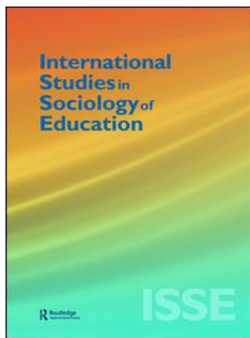

International Studies in Sociology of Education

ISSN: 0962-0214 (Print) 1747-5066 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riss20

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To cite this article: Elena Minina, Diana Yanbarisova & Ekaterina Pavlenko (2020): Educational choice of Russian high school students in grade nine, International Studies in Sociology of Education, DOI: 10.1080/09620214.2020.1728362

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1728362

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1728362

ARTICLE

Educational choice of Russian high school students in grade nine

Elena Minina, Diana Yanbarisova and Ekaterina Pavlenko

Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

ABSTRACT
Drawing on the data provided by Russian panel study 'Trajectories in Education and Careers' (TrEC), we explore the different rationales pupils employ in deciding their education path in grade nine. Drawing on the relative risk aversion theory we show how young people's decision-making logics are aimed at class maintenance and risk management. Using a qualitative methodology we show that the decision to continue into grade ten with the view to enter a university program is largely a 'non-decision' informed by class-appropriate ambition. While students from higher socio-economic backgrounds 'automatically' enrol in grade ten, students of lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to opt for vocational education in the hope of 'fast-tracking' to adulthood and the world of work. Drawing on the concept of a 'cultural narrative' we also demonstrate that what is considered 'rational,' 'safe', 'risky,' etc. is both class- and culture-specific.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 March 2019
Accepted 5 February 2020

KEYWORDS
Educational choice; social inequality; cultural narrative; qualitative methods; rational choice

Introduction and problem statement

The focus of the paper is the educational choice of Russian high school students in grade nine. An individual educational career is a sequence of decisions (Boudon, 1974), and grade nine is the first and arguably the most important one within the Russian system of education. It marks the end of compulsory schooling in Russia and is the first crossroads that largely defines high school students' future educational and career trajectories.

The Russian educational system includes nine years of compulsory education with no formal tracking. To obtain a certificate of basic general education pupils must take the State Final Attestation in four school subjects: Russian, Mathematics and two optional disciplines. After grade nine all students have the option of leaving or staying in the school system for two more years (until grade eleven). The latter path is informally called an 'academic track' because it provides the quickest way to university (Kosyakova, Yastrebov, Yanbarisova, & Kurakin, 2016). Those who choose to continue to grade ten must, at the end of grade eleven, take the Unified

CONTACT Elena Minina fidelliep@gmail.com
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State Examination (USE). The exam is compulsory in Russian and Mathematics and the student may choose to take additional exams in other subjects related to their desired study program at university, similar to the SAT in the US. USE serves simultaneously as a school-leaving and a university-entry exam. The higher the USE results, the better the chances of entering a competitive university program.

Another option is to enter one of the vocational education programs within specialized professional educational institutions, such as a technical college. Lasting from one to three years, primary vocational education programs offer basic qualifications for workers in manual labor such as builders, bakers, welders or railroad maintenance. Secondary vocational education programs usually last longer (3–5 years) and offer mid-level qualifications in technical industries as well as in service, art and pharmacy. Those who choose the vocational education track have the option of continuing to university without having to take USE as some universities accept vocational education graduates on the basis of an internal examination designed and conducted by a particular university. Therefore, the vocational track may be viewed as a structural opportunity for low-performing students to get access to higher education (henceforth HE) without having to take the high-stake exam in grade nine and competing with high-performing students in grade eleven (Yastrebov, Kosyakova, & Kurakin, 2018). However, only as few as 9.8% of students continue to university following a vocational education (Yastrebov et al., 2018). Overall, depending on the year, 51% to 67% of Russian pupils in grade nine choose the academic track, 26% to 39% opt for one of the vocational tracks, with the remaining leaving the system or going to evening schools (Bessudnov, Kurakin, & Malik, 2017; Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Yastrebov et al., 2018).

Research into educational inequality in Russia has shown that these educational pathways are socially structured (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Khavenson & Chirkina, 2019; Kosyakova et al., 2016; Yastrebov et al., 2018). Those who choose the vocational track usually come from families with lower socio-economic status (henceforth SES) than those who choose the academic track (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Kosyakova et al., 2016). Additionally, children with better grades tend to stay at school until grade eleven, and those children tend to have higher SES. These tendencies are generally explained by the primary effects of inequality (Boudon, 1974), whereby higher social background results in higher academic performance (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Kosyakova et al., 2016).

In addition, research identifies a strong secondary effect of the family SES on Russian students' educational choice in grade nine (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Khavenson & Chirkina, 2019; Kosyakova et al., 2016). Thus, while demonstrating similar academic performance, students from families with higher SES are more inclined to continue to grade ten with a view to

enrolling into a university than those from the families with a lower SES. Under-performing students from the families with a higher SES tend to continue to grade ten, while high-achieving students from the families of lower SES tend to choose less selective educational paths, such as vocational education (Khavenson & Chirkina, 2019). Therefore, children from less privileged families have a lower probability of continuing school education after grade 9 regardless of educational achievement.

This article contributes to the educational inequality debate in Russia and beyond by probing into different logics of decision-making between teenagers continuing to grade ten and teenagers leaving school after grade nine. The analysis draws on the theoretical concepts of rational choice and classed cultural narratives. In terms of rational choice, we draw on the relative risk aversion framework developed by Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), which suggests that educational ambition is class-specific and informed by the concerns of maintaining or upgrading one's social status while avoiding downward mobility. We assume that in Russia, a society where HE is traditionally highly valued, the social expectation for students of higher social classes is to obtain a university degree in the hope of securing higher social status and a more prestigious job in the future. Similarly, we can expect that for students of lower social classes the rational choice is to obtain a professional qualification via the vocational track and to secure a working-class occupation, thus minimizing the risks of downward mobility.

In this study, we further zoom in on culture-specific variations of class maintenance and risk aversion. To this end, drawing on the narrative theory in the sociology of education, and social sciences more broadly (Mumby, 1993; Quinn, 2004; Steinmetz, 1992), we introduce the concept of 'cultural narrative' – unspoken and taken-for-granted cultural scripts which shape people's view of the world and inform their decisions and actions. Alternatively referred to as 'cognitive structures,' cultural narratives are 'internalized, embodied social structures' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 468) or 'historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and discourse.' Cultural narratives 'make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 468). They produce expectations and norms with respect to such social institutions and practices as education, work, dating, family, and aging. Cultural narratives are rooted in SES and transmitted from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1986), serving as 'a form of social control' (Mumby, 1993, p. 1). These are appropriated, in varying degrees, by all members of the society but can be fully or partially adopted, internalized or rejected in people's personal narratives and the construction of one's own identity. Bringing the two frameworks together,

we presume that while high school students are guided by the rational choice, what is considered 'reasonable' (Bourdieu, 1986., p. 468), 'rational' (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), desired, mandatory, risky, etc. within a particular socio-cultural locus is rooted in classed cultural narratives.

Our analysis is the first attempt to qualitatively investigate the decision-making of Russian high school students at the intersection of relative risk aversion and the theory of cultural narratives. Drawing on the theoretical propositions above, the empirical analysis in this article addresses two research questions:

(1) How is choice experienced by students continuing to grade ten and leaving school after grade nine?
(2) Which logics and narratives do students employ in justifying their educational choice in grade nine?

Data and methodology

The analysis draws on 111 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17-year-old students conducted within the 'Trajectories in Education and Careers' (TrEC) longitudinal study, which was, in turn, designed alongside the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). TrEC is Russia's first, most up-to-date and most comprehensive education-related cohort longitudinal study on a national scale (Malik, 2019), which has been carried out since 2012. Our data includes a sub-sample, titled 'Tracer Atom,' of the national panel. Out of the 42 regions of Russia surveyed within the TrEC, we chose eight that represent different types of geographical and social settings across Russia.[1] We employed purposeful sampling which included boys and girls from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, levels of academic achievement,[2] types of locations (village, small town, mid-sized town, Moscow and St. Petersburg) and types of educational institutions (school or vocational college). The table below summarizes the socio-economic composition of the respondents' families based on parent's education vis-a-vis the academic track chosen by the respondent:

Table 1. Number and percentage of students by family background and by track.

	Academic track	Vocational track
Both parents have a HE degree	24 (28%)	4 (17%)
Only one parent has a HE degree	30 (34%)	10 (42%)
Neither parent has a HE degree[a]	33 (38%)	10 (42%)
Total number of cases	87 (100%)	24 (100%)

This category includes cases with no information on parental education.

Interviews were conducted in November and December 2013 by members of the 'Tracer Atom' research team. Each of the eight regions was visited by two team members who spent an average of 7 days in the field. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the respondents (87) had continued to grade ten, while a small number (24) were studying in vocational education institutions. The interviews lasting on average 1–1.5 hours were conducted face-to-face, with no teachers or parents present. Most of the interviews were held on the school premises following an agreement with the school administration. School administrators assisted in contacting and arranging interviews with their former students who had left school in grade nine to enrol in vocational institutions. Informed consent was acquired from parents of underage participants prior to interviews, and personal permissions were obtained from legally adult participants. As data collection was supported by local educational institutions, almost all sampled students, with a few rare exceptions, agreed to participate.

The interviews focused on the student's reasons for staying in school after grade nine or enrolling in a vocational education institution; whether they considered alternatives; which symbolic resources (such as books, films, and significant others) they relied upon in making those choices; what plans and aspirations they have for the future; and how the desired level of education would help them achieve those. As each respondent had been previously included into the larger quantitative TrEC panel survey, for each of them we had a fair degree of contextual data, including parental level of education, current parental occupation, family income, current school grades, their reported plans for after leaving school as stated in the TrEC questionnaire, desired level of education and occupation, and many others. All interviews were anonymized. Unlike the TrEC survey data, which is publicly available and widely used by education researchers, the 'Tracer Atom' data were exclusively available to the authors of this paper and a small number of project co-investigators.

The overall methodological approach adopted within this study is discourse-analytic (Fairclough, 1995; Lemke, 1995; MacLure, 2003) and grounded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), rooted in a constant movement between the theoretical frameworks and the empirical data, searching for emerging patterns in the data while remaining sensitive to socio-cultural meanings. We look at individual student narratives to identify categories of meaning and to reconstruct larger social meanings behind the rationalization of their educational choices. While recognizing individual choices as 'constellations' (Walther, Warth, Ule, & Du Bois-Reymond, 2015) of decision-making, we look for patterns in the rationalization of choice in student narratives. We pay particular attention to discursive tensions, ruptures and uncertainties, which allow us to identify competing cultural narratives within the decision-making. The qualitative software Atlas.ti was used to store, sort and

categorize the interview data, identify recurrent themes and concepts, and code them into broader categories for analysis.

University education as a prerequisite for the labour market

The majority of students in our sample see the decision to continue to grade ten and subsequently to university as a 'non-decision' (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002). These students, regardless of their academic achievement and personal ambition, report never considering any option other than going into grade ten – they simply 'always knew' they would complete 11 grades and continue to HE and it 'never occurred' to them to consider the vocational track.

As one might expect, the academic track is a particularly smooth and unproblematic path for pupils with higher SES and high grades, as, for example, for Olga from Krasnoyarsk, an all A-student from a higher SES family:

> Respondent (henceforth R): There was no decision [about going to grade ten]. I never thought about it. A vocational college is not as prestigious … In any case, I never considered leaving after grade nine. It never even occurred to me (Olga, Krasnoyarsk, both parents have a HE degree, high grades).

The maintenance and upgrade of socio-economic status for these students is implicitly associated with a university degree and the decision-making logic is overwhelmingly shaped by the dominant discourse of a university education as a pre-requisite to having a class-appropriate job.

I: What is the role of university education for you?

R: A certificate. So that I can get employed (Ella, Kazan, both parents have a HE degree, high grades).

At the same time, higher SES respondents do not seem to differentiate between the cultural capital associated with different occupations associated with a HE degree – such as a school teacher, a lawyer, an engineer – but instead see a degree as a basic 'pass' to the labour market. Many report being prepared or expecting to be employed outside the area of their future university specialization or desired occupation and state that they would be satisfied with any kind of job as long as the job 'allows them to stay afloat,' 'provides a regular paycheck,' or 'provides some stability.' The meaning of HE to them lies primarily in 'handing over' a certificate that guarantees some unspecified and undifferentiated employment, which would provide an acceptable quality of life. While high achievers sometimes report having have higher ambitions – such as financial well-being, a big house, own company – those are still limited to the constrains associated with comfortably securing a HE degree. For instance, when faced with a choice of

attempting to enrol in a selective Moscow or St.Petersburg-based university, provincial students often opt to stay in their town/region where they feel more confident about entering a local, less prestigious HE institution.

A discussion of the quality of university education provided by a particular academic institution or academic program is markedly absent from the student narratives. Only a few are able to meaningfully discuss their preferred choice of HE institution(s) vis-à-vis their career ambition. For the majority, gaining entry to a/any university is more important than getting into the academic program of their choosing. Students report not thinking far ahead and, in regard to their future occupation, they believe things will go 'the expected way', 'the way they're supposed to' with the right opportunities hopefully presenting themselves in the future. Both higher and lower SES students tend to make their decision on the spur of the moment, in the context of little information about the contemporary labour market and relying heavily on external advice.

While putting great value on HE, students from families with higher SES refer to the vocational track as a second-hand option catering for the 'losers' and the 'doomed.' Most view the vocational track as a 'waste of time' as, in their view, it would have to be supplemented by a university degree in the future anyway, in order to legitimize entry into the world of work.

The option of vocational education as a by-pass to university is just as unpopular among higher SES students in our sample as a vocation education degree itself. As described in the introduction, the 'hybrid' (Yastrebov et al., 2018) access to university via vocational education would allow lower-performing higher SES students to by-pass USE at the end of schooling and enter a university via less demanding internal university exams or inter-institutional agreements. Thus, in theory, for higher SES teenagers who under-perform at school and cannot automatically' step onto the path to university going into vocational education would serve as a safety-net and a 'by-pass' strategy compensating for the risks of failing USE (Yastrebov et al., 2018). Leaving school in grade nine would mean rational risk management on the path to a HE degree. However, only a couple of lower-performing higher SES students in our sample admitted considering vocational education as a pathway to HE. In all other cases, the dominant narrative of a university degree being a pass to a decent life leads to the widespread interpretation of vocational education as a social taboo.

The narrative of HE as a 'must-have' is pervasive among students and parents of both higher and lower SES alike. Almost all our respondents agree that a HE degree is either necessary or more desirable as leading to a decent quality of life, while most lower SES respondents report their parents' ambitions for a HE degree for them. In the examples below, when asked about how they envision a successful person, HE is the first attribute mentioned by the respondents both of whom are students of vocational

colleges. While Alexey says he plans to go to university at some point later in life, Igor' believes that a HE education degree is 'nor for him', even though it is crucial for individual success:

I: When you imagine a successful person, which qualities come to mind?

R: Successful? That would be. my uncle. He's got a HE degree and he achieved everything he wanted in life. So, [for a life's success one would need] HE, a good job, I guess, a family. (Igor', Kaluga, neither parent has a HE degree, poor grades).

I: [during a discussion of what constitutes success] Are you yourself planning on getting a HE degree?

R: Yes.

I: Why is that? Do you find it necessary?

R: It's highly important for everyone to have a HE degree. In fact, yes, it's a necessary thing [to be successful in life] (Alexey, Ekaterinburg, both parents have a HE degree, good grades).

The difference between higher and lower SES respondents illustrated above is that the latter, in the logic of risk management, tend to either postpone going to university to some unidentifiable future or settle for a less ambitious but safer option: after all, some job following a vocational degree is better than no job at all.

For lower SES students the narrative of a university education being a pass to decent life often comes into conflict with other logics of decision-making, such as the wish to get into labour market and start a 'grownup life' sooner (a popular line of reasoning among those who enrol in vocational programs), the need to start generating income to provide for the family or a sick parent, or a wish to break the life pattern expected of them and leave school for no specific reason other than teenage rebellion. These conflicting narratives are most often faced by lower SES students with high grades. The narrative of 'compulsory' university education in those cases may prevail or fail depending on the individual student's social surrounding and personal circumstances. When it does prevail, it is often rooted in discursive, rather than practical reasoning, and is transmitted through and reinforced by parents, family members, role models or figures of authority, such as in the cases of Tatiana and Irina. Both young women report to have, at one point, considered leaving school in grade nine for vocational education. Tatiana claims to have been influenced by her parents neither of whom has a HE degree but both of whom wished for her to acquire a higher social status and have a better life through a university degree:

> R: I considered leaving after the 9th grade. But then I changed my mind, I wanted to complete 11th grade anyway, to celebrate my graduation, to have these memories, to

> finish school together with my class. And my parents insisted that I shouldn't leave after the 9th grade too. To get a certificate [of school completion allowing to enrol in a university program] after the 11th grade, so I stayed. (Tatiana, Krasnoyarsk, neither parent has a HE degree, high grades).

Irina admits that she was pressured into grade ten by her father and would have chosen a different path if allowed to decide on her own:

> R: In 9th grade I knew what I wanted to be but I didn't know where to study. And in the end, when there was a graduation party, I said that I wouldn't stay at school, it would be better to go to a vocational institution. Dad started yelling at me right away, saying 'You have to get a degree! You have to finish 11 grades!' Blah-blah-blah. 'You can't get anywhere in life without it now, so you are going to [stay at] school!". Okay, so I stayed, why not? (Irina, Saint-Petersburg, single parent (father) is completing a HE program as an adult, average grades).

Tatiana and Irina, along with a number of other lower SES students with average and higher grades in our sample appear to find themselves caught between two conflicting discursive formations. Some end up succumbing to the social expectations of 'not wasting their grades' and 'doing something with your life' and continue to grade ten and further to a HE degree, while others opt for a vocational degree. Many lower SES students admit that they 'automatically' considered the vocational track as their number one choice but changed their mind due to high achievement in school. While some students seem to have appropriated the cultural narrative of HE as a pre-requisite for life's success from their social environment, many require a 'nudge' from either parents, school teachers or other figures of authority to start seeing their high academic performance as a form of social capital worthy of investing into.

In rare instances, higher SES students report considering leaving school after grade nine for vocational education, usually only to be ordered otherwise by their parents, as in the case of Oleg from Moscow:

> R: I myself wanted to leave after the 9th grade. But my parents told me that I absolutely had to continue to 10th and 11th grade, and to pass USE. I didn't really want to. Because I think that a man is able to work, either with higher or vocational education ... It's very hard to get a good job anyway these days. [...] A student who isn't very bright and is not doing great in school has more chances of getting a good job than an A-student with all their knowledge (Oleg, Moscow, both parents have a HE degree, average grades).

Vocational education as a 'fast-track to adulthood'

The dominant narrative of those opting to leave school after grade nine is that of 'fast-tracking' (Bynner, 2005; Jones, 2002) to adulthood, manifested as entry to the labor market. The narrative includes a number of roles and actions associated with adulthood: transitioning from a 'pupil'/'apprentice'

to a ‘worker’, making one’s own decisions, living away from parents, and supporting oneself. One’s life is viewed as consisting of discrete and hierarchically organized steps between which one progresses in a ladder-like manner: leaving school, getting a professional certificate, getting a job and a place of one’s own and creating a family. Entering the labor market is viewed as the first step in this scenario, a pre-requisite to a ‘normal’ life with a minimal level of welfare, stability and predictability:

R: I think it’s good [leaving school in grade 9]. Because I will finish school faster, will get a profession faster. If I get a profession faster, I will start working faster. When I start work faster, I will also get the rest of it faster. (Victor, Krasnoyarsk, neither parent has a HE degree, average achievement).

I: Why not finish high school and enter HE after that?

R: I think it’s easier in [a vocational] college, because you finish 10th and 11th grades in one year and also get a specialization (Artyom, Blagoveschensk, neither parents have a HE degree, good grades).

As is the case with higher SES students, the type of certificate, the quality of instruction, and the status of the educational institution bears little significance, as long as it provides access to a job. Teenagers do not normally consider comparative advantages of various educational options, as long as they are provided with a certificate that lists specific practical skills.

> R: The funny thing is that I don’t know [which job I would like to have]. Basically, I don’t care what work I do. It’s important that I’ll be paid, so that I could live normally, have time to hang out with friends. And for me it’s just important to work. To study just so that I could have this certificate and I could get a job somewhere. (Georgy, Saint Petersburg, neither parent has a HE degree, average grades)

Similar to the rationale of ‘always knowing’ that one would be going to university, the choice of vocational education students is largely unreflexive and is often expressed in terms of ‘never thought of other options,’ ‘always leaned towards working,’ and ‘eventually it all comes down to getting a job.’ Teenagers often cannot unpack the meaning of ‘adult life’ except for the algorithm of steps they know they are supposed to follow to achieve it:

R: Probably in order to start working faster. I mean, I wanted to leave after the 9th grade, I didn’t plan on going to university. I was thinking of leaving school at the end of the 9th grade, and so it happened. My mom wanted me to stay until the 11th grade, but I was against it.

I: Why?

R: I don’t know, didn’t want to go to 11th grade. For example, in order to start working faster.

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

R: I don't know. It was just all coming to this, to getting a job. (Maxim, Krasnoyarsk, single mother doesn't have a HE degree, poor grades).

Within this scenario, teenagers often see school as a useless enterprise, as it does not provide them with specific skills that ensure access to the labor market. In their eyes, the difference between university and vocational education is calculated primarily in terms of time investment, the former being a 'longer' path to employment. Two more years of 'boring' schooling and cramming for finals is, therefore, seen as a 'waste of time,' followed by a few more years of university without a clear understanding of 'what it is there to learn for so long.' The rewards of six or more years spent in education post grade nine are outside of the horizons of planning for most, while the outcome of a vocational degree is immediately available – a set of 'practical skills' that lead to employment.

I: And how was this decision made that you should leave school for a vocational program?

R: No, actually . . . I passed SFA [the examination in the 9th grade and end at the end of compulsory schooling], and then a girl who completed two years in one, she didn't pass USE [Unified State Examination]. And all this UNT stuff is really serious, and I thought that these two years, 10–11th grades, they would be spent only on preparation for UNT. Because all I hear now is USE, USE, USE, USE. All these tests, tests, tests. I went to vocational school because I understood that in these two years while they would be preparing for USE, I would already get (professional) knowledge. (Ekaterina, Moscow, one parent has a HE degree, poor grades)

While vocational students do not see a qualitative difference between a vocational and university education, they often assume that a university degree, if needed, will be accessible to them later on. It is imagined as a vaguely desirable, yet unclear path with no defined time limits and no clear indication of a future workplace, while a vocational education is thought of as giving concrete professional skills which are applicable right away. When asked whether they have considered differences in income between a job requiring a university education and a vocational one, teenagers often say the question is irrelevant, as a vocational degree provides a cash flow *right away* and is, therefore, a more obvious choice. Those planning to get a university degree in the future say that they would much rather get a foothold in life through gainful employment first and move on to university at an unspecified later stage in life. Longitudinal data in our sample suggest that those plans rarely come to fruition as teenagers get on with their lives, supporting themselves, creating their own families, and caring for parents. Nationwide quantitative data suggest that less than

10% of Russian young people continue to HE later in life after obtaining a vocational degree (Yastrebov et al., 2018). Even though higher education is hypothetically necessary and desirable, vocational education provides to lower SES students a trade-off between the investment of time and effort on the one hand and an acceptable, if not ideal, quality of life.

Getting a professional qualification as soon as possible features as the primary concern of male students who have no choice but to consider their educational path in the context of army conscription, which in Russia is mandatory for male citizens aged 18. Most male students in our sample express the fear of finishing grade 11 and not having enough time to, or failing to, enter a university, getting conscripted and returning home after two years being 'grown up' but having no professional degree. Many state that studying post-army would be 'too late' and 'status-inappropriate'. The army is envisioned as a transformative experience, the ultimate in 'growing up' after which one is no longer capable of going back to being a student and re-establishing oneself on an academic path:

> R: Oh well, actually, I was always hoping for 11 grades, because I know how it is now in Russia nowadays. If you enroll in a university program they might not conscript you. And I got scared of the army. I wanted first to get some education and only then get conscripted. Because I thought I wouldn't [be able to] study after the army. (Alexander, Krasnoyarsk, none of the parents have a HE degree, average grades)

Education is thus seen as reserved for a specific stage which should be completed before transitioning to adulthood.

Discussion and implications

While the Russian education landscape provides several pathways to the job market, few high school students in our sample give serious consideration to those options. In terms of the degree of choice, for the majority of academic track students, the decision to continue to grade ten and subsequently into university is a 'non-decision' (Ball et al., 2002). These students associate vocational education with less cultural capital, less social status and a lower salary. Those who venture to consider going into vocational education are promptly 'set straight' by parents and school teachers, and their educational paths are 'corrected'. Irina's 'yelling' dad and Oleg's parents' 'telling him what to do' in the examples above are illustrative of the discursive power of the HE narrative in Russia's everyday culture, whereby young people's personal opinions and preferences as to their educational and career trajectory are often dismissed as foolish teenage whims and trumped by the social imperative. A university degree is perceived as the only option to maintain or upgrade acceptable socio-economic status, to secure a basic level of success and to guarantee basic employment. Both higher- and lower-performing

students of higher SES automatically 'hop on the school bus' to a university education.

Guided by the desire to enter the job market faster, the students who leave school after grade nine to enter vocational education also largely see the transition as a non-decision. Most vocational students see a university degree as necessary for a good life and hypothetically desirable but see vocational education as a trade-off between the investment of time and effort on the one hand and a minimally acceptable, if not ideal, quality of life. Vocational education allows to avoid risks associated with continuing on the academic track, such as failing USE and returning to the vocational track, having 'wasted' two years of potential employment. By prioritizing the fast track into adulthood vocational students are guided by considerations of lowering the risks of being left out of the job market.

Within contemporary Russian culture, there is little dignity in staying on vocational track, though there is some in voluntarily quitting school. Somewhat similarly to the nonconformist counter-school culture described in Paul Willis' classic work (Willis, 1977), we observe a form of struggle for independence manifest in young people's treatment of school as a 'waste of time.' However, instead of the active opposition to the school culture, almost all of our informants passively wish to stay within the system and eventually acquire a HE degree. Unlike Willis' 'lads,' our lower SES respondents do not necessarily see the choice to leave school in grade nine as the first step on a set path towards low-wage working-class positions. Instead, they view it as normalised transition into adulthood fraught with uncertainties brought on by the collapse of the well-oiled Soviet system of vocational-level careers and the former prestige associated with it (Walker, 2015). To these teenagers, postponing entry into the labour market by two more years of schooling and then facing the possibility of failing to matriculate, thereby wasting two years of potential employment, is a risk not worth taking.

On the one hand, our qualitative findings support relative risk aversion premises adopted in the study. Both higher and lower SES students are concerned with access to the labor market and quality of life. However, the former tend to view the academic track and university as the only acceptable pathway to success, while the latter tend to see the vocational path as the obvious choice. Thus, our findings may support the thesis put forward in quantitative studies of educational inequalities in Russia (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Khavenson & Chirkina, 2019; Kosyakova et al., 2016; Prakhov, 2016; Yastrebov et al., 2018): with academic achievement being equal, children from less socially privileged families have a lower probability of continuing school after grade nine and entering university than children from families of higher SES.

On the other hand, we suggest that class-specific cultural narratives, alongside considerations of risk management and the assessment of one's educational options and chances will determine the chosen pathway after grade

nine. To this end, our findings demonstrate an emerging intricate link between class-related risk aversion and cultural narrative. Firstly, while cultural narratives are generally considered class-specific, our findings suggest that certain overarching narratives may transcend the boundaries of class. Thus, we find that the narrative of HE as a precondition for decent life permeates all social segments. While both higher and lower SES students and their parents agree that HE is highly desirable, in practice lower SES students routinely opt for the inferior option in order to avoid potential downward mobility. Secondly, what is considered 'safe' and 'rational' is defined by classed cultural narratives. Thus, a seemingly rational option of enrolling into a vocational education program as a 'by-pass' around USE and a safer pathway to HE is almost never considered by higher SES students. Avoiding a social taboo captured in the cultural narrative becomes more important than securing a desired social position. These findings support the thesis that the decision-making process in grade nine is largely informed by a dominant cultural narrative, in addition to pragmatics and social risk management.

Our findings further showcase and problematize the power of classed cultural narratives. Historically in Russia, the narrative of university education as 'a social imperative' dates back to the early post-Soviet period. Some of the key reforms of the 1990s included the elimination of the mandatory distribution of graduates to labor market places, the opening of private universities, and the opening of new university programs in the state universities, including fee-paying ones (Carnoy, Loyalka, & Froumin, 2013; Kosyakova et al., 2016; Roschin, 2006; Yudkevich, 2017). The increased variety of and access to university programs resulted in the social stereotype of a university degree being a pre-requisite for the job market, irrespective of the level of skill required, whereby the 'lack of a degree is negatively perceived by employers, even for semi-skilled jobs such as shop assistants and delivery persons' (Yudkevich, 2017). A degree came to carry merely a 'signalling role' (Roschin, 2006) and was not reflective of the actual quality of education and skills. This was exacerbated by the 'myth' of universal HE in Russia perpetuated by both the public and the expert community (Bessudnov et al., 2017).

In reality, actual university enrollment in post-Soviet Russia has been comparable with other European countries (Bessudnov et al., 2017). In addition, Russia's labor market has significantly transformed from the early post-Soviet times and is much more diverse and eclectic than it was in the Soviet and early post-Soviet times. Thus, some employers will only recognize a degree as a guarantee of professional skills if it is from a top university, others will prioritize work experience irrespective of educational degrees, while some prefer to train their employees from scratch (Gimpel'son et al., 2017; Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2017; Roschin, 2006).

Out findings demonstrate that the scope and significance of university education continues to be overrated among high school students and their parents, and the classed narrative of a university education as the only pathway to a successful life continues to be widely reproduced in society. It marginalizes other options provided by the system of education and devalues the historically well-respected vocational track. Furthermore, as we argue elsewhere (author reference), by postulating that entry to university is more important than the choice of occupation or study program, the narrative of a university education as a 'must-have' biases and depersonalizes high school students' choice of occupation/study program in grade eleven, prompting them to enroll in less desired or undesired academic programs for the sake of gaining access to university by any means. As Russian Bachelor's degrees continue to remain highly specialized in terms of disciplinary boundaries, high school students going into university often end up sacrificing their ambition for a particular occupation or a more competitive academic track and enrolling in the next best thing or any random academic program for the sake of enrolling (author reference).

The sociocultural lens applied in this study provides an important insight into educational choice and the secondary effects of inequality in education. It has been suggested that by serving as a 'self-fulfilling' (Quinn, 2004) prophecy, classed cultural narratives contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. Our findings further suggest that socially reproduced narratives may be outdated and misaligned with the employment landscape, which contributes to misinformed individual decision-making vis-à-vis one's educational trajectory early on. This has significant implications for career counseling theory and practice in Russia and beyond. Specifically, the sociocultural angle reinforces state-of-the-art career counseling frameworks, such as the one advanced by the OECD (Musset & Kurekova, 2018), which centers around practicing decision-making skills and familiarizing oneself with the world of work through employer involvement. Sociologically informed career counseling should be more oriented to breaking the pattern of 'non-decisions' in choosing an educational trajectory and building decision making skills, while highlighting the benefits of various educational tracks.

Notes

1. The regions chosen for the 'Tracer Atom' qualitative study are:
2. According to the Russian system of grading (grades 2 to 5), we have classified student's academic performance as 'high' (mostly grades 4 and 5), 'average' (mostly grades 3 and 4) and 'poor' (mostly grades 2 and 3).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The data of the Russian panel study 'Trajectories in Education and Careers' (TrEC, http://trec.hse.ru) are presented in this work. Support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (TZ-157) is gratefully acknowledged.

Notes on contributors

Elena Minina is an educational researcher and consultant. She is Associate professor with The Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics-Moscow (HSE), specialising in comparative education and public policy. Dr. Minina holds a DPhil (PhD) from the University of Oxford with a doctoral research on cultural variations in neoliberal modernisation reform in education. Elena has worked and done research at a number of world-class educational institutions, including Oxford University, the University of California-Berkeley, the European University-St.Petersburg, and Aleksanteri Institute-Helsinki. She has also conducted fieldwork in various cross-cultural environments, including Russia, the US, the UK, Scandinavia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Prior to the academia, Elena served as Education Adviser with the American Councils for International Education designing and administering US Department of State-sponsored academic programmes.

Diana Yanbarisova is a research fellow at the Laboratory for Cultural Sociology and Anthropology of Education at the Institute of Education, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia. She is working on the longitudinal research project “Trajectories in Education and Careers,” initiated in 2009, tracing transitions to adulthood by Russian youth. Her research focuses on educational choices and inequality. She is currently working on non-standard educational trajectories of young Russians.

Ekaterina Pavlenko is a research fellow at the Laboratory for Cultural Sociology and Anthropology of Education at the Institute of Education, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia. She is working on the longitudinal research project “Trajectories in Education and Careers,” initiated in 2009, tracing transitions to adulthood of Russian youth. Her research focuses on exploring the role of various cultural structures in educational and career meaning-making and the role of culture in shaping social inequality and social mobility. She is currently working on methodology for studying youth transitions by employing the concept of ‘landscapes of meaning’.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at DOI.

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