution of male educators across teaching, managerial and other posts in the pre-school sector

Posts in the pre-school sector	2007			2014			2021		
	Total number	Males		Total number	Males		Total number	Males	
		number	percentage		number	percentage		number	percentage
Managers	65,854	444	0.7	68,150	1,902	2.8	–	–	–
Group-based educators	439,044	273	0.1	491,096	897	0.2	512,416	1,069	0.2
Senior educators	16,393	18	0.1	19,772	81	0.4	25,130	108	0.4
Junior educators	20,659	45	0.2	180,075	655	0.4	–	–	–
Assistant educators	18,494	32	0.2	123,924	451	0.4	–	–	–
Music instructors	42,676	1,338	3.1	43,278	1,047	2.4	42,961	659	1.5
PA/sports instructors	18,054	379	2.1	20,280	879	4.3	23,644	1,671	7.1
Speech therapists and 'defectologists'	30,365	45	0.2	31,903	125	0.4	43,459	78	0.2
Educational psychologists	13,818	78	0.6	14,402	133	0.9	19,287	156	0.8
Child and youth councillors	1,491	6	0.4	1,215	20	1.7	1,491	38	2.6
Teachers with event organisation duties	265	7	2.6	171	6	3.5	498	26	5.2
Teachers of additional education	7,491	121	1.6	6,054	195	3.2	5,725	356	6.2
Teachers of foreign languages	–	–	–	–	–	–	1,027	67	6.5
Other teaching personnel	–	–	–	2,095	78	3.7	5,866	277	4.7

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of Rosstat data.

A few interesting observations can be made. First, PA and music instruction were the preferred subject fields for male teachers. In 2007 just over 1,700 males were working in these positions which constituted 2.8% of all PA and music instructors working in the sector; in 2014 the number increased to 1,926 (3%) and in 2021 it reached a whopping figure of 23,330 (5.4%). It must be noted, however, that in 2021 the percentage of male music instructors was significantly lower than in 2014 and the overall growth was due to a sharp increase of males among PA instructors. In 2021 PA was the subject with the highest proportion of male teachers (7.1%). Second, between 2007 and 2014 the share of males in managerial posts was growing faster than in other posts positions, from 0.7% to 2.8%. In 2013 these posts were incorporated into school-level staff, so we do not have relevant data for comparison. Interestingly, among senior educators the proportion of males in the same period increased fourfold – from 0.1% to 0.4%.

Third, it appears that with time more males were selecting subject areas other than sports and music. For instance, the share of males among teachers with event organisational duties increased from 2.6% in 2007 to 3.5% in 2014 and 5.2% in 2021. Similarly, the proportion of male teachers of additional education grew from 1.6% in 2007 to 3.2% in 2014 and 6.2% in 2021. Similar growth was

evident among child psychologists, although the change was less dramatic.

Finally, we looked at the distribution of male educators across regions, types of regions and types of providers. Figure 2 compares data for urban and rural areas as well as Moscow Region in 2014, 2017 and 2021. We could not find comparable data for the earlier period because any regional statistics for the time before 2014 combined figures for educators and managers, which made the data incomparable to the data for later years. Comparing rural and urban figures, it was somewhat surprising to see higher concentration of pre-school males in rural rather than urban areas, although with time the gap was narrowing. In 2014 just 1.1% of rural educators were male while in urban dwellings the equivalent figure was 0.4%. By 2021 the percentage of rural educators shrank to 0.8% and the percentage of male educators working in pre-school establishments in cities and towns increased to 0.6%.

The Moscow region is included separately because it has always had the highest concentration of male educators, setting it apart from the rest of the country, and because of its recent innovative local programmes to recruit more male educators to kindergartens. One of these programmes is discussed further in the article. As can be seen from Figure 2, the Moscow region was already ahead of the game in 2014, with 1.4% male educators, but it was not too far from the rural figure for that year.

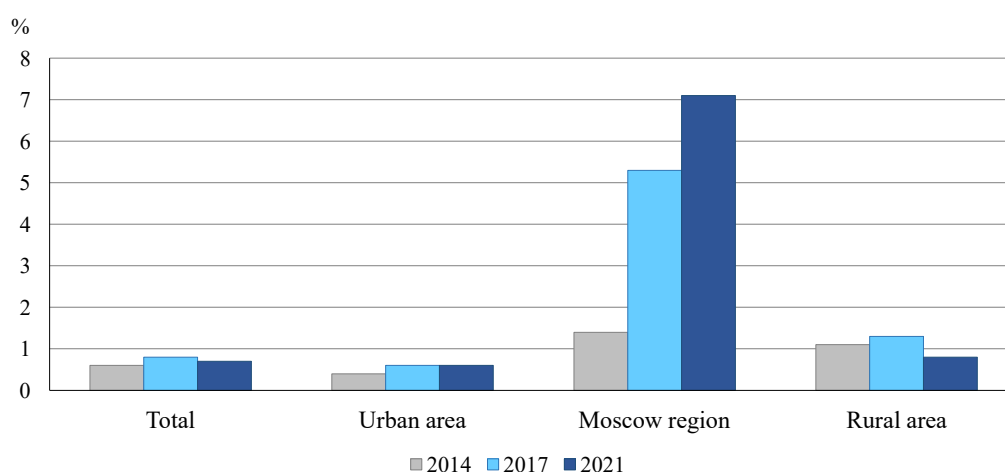


Fig. 2. Share of male educators in different types of regions

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of Rosstat data.

By 2017, the proportion of male educators had jumped to 5.3%, and by 2021 it had risen further to 7.1% – a fivefold increase in less than a decade! To put this remarkable achievement into context, consider that in 2021 the absolute majority of Russian regions (84 out of 87) reported the proportion of male teachers in the range of 1.93–0.07%. Outside Moscow, only two other regions reported a figure close to 3%³.

In addition to showing regional differences, the 2021 data compare State/local government settings with those run by the private sector. The state remains the dominant provider and employer in the pre-school sector, with almost 97% of the workforce employed in state institutions. Not surprisingly, the proportion of male educators in state kindergartens and nurseries is close to the national average (0.6%). In contrast, the figure for privately run institutions is six times higher (3.6%).

Despite the limitations of the available data presented in this brief review, some general conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the data show that although male educators have always been a tiny minority of the pre-school workforce, the situation is not uniform and that in certain circumstances more men could be motivated to work in the sector. Secondly, we found that the growth in the number of male pre-school educators has been driven by more men moving into roles other than group-based educators, such as PA and sports instructors and event organisers. Thirdly, we found that the Moscow region and the private sector have the highest proportion of male educators. Research conducted by one of the authors in 2012 and 2014 [19; 20] suggests that this may be due to better working conditions, including staff wellbeing and pay, although this requires further investigation.

Overall, our statistical analysis suggests that while barriers to more men entering the pre-school teaching profession are still prevalent and continue to create obstacles, they

may not be as insurmountable as hypothesised and can be reduced, if not overcome, through targeted educational policies.

Kindergarten Dads – Representing Male Pre-School Educators in Public Discourse. The “Kindergarten Dads” project, first conceived in 2012, was the first deliberate attempt in the Moscow region to get more men involved in pre-school education and to test new innovative forms of pre-school education. It was implemented in a group of kindergartens in Moscow’s Kapotnya district. After more than eight years of operation, the project’s organisers described it as a complete success and strongly recommended that it be replicated elsewhere.

We used content analysis of texts about the project⁴ in public media to identify the main features of the representation of male pre-school educators in public discourse. The data analysed included interviews with four male educators, comments from their female colleagues, and a general description of the project, including its aims, implementation challenges and achievements.

Personal Background: The teaching experience of the male educators ranged from 2.5 to 8 years (2.5 years / 3 years / 8 years / not specified). They all graduated from different universities in Moscow with a teaching degree, including two with a specialisation in sports/PA training). It should be noted that the age of the male educators was not formally specified in the texts, but according to the available photographs, they are young men in their 20s or early 30s.

Career Choice: When asked what motivated them to choose this unusual career, all four male interviewees cited early positive experiences with childcare, as well as encouragement and support from family and friends. Two of the educators had relatives who were teachers, whom they visited and from whom they were able to learn. The other two men gained their informal pedagogical

³ Teaching Personnel in preschool education and child care organisations (2021, Russia) (Source: rosstat.gov.ru).

⁴ [Moustachioed Nannies: Four Interviews with Unusual Kindergarten Teachers]. (In Russ.) Available at: <https://www.mos.ru/news/item/62831073> (accessed 18.06.2023); [The Union of the Fathers of Russia]. (In Russ.) Available at: https://vk.com/wall-55658751_4045?ysclid=ln263cz21q549248099 (accessed 18.06.2023); [Supervisor: Educational Trajectory from Preschooler to Schoolboy]. (In Russ.) Available at: <https://ug.ru/rukovoditel-obrazovatelnyaya-traektoriya-ot-doshkolnik-ak-shkolniku> (accessed 18.06.2023).



experience as teenagers by regularly playing with younger siblings, which was appreciated and encouraged by their parents and families: “I intentionally chose a pedagogical university... My mom is a teacher, and I always got along with children. Even in my childhood, my neighbours noticed that my little sister and I were always surrounded by kids from small to large. I didn’t get into pedagogy by accident ... Almost everyone in our family is a teacher. My mother, my aunt, my sister, and my wife work as kindergarten teachers. There was no question for me where to go to study, I studied the specifics of the educator work from my childhood” (Here and elsewhere, the spelling, punctuation and style of respondents’ answers are preserved – *Ed.*).

Importantly, none of the men interviewed recalled that their partners or family members had any negative feelings about their career choice. They were accepting and supportive, even though they acknowledged that this was an unusual choice for men. For example, one respondent quoted the following comment from his wife: “You are an unusual man – you work in a kindergarten”.

All four male educators appeared to be satisfied with their professional choice and had no plans to change their profession: “I assumed that I would be working with older children, but it so happened that I started working in a preschool group, and I don’t regret it. It is always interesting to work with children, and there are all conditions for good work: Two sport halls and multimedia equipment in each group”, “Parents often thank me for everything, but honestly, this is my job, and I like it”, “In general, the most pleasant thing in my work is to see how children’s eyes shine, and with what joy and energy they come to class. There is no place for bad mood with them, they give you this energy – such is the specifics of working in preschool groups”.

On Being a Role Model: Both personal and public narratives converge on the idea that the main purpose of the male educators is to provide a positive male role model for pre-schoolers. Indeed, the project organisers pointed out that many children live in fatherless families and therefore lack a positive male figure to learn from. Male educators in kindergartens should be able to fill this gap

and help to raise children, especially boys, with the ‘right’ gender vision: “We compiled ‘social passports’ for groups and noticed that many children live in single-parent families. That’s when we decided to recruit ‘group dads’, male educators who can help female educators”.

Female colleagues noted in their comments that male educators were essential in setting ‘correct’ standards of behaviour and good manners for all children, but especially for boys. This, according to female colleagues, was a vital, albeit implicit, duty of male educators, the other implicit responsibility being their role as enforcers of order and discipline: “A boy in the group saw Igor Yurievich open the door for me and let me through, and he also started opening doors for the girls. The kids saw how Igor Yurievich gave me the jacket before the walk and they also started helping the girls get dressed. Now it is the norm. Children have to see the example. Now we can’t imagine how to work without men!...”, “Occasionally there will be laughter or conversations at the tables, and then the male educator will say loud and meaningfully, “Ahem, ahem! – The conversations are immediately silenced...”.

The male educators interviewed recalled facing initial mistrust from some parents who questioned their professional competence, particularly their ability to look after pre-schoolers. Some parents even saw them as competing with fathers and it took some time to prove that such concerns and reservations were unfounded. In the end, parents were won over when they saw their children thriving and enjoying having male educators: “At first the parents were perplexed, saying, “My son has a father, why does he also need a kindergarten dad?” But when they saw how much the children loved them, how they crowded around them and caught every word, they thawed out. Now the parents of the youngest children are asking, “When will our kids get a kindergarten dad?”

It is worth noting that both educators, and parents agree that although a male role model is the main reason for having male educators in pre-school education, the latter are still expected to have the right educational qualifications and to be able to carry out the same tasks as their female counterparts. However,

as the following quotes show, there is also a tacit acceptance that when it comes to normal childcare responsibilities, men are at a disadvantage by default and should therefore accept their supporting role as a complement to female educators: “One boy in my class for a long time could not dress himself ... Lyubov Nikolaevna and Alevtina Petrovna and I noticed this and taught him – he began to dress independently... His parents were happy”; “The most difficult thing for me was to learn how to braid plaits,” admits Alexander Kotov. – The girls come up after sleep time and order: “I want a ponytail! I want a braid! And if you do not do them – there will be tears. But my braids were falling apart, I just couldn’t get them right for some reason – luckily, my colleague Lyubov Nikolaevna was always ready to help me. I’ll be lost without her! Now I have mastered the skill”.

The last quote is particularly telling as it shows the conflicted position of a male pre-school teacher: as a group teacher, he is expected to know how to make plaits, but this is not something that ‘typical men’ should be able to do, so it is only natural that a female colleague comes to the rescue.

Sports Narrative: The analysis of the testimonies and official texts showed an awareness that the main purpose of the project, i.e. to strengthen the male presence in pre-school education, could be seen by others as controversial and in need of some justification. To this end, they often use the narrative that men are great at sport and natural leaders in physical activities. The theme of sport, active play and other physical activity is central to all four interviews, while three of the four kindergarten dads interviewed also reported that they combine their group-based pedagogical responsibilities with the work of a PA instructor for all children in the kindergarten: “... Then we decided to attract “kindergarten dads” – male educators to help women, who, unlike them [i.e. female educators], will be able to deal with the physical education of children”; “The morning of a Kindergarten Dad ... begins with active games in the kindergarten playground. Kids in bright jackets run after each other – “hunters” catch the gaping “geese” at the teacher’s signal. ... “Our children love all games that have a catch-up element”; “The

kids, whose PA teacher is Andrei Rybakov, are proud that their physical education is led by a real paratrooper. ... The children play outdoor games and go skiing in winter. And as a result they are getting well prepared for school”.

The ‘sports narrative’ is often used to position male educators as true professionals who deserve respect in their interactions with parents. They use their authority as PA instructors to gain parents’ attention and support for their children’s physical education: “We were preparing for the ‘Faster, Higher, Stronger!’ competition, and one boy was never good at the long jump... I gave him and his parents some homework: to train for the long jump. ... They tried, they practiced. And at the competition the kid ... got his first win ever! You should have seen how happy he was, how thrilled his parents were. This means that my work and the parents’ work helped, and there are many such cases”.

Summarising our findings from the analysis of the public texts of the Kindergarten Dads project, it is important to highlight a peculiar combination of references to both classical masculinity and gender equality in the construction of the image of the male educator. In this respect, we see close similarities with the trends observed in international research. The presence of men in pre-school, which is traditionally defined as a female domain, is problematized and therefore in need of explanation and justification. In order to be accepted, male educators must not only prove that they are as qualified and competent as their female colleagues, but their presence must also be expected to add value. The latter is achieved through the use of role models and sports narratives. Previous studies have noted that it is common for educators to present kindergartens as quasi-family spaces [19], and the project discourse, using the same analogy, describes the male educator as the ideal embodiment of “involved fatherhood” [21]. In this deliberately distorted vision of reality, sport, discipline, good manners and character building are presented as masculine areas of expertise, and therefore these distinctly masculine contributions to the educational process are welcomed and celebrated. Of course, not all male educators are athletic and authoritative, and not all female educators



need help controlling children's behavior and teaching them good manners.

Finally, it is worth noting the exclusion of certain important issues from this public representation of fathers in pre-school education. For example, when describing the challenges faced by men working in pre-school sector, the discourse mentions parental resistance and difficulties experienced by males in performing certain childcare tasks. The discourse is however silent on such crucial issues as low wages, career prospects and conflict situations among staff.

Trainee Teachers' Views. In September 2022 we had the opportunity to interview students studying pre-school education at the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology of Education of the Moscow City Pedagogical University⁵. In the not too distant future, these students will join the pre-school workforce, which makes their views on male educators particularly interesting and revealing. The survey was conducted during a visit to the university and all students present were invited to complete a short questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions. Specifically, it included (a) a series of general Likert-type statements about the profession of an pre-school educator and views on men working in the profession, (b) multiple-choice questions about their career plans in the immediate and long term future, and (c) two questions in which respondents were presented with a list of 16 descriptors and asked to select the top five that best described how they felt about working as an educator at the kindergarten group level and how they would feel if a man performed the same role. In addition, respondents were able to clarify their views and explain their choice of answers in open-ended questions.

In total, we collected responses from 142 students, including 87 students in their second year, 35 in their third year, 10 in their fourth year and 11 in their final year. There were only seven male respondents, and the rest (n = 136) were female, which reflects the overall gender balance of students at the University.

General Views on the Profession: The data show that, unsurprisingly, most students see their future profession as socially respectable and valuable: 80% of respondents believe that 'people listen to and follow the advice of educators', while 87% agree that 'the demand for pre-school educators will increase in the near future'. At the same time, nine out of ten respondents (90%) agree that 'working with pre-school children is not for everyone', but analysis of the open-ended questions shows some disagreement as to why this is the case. For some, the job requires particular innate skills and personal qualities, such as being a loving and caring person, having patience, moral integrity and mental and emotional health. In traditional discourse, these qualities are associated with femininity, so it is not surprising that many (but not all) of these respondents also agreed with the statement 'the job with young children is more suitable to females': "Working with children, especially at kindergarten age, is work from the heart, you have to love this age and find the right approach to every kid"; "A female educator is gentler and kinder towards the children".

For others, it is about gaining specialist training and experience – these are the ingredients that make a real educator, a professional who understands the fundamentals of good childcare and education: "You also need to learn how to behave with them, to know child psychology, etc."; "It is necessary to know the psychological and pedagogical principles, various games and activities for children".

However, the third and most numerous group of respondents argue for a combination of innate personal traits and obtained professional skills: "Work with small children requires special understanding of the specifics of work, you need a lot of patience and a certain frame of mind".

At the other end of the spectrum was a minority who felt that, in principle, anyone could work with children. However, 40% of them also acknowledged that women are naturally better at such tasks, while the rest accepted the importance of having the 'right' motivation: "Everyone goes through a stage of fatherhood

⁵ Students were informed about the research purposes, how their data will be used and the voluntary nature of participation.

and motherhood in life; it is easy to work with children of preschool age if you find the right approach. Everyone is capable of it”.

Workplace Preferences: When asked about their ideal place of employment after graduation, most students chose working in state (44%) or private (34%) pre-school settings as a good starting point for their career. The third most popular option was self-employment as a childminder or tutor (35%). Only a tiny minority considered jobs in education authorities (14%), research (4%) or teacher training (2%). A further 11% were considering a move into secondary education or a non-education job. However, when considering their ideal employment in the long term (“20 years from now”), significantly fewer students were happy to continue working in pre-school settings: only 18% of all respondents, and none of the male students, envisaged working in a state kindergarten at this point in their career; a further 24% and 18%, respectively, were happy to work in private settings and as self-employed childminders or tutors. In contrast, jobs in education authorities became more attractive: 39% of all respondents and 71% of male respondents selected this long-term career outcome as desirable. The number of those considering working in teacher training rose to 8%, and the proportion of those who thought they were likely to leave the pre-school sector in 20 years rose to 18%.

Views on Male Educators: While students showed consensus on the social importance of the profession in general, their opinions on the importance of having male educators in pre-school education were polarised: 51% agreed and 49% disagreed with the statement “Children in kindergarten very much need male educators”. Similarly, 55% agreed and 45% disagreed with the statement ‘Male educators

should play an important role in the pre-school education of the future’. Interestingly, even the male respondents were divided and two out of seven male respondents joined the ‘no’ side on both questions, while one respondent chose not to answer both questions.

Moreover, 61% of respondents agreed and 39% disagreed with the statement that ‘male educators behave differently with children than female educators’. At first sight, it might be suggested that negative views about the importance of male educators are underpinned by gendered perceptions of educator behaviour. However, this is not supported by further analysis of the cross-tabulated responses to the statements ‘Male educators behave differently with children than female educators’ and ‘Children in kindergarten need male educators very much’. Table 2 below shows that these variables do not have a linear relationship and that participants’ views on these two statements fall into one of four different positions.

Almost half of those who think that male educators behave differently from their female colleagues (27% of all respondents) also think that children benefit from having more men in kindergarten. This implies the use of the ‘male role model’ argument: “He can give them what a female educator will not, to compensate for the lack of male education in children growing up without fathers”.

The remaining half of those who think male educators behave differently (33% of the total) don’t think there is a need for more male educators. The common explanation for this position is that men are naturally less suited to childcare than women, meaning that male educators are by default less competent and more likely to endanger children’s welfare: “Female educators do well. Unfortunately, a male teacher is a big risk for the children”.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of the students’ opinions on how male educators behave with children and how much children need them in the kindergarten (number and percentage of the total responses)

Statements and students’ opinion		Children in the kindergarten very much need male educators		
		Strongly agree / agree	Strongly disagree / disagree	Total
Male educators behave with children differently than female educators	Strongly agree / agree	38 (27%)	46 (33%)	84
	Strongly disagree / disagree	33 (24%)	22 (16%)	55
	Total	71	68	139 (100%)

Source: Hereinafter in this article all tables were drawn up by the authors.



A similar split is observed within the camp of those who believe there is no difference between male and female educators. Three-fifths of them (24% of the total) are also in favor of more male educators in kindergartens. However, instead of the ‘role model’ narrative, they use arguments of inclusivity and diversity and shift the attention to the quality of teaching, which they consider to be the only valid criterion for the selection of teaching staff: “The quality of education does not depend on the sex of the educator”; “He [a man] is the same educator as a woman. If a man got [pedagogical] education, then why not. The main thing is that he loves his job”.

The final group of respondents are those who see male and female educators as equal and believe that children do not need more male educators. In their explanatory comments, they often say that male educators do not bring any unique value, so there is no need to worry if childcare remains a predominantly female profession: “I believe that we can do without them, but if we have them, that is fine too”.

Adjectives Describing the Profession: In addition to answering a series of general statements about the profession, respondents were asked to choose five descriptors from

an existing list of adjectives to describe their feelings in two hypothetical cases: ‘you work as a group-based educator in a kindergarten’ and ‘a man working in the same job’. In both cases respondents could add their own descriptors. These questions provided richer information about participants’ views and beliefs and complemented the data from the Likert-type questions well. As a result, we were able to conduct a nuanced analysis of perceptions and attitudes, for example by comparing participants’ feelings about the profession in general and about men working in the profession.

Overall, positive attributes were chosen more frequently than negative or neutral ones for both questions (see Table 3 below), but there was a noticeable difference between the questions: respondents showed more agreement and positivity towards the idea of a male educator working in a kindergarten than when describing how they felt about themselves working in the same job.

The top three words used to describe a male educator were *innovative*, *recognition* and *inspiring*, selected by over 60% of respondents. These were followed by *proud* (53%), *confident* (48%), *happy* (35%) and *self-realisation* (33%).

Table 3. Selection of attributes by the respondents to describe their feelings about two hypothetical situations (number of selections per attribute and percentage of participants selecting this attribute)

List of descriptors	From the list below please select five items that best describe your feelings towards the idea of...	
	you working as a group-based educator in a kindergarten (N = 143)	a male working as a group-based educator in a kindergarten (N = 139)
happy	55 (39%)	48 (35%)
unhappy	34 (24%)	11 (8%)
inspiring	60 (43%)	83 (60%)
boring	22 (16%)	3 (2%)
confident	54 (39%)	67 (48%)
worrisome	53 (38%)	31 (22%)
proud	35 (25%)	73 (53%)
sad	27 (19%)	9 (6%)
recognition	59 (42%)	89 (64%)
lack of respect	11 (8%)	3 (2%)
self-realisation	40 (29%)	46 (33%)
standard	42 (30%)	18 (13%)
well-paid	26 (19%)	13 (9%)
poorly paid	57 (41%)	12 (9%)
innovative	22 (16%)	91 (65%)
traditional	30 (21%)	4 (3%)

In general, negative attributes were rarely selected, apart from the term *worrying*, which was selected by a fifth of respondents (22%), indicating a modest level of anxiety about or for male educators.

Unsurprisingly, the percentage of those who felt anxious about male educators was significantly higher among those who disagreed with the statement '*Children in kindergarten very much need male educators*' ($n = 71$): 37% of them described their feelings using the term *worrying*, 16% chose the term *unhappy* and 13% the term *sad*, while among those who agreed with the statement ($n = 68$) the figures were 8%, 0% and 0% respectively. The highest level of negativity was observed among those who, in addition to denying the need for more male educators, also believed that male educators behave differently from females, i.e., those who believe that males are inherently less competent ($n = 46$): 41% of these respondents chose *worrying*, 20% *unhappy* and 17% *sad* when describing a male educator.

Choices by male and female respondents were slightly different, although due to small number of males in the sample ($n = 7$) this is not statistically significant. Males' top choice was *inspiring* (86%), followed by *confidence* (71%) and *recognition* (71%), while for females the most often selected descriptor was *innovative* (65%) followed by *recognition* (64%) and *inspiring* (58%).

Overall, and despite the differences described above, respondents showed a high degree of consensus when expressing their feelings towards a male educator in a kindergarten. On the other hand, when it came to describing their vision of 'self' in the profession, opinions were clearly divided. The choice of descriptors was mixed, more evenly distributed and more likely to include negative terms. The top choices – *inspiring*, *recognition*, *happy*, *confident*, *poorly paid*, and *worrisome*, – each received around 40% and included two negative and four positive descriptors. In addition, one in four respondents (24%) felt *unhappy* about the prospect of working as a group educator and one in five (19%) chose the term *sad* to describe their feelings about this future scenario.

Such a choice of descriptors confirms that most of the student pre-school educators in our sample feel positive about the profession of a pre-school educator. However, their views and expectations about personal future are more complex than their views on male educators. Most respondents see themselves working in the field of pre-school education, yet their preferred career pathway is to move into administrative or leadership posts. Low pay is a big concern and a source of anxiety, yet, interestingly, pay considerations hardly feature when they think about male educators with only 9% of the total respondents – and 15% of those who did not see the need for bringing more male educators in kindergarten, – selecting *poorly paid* as one of the five descriptors.

Further interesting insights emerged after we used Bayesian analysis to uncover groups of attributes that had a high probability of being selected together. By calculating conditional probabilities for each combination of word pairs from the set of 16 available attributes (120 pairs and 240 combinations), we determined the likelihood of an attribute being selected together with another attribute (i.e. forming a pair), denoted by the conditional probabilities $P(A|B)$ and $P(B|A)$ ⁶. We then identified the strongest probability relationships (where $PA|B > 0.4$) across all pairs of attributes and grouped relevant pairs into clusters. By identifying the strongest word associations, this method helped to test for unity/diversity of opinion among respondents and to better understand different positions on the issue.

The analysis of the attributes chosen to describe the 'self' in the profession revealed the existence of three distinct clusters (Fig. 3). The first one represents a very positive outlook and has four core attributes: *happy*, *recognition*, *excitement*, *confident*. The second cluster brings together three negative attributes *poorly paid*, *unhappy* and *worrisome*, – and thus represents an opposite, very pessimistic view of the profession, with low pay being the anchor for negative feelings. Given the use of antonyms, *happy* and *confident* in cluster one vs *unhappy* and *worrying* in cluster two, the links between the two clusters are very weak, indicating a clear difference in opinions.

⁶Jeliazkov I., Yang X. (eds). Bayesian Inference in the Social Sciences. New York City: Wiley; 2014.

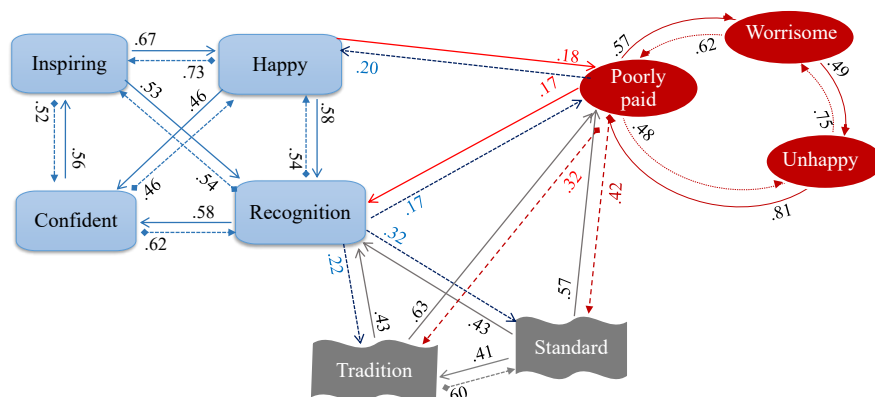


Fig. 3. Case “describe your feelings towards the idea of working as a group-based educator in a kindergarten”: strongest probability relationships (where $P_{A|B} > 0.4$) across pair of attributes

Source: Hereinafter in this article all figures were drawn up by the authors.

The third cluster is based on two attributes, tradition and standard, but each of these attributes has strong links with the other two clusters. This suggests a dual meaning of the terms, which can have both positive and negative connotations. In association with *recognition* they are most likely to mean professional tradition and standards, which are the sources of confidence and inspiration, hence the links to cluster one. When respondents used the terms together with *poorly paid*, they were most likely indicating that the profession is traditionally poorly paid, hence the association with the second cluster.

Attributes used by respondents to describe a male educator form group patterns that are in some ways similar to, but also markedly different from, the patterns described above (Fig. 4). Again, we found two groups of attributes that expressed opposing views on the issue, but the positions were not completely divorced as there were strong unidirectional links between them.

The first cluster is formed by four positive attributes: *innovation*, *recognition*, *inspiring* and *confident*. These are the same as the most frequently used attributes (Table 3) meaning that the cluster represents the most popular view of male educators who are defined as innovators and who bring inspiration and confidence to the profession. The second cluster represents an alternative view that connects three negative attributes: *worrying*, *sad* and *unhappy*, but the relationship in this triad is not equal. The attributes *sad* and *unhappy* have a very strong mutual association and each has a strong connection to *worrysome*, but the latter does not reciprocate. In simple terms, it means that those who feel sad and unhappy about males working as a group-based educator almost always have certain anxieties and concerns associated with it. However, there are other people who while having some anxieties about the situation, do not perceived them as critical and therefore do not share the negative general sentiment about male educators.

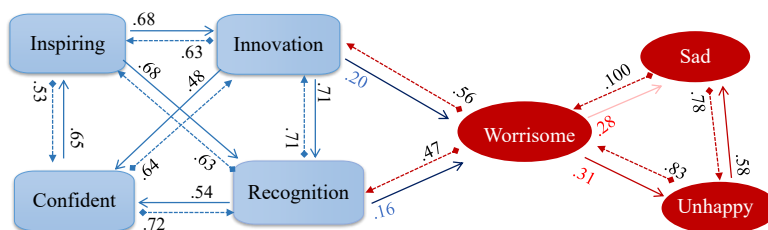


Fig. 4. Case “describe your feelings towards the idea of a male working as a group-based educator in a kindergarten”: strongest probability relationships (where $P_{A|B} > 0.4$) across pairs of attributes.

Indeed, the most popular choices of attributes among those who selected the word *worrisome* are *innovation* ($P_{A|B} = 0.56$) and *recognition* ($P_{A|B} = 0.47$) suggesting that these were the main grounds for concerns.

Summarising the key findings of the survey, perhaps the most important takeaway is the complexity and heterogeneity of trainee teachers' views about the profession, their own futures, and male educators, often hidden behind the seemingly deceptive perception of consensus and agreement on many questions. A deeper analysis of the responses revealed how the use of 'role model', 'masculinity' and 'equal opportunity' narratives can bring people to agree on certain points of view but for different reasons. It is also worth noting the difference in how respondents define the key attributes when describing the job of a group-based educator in relation to themselves and to a male educator. Positive ideas about the profession in relation to self are focused on long-term satisfaction with a career choice, public respect, and compliance with norms and standards. In contrast, for male educators the emphasis shifts to innovation and recognition. The main negative aspect of the profession is low income, but what is interesting and important is that the surveyed trainee teachers (in majority female students) distance group-based male educators from this problem as if it does not apply to them.

Expert Reflections on the Situation. When organizing the student survey at the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology of Education, we contacted the Institute Director, Professor Doctor Alexander Ilyich Savenkov, a leading national expert on pre- and early-school education in Russia, who kindly agreed to share his thoughts on the topic. Besides providing valuable comments on the survey design and findings, Professor Savenkov gave his vision of the past, present and future of the Russian pre-school sector. We also learned about the student recruitment experiences at the Institute, which provided valuable insights into male student motivations and career progression ideas. A summary of the professor's thought-provoking ideas is presented in this section.

According to the expert, the roots of the cotemporary gender imbalance in pre-school workforce in Russia and world-wide could be

traced far back in history to traditional society where females were seen as most suitable for working with pre-school children. Professor Savenkov referenced the works of the two famous scholars in the field of pedagogy who built the theoretical foundations of the contemporary preschool education and viewed this to be a traditionally female domain. One of them was a famous 17th century Czech scholar J. A. Komensky and the second was Friedrich Froebel, a 19th century German scholar. Both scholars insisted that pre-school children need motherly care, hence women are best suited to working in kindergarten. According to Savenkov, the Soviet educational system inherited the same thinking, although it was articulated less explicitly. While there were no legal or other formal barriers to stop males entering the profession, low qualification requirements coupled with modest salaries and social stigma worked as efficient deterrents and kept the number of male pre-school educators close to none: "In the twentieth century, during the Soviet period, our country began to create an unprecedentedly wide network of preschool educational institutions, primarily to give women equal rights with men to participate in social production. The main task of kindergartens was to "look after and take care of children", and although the educational focus was gradually increasing from decade to decade, it is only in the twenty-first century that kindergartens became recognized as the first level of education. The educational requirements for kindergarten teachers were minimal at the start, so the training of teachers for the pre-school system was conducted only by teacher training colleges, where there were virtually no young men in the pre-school departments. ... Salaries of kindergarten educators traditionally remained below the already low salary of schoolteachers".

The situation started changing in the 1980s when pedagogical institutes began to offer degrees in pre-school education which, in turn, opened new career opportunities for those working in pre-school education and consequently made pre-school specialism more attractive to males with career ambitions: "The mass opening of Preschool Pedagogy and Psychology Departments at pedagogical institutes in our country did not start until the



1980s, and most of their graduates immediately become “supervisors”: they become heads of regional, city and district education departments, as well as directors and methodologists in kindergartens”.

In Professor Savenkov’s view, the same logic applies to the present time and needs to be taken into consideration by teacher training institutions. Given that the salaries and social status of kindergarten educators remain uncompetitive, universities have to offer wider career prospects if they want to make their offer more attractive to strong-performing students of both genders. A recent experiment at the Moscow State Pedagogical University provides a very good illustration of the situation. Historically, the University struggled to recruit good students to its full-time pre-school education courses, because those with strong academic performance were able to go into more socially attractive fields of work, including teaching in school rather than in a kindergarten. In 2021 the University switched to a so-called 2 + 3 + 2 system that offered a multi-specialism bachelor’s degree integrated with a 2-year master course. Besides pre-school and primary school education, the new system now includes education management as one of its areas of specialism. It also allows students to delay their final choice of main specialism to the end of the second year. This proved to be a great success and created a ‘miracle’: “...this possibility of delayed choice turned out to be very attractive for many. And we had a miracle. Whereas in previous years ... our average USE⁷ score did not rise above 79, which was the lowest score at the university, as soon as we switched to the 2 + 3 + 2 system, our USE rose to 85.4 last year, almost more than 6 points up at once. The fact that at least some, if not many, young people have signed up is probably the most interesting thing”.

Considering possible reasons for males to choose pre-school education as their field of work, professor Savenkov reflected on the entry barriers that still exist in the Russian

society, namely social stigma, prejudice and low pay. These are the same obstacles that, according to the international research cited in the literature review section, are faced by male educators in other parts of the world. In these circumstances, continued the expert, only a few determined ‘romantics’ would endure this career pathway: “It is common in our society to treat male kindergarten teachers with suspicion. It is believed that either a marginal or, excuse me, a maniac can choose the profession of a kindergarten teacher. Gradually, this situation is changing, there is a rethinking of the gender role of men. More and more men are thinking about going to work in kindergarten or primary school. But so far it’s just some romantics ... Such romantics exist”.

Despite the similarity of the entry barriers faced by Russian males working with pre-school children and similar social concerns with safety of pre-school children under their care, Professor Savenkov described what appears to be a uniquely Russian way of ‘dealing’ with potential safety issues. Instead of trying to ‘squeeze out’ male colleagues from the profession, they are offered a rapid promotion to managerial, research or leadership posts, which limit their unsupervised contact with the children: “If a male student accidentally walks into the department and ends up being a kindergarten teacher, what happens... such students are immediately suspected of something bad. This obstacle could be managed ... But, as a rule, male educator is quickly forwarded to leadership posts: first a methodologist, then a specialist, then a department head. That’s it. The system squeezes him up. He does not stay there [at the kindergarten level] for long”.

This assessment of the situation resonates with our analysis of the statistical data presented earlier in the article. In fact, it would provide a convincing explanation for the observed higher percentages of males in leadership and ‘specialism’ posts, although more research would be required to confirm this connection.

⁷USE – The Unified State Examination (Russian: Yediniy gosudarstvennyy ekzamen, EGE) is a set of exams that every student in the Russian Federation must pass after graduating from high school in order to enter a university or vocational college. Since 2009, the USE is the only form of graduation examination in schools and the main form of preliminary examination in universities and colleges. The maximum score in the USE is 100. The higher the average USE score of applicants to the training programme, the more popular it is among applicants. More information available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified_State_Exam (accessed at 18.06.2023).

Professor Savenkov concluded that efforts to attract more male educators to pre-school system are unlikely to be effective without changing the social status of the profession in general. This in turn requires better, more competitive salaries for the workforce, so a significant increase in public investment in the sector remains a must: “I think that the status of the profession can change only one thing – the salary. For example, teachers in Moscow have a decent salary now... Kindergarten educators were not fully affected... and their salaries remained much lower...”.

Discussion and Conclusion

This comprehensive multi-method study had a broad purpose: to uncover and synthesize all available information on the subject of male pre-school educators in Russia and to position the new findings in the international research framework. We defined this study as a situational analysis with three specific research questions, the answers to which would frame the basics of the Russian situation and shape the direction of future research. What did we find?

In response to our first research question, we confirmed that since gender information on the workforce first became available in 2007, the proportion of male pre-school educators in Russia has always remained extremely low. Over the years there have been some fluctuations in the total number of male pre-school staff, particularly at the regional level, and recently there has also been a steady increase in the number of men working in the private sector. We hypothesised that the observed differences were related to changes in economic circumstances, institutional reforms and new policies in the education sector. If the Moscow Pedagogical University, where we collected our primary data, is indicative of the situation more generally, the gender imbalance in the workforce begins with difficulties in recruiting enough male students to teacher training institutions. We suspect that the retention rate of male educators in pre-school education is also lower than the retention rate of female colleagues, but we have no direct evidence to verify this, so this could be the subject of the follow-up study.

The other key finding concerned the types of work and responsibilities that male

educators were likely to undertake. Looking at the national data for 2007–2021, we found that the highest concentration of male educators was in roles other than group-based educators, such as sports or music instructors, event organisers and educational managers working in kindergartens, childcare centres and local authorities.

To explain the observed statistical patterns, we turned to qualitative data and explored public and private perceptions of pre-school education and male educators working in pre-school education. This was our second research question. Applying narrative analysis to public texts and examining new survey data, we confirmed the dominance of traditional stereotypes, particularly in official discourse, which portray pre-school education as a female domain and a ‘quasi-family’ space. These perceptions problematize men’s presence in pre-school education by making them appear a priori less capable of caring for children. They also limit the role of male educators to complementary functions such as subject teaching, leadership and role modelling of masculinity and fatherhood. As a result, male educators are driven into positions with limited unsupervised contact with children and a bigger focus on teaching or leadership rather than childcare. This finding was corroborated by the education expert interviewed, who pointed to the uniquely Russian way of addressing potential safety concerns of parents and colleagues of male pre-school educators, i.e. by providing male pre-school educators with incentives and easy career paths into management, research or leadership positions. It is no coincidence that such posts are also better paid and/or have better working conditions than the ordinary work of a group-based educator.

Looking at the private discourse represented in the trainee teachers’ responses to the survey, we observed more complexity and heterogeneity of opinion. The ‘role model’ and ‘masculinity’ narratives were clearly dominant, but they were challenged by the ‘equal opportunity’ narrative, which downplays the importance of gender and emphasises the value of professional qualifications and skills. We also saw how people with opposing views on the value of male educators in pre-school education used the same narrative to justify



their position. Another notable finding was the difference in the portrayal of a male educator's job at group level compared to the genderless description of the same job. When presenting the former, respondents were more positive and unanimous than when describing the job in general. They emphasised the innovative nature of male educators and expressed concerns about their recognition as equals in the profession. In contrast, their views of the job in general were more practical and mundane, with concerns about pay and compliance taking centre stage.

Finally, our third research question was about recruitment and retention strategies aimed at increasing the number of male educators in the pre-school sector. Our data showed that, despite the lack of a targeted federal policy on this issue, the number of male staff in the pre-school sector has been influenced by broader institutional and economic reforms. For example, the shift in pre-school policy discourse from 'care and supervision' to 'education' led to the integration of pre-school education into mainstream education⁸ and the expansion of specialist teaching posts in preschool education. This was supported by a similar shift in the parenting paradigm towards child-centred approaches, which increased parental demand for the provision of educational activities for pre-school children ("professionalization of parenting" [22]).

As a result, more male educators interested in working with pre-school children were able to find employment as subject teachers or event organisers. Crucial for this development was the fact that new job opportunities fit the established traditional narratives of 'masculinity' and 'sports' role model. The importance of this link is well illustrated by the example of the "Kindergarten Dad" project, which used both narratives to address parents' concerns about their children's safety and to demonstrate the added value of male educators working alongside female colleagues.

Our other source of information on this issue was the case of the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology of Education at the Moscow Pedagogical University. Specifically, we discussed their innovative enrolment strategies and changes in course structure, which made the pre-school education degrees on offer more attractive to stronger candidates of both genders and attracted more male students to study. According to the expert, the key to success was to clarify and broaden the career prospects for those with leadership ambitions. The other part of the success formula was to offer combined degrees in pre-school and primary education and to delay the point at which students choose their specialisation.

Overall, our two policy case studies show that to be successful, recruitment and retention strategies need to address a range of common and male-specific barriers. These include changing the social image of pre-school sector as a female domain, improving pay and career prospects for some, if not all, types of jobs in the sector. The proliferation of the 'masculine' role model narrative in public discourse also means that successful male recruitment and retention policies must continue to reassure the public about child safety and demonstrate the added value of male educators. In this regard, it would be interesting for future research to investigate how the increasing use of educational technology (EdTech) in pre-school education, driven by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, is affecting the situation⁹. As with any technology, EdTech has traditionally been seen as a male domain. The use of technology could also provide means of verification to help address security concerns. Finally, it can help to raise the social status of pre-school jobs. All in all, this can break down some of the barriers and create new opportunities for male educators to work in pre-school education, thus making pre-school sector less gender imbalanced over time.

⁸ [On Education in the Russian Federation: Federal Law No. 273-FZ of 29 December 2012: Adopted by the State Duma on 21 December 2012]. (In Russ.) Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36698> (accessed 18.06.2023).

⁹ UNICEF: Education: Research for Education and Development. Available at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/research/education> (accessed 18.06.2023).

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