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## Saturday Russian Schools and Parents' Social Networking: Two-way Cooperation?

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### Abstract

*How does the relationship between parents whose children attend the Saturday Russian schools in Scotland influence their social networks? How are complementary Russian schools involved in this social networking, and how does this social networking support the schools' development? This article explores these questions using qualitative research in four Russian schools in Scotland. It contributes to the discussion about the dynamic nature of migrant social networks which depends on the relationships between actors (Ryan, 2011, Dedeoglu, 2014) and the organisational landscape (Vasey, 2016). Expanding on the existing literature in this area, my research investigates social networking in the Russian schools as a two-way process influencing both the socialising Russian-speaking parents and the Russian schools' development based on parents' social networks.*

**Keywords:** migrants; social networks; complementary schools; relationships.

### Introduction

*Each large Russian community tried to open a Russian school in their Scottish city. It is pretty normal: if not us, who will help our children? (Inna, teacher, Aberdeen)*

In 2012-2017, six Saturday Russian schools operated across Scotland: one in Edinburgh, two in Glasgow, two in Aberdeen, and one in Dundee. The secular Russian schools in Edinburgh and in Glasgow were established in 2004. In Aberdeen, the Russian school was opened in 2006, but then split into two schools in 2010. In Dundee, the Russian school was created as a branch of the Edinburgh Russian School in 2011. In 2012 – 2017, all the Russian schools in Scotland operated on Saturdays and provided Russian language lessons and some additional subjects such as mathematics, drama and others. The list of subjects varied across the Russian schools.

The Russian schools can be considered not only as interesting migrant organisations, but also as a core venue of migrant communities with special features. Previous studies (Kopnina, 2005; Remennik, 2008) have suggested that families' decisions to teach their children the Russian language depend in wide range of factors. The groups of parents connected to each of the Russian schools also have their own specific features, such as professional backgrounds, current forms of employment, and experiences of migration, each of which reflect the particular characteristics of the Russian-speaking communities living in the different cities.

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Until quite recently, the complementary Russian schools had not been properly investigated when compared with other ethnic communities (Li, 2006; Chen, 2007; Francis et al., 2010; Strand, 2007). Some authors mentioned Russian schools but did not study them in depth (Judina, 2014; Kliuchnikova, 2016). In this article, I therefore explore the links between different types of social networks and the parents' engagement in the Russian schools' everyday life. Using the Russian schools as a case study, I contribute to the wider academic discussion about migrant social networking by focusing on the role of complementary schools in these processes. It provides insights which lay in the importance of supporting the work of practitioners in complementary education for migrant children.

## **Social networking in Saturday schools**

*The nature of social networks may best be understood by focusing on the relationship between the actors, their relative social location and the available and realisable resources. (Ryan, 2011: 708)*

Ryan's statement can be used as the frame for understanding the social networking among migrant families in complementary schools. The social networks approach has played a significant role in prior investigations of aspects of migrant everyday life in host countries (Czaika & Varela, 2015; Vasey, 2016; Morosanu, 2016; Svašek, 2010; Rabikowska, 2010). Starting with the societal factors involved in migration (Boyd, 1989; Mesch, 2002), a focus on migrant networking has been developed at the personal level (Ngo et al., 2014; Lomsky-Feder & Leibovitz, 2010). Nowadays, social networks theory is widely employed in investigations of the communications and interpersonal relationships of migrants (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014; Dedeoglu, 2014). The research focus on migrant networks has led to the emergence of new questions about the importance of cultural similarities in maintaining relationships between individuals. Early studies which employed social networks theory in migration studies assumed that migrant networks were primarily based on ethnicity (Putnam, 2000) and shared heritage language as a pre-condition to entering into different types of networks (Boyd, 1989; Mesch 2002; Bakewell, 2010). However, further investigations have shown that the links between ethnicity, heritage language and migrant social networking are not straightforward, and that they can have a wide range of variations, especially in multi-ethnic, diverse communities (Erel, Ryan & Angelo, 2015).

Migrants' motivations for involvement in different types of networks depend on the various objectives which they seek to achieve (Eve, 2010), and on the activities accessible to them (Ryan, 2007). The unique features of migrant networks can thus be shaped by their needs (Ryan, 2007), by their cultural experiences (Erel, 2010), and/or by their shared social norms and values (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005). The importance of Saturday schools and toddler groups 'as a source of friends' has previously been indicated by White (2011: 189), who investigated the Polish Saturday schools in the UK. The desire of Russian-speaking parents to teach their children Russian and to meet other parents can be seen and explored as a starting point for the creation of specific social network clusters.

In exploring the critical role of relationships within social networks, migration scholars have employed a modified version of Granovetter's approach to networks as structures with strong or weak ties (1983). The strength of these ties can be measured by 'a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie' (Granovetter, 1973: 1361). Previously, migration scholars debated the types of



ties that form on the basis of their benefits for migrants (Boyd, 1989). However, more recently, using these typologies as starting points, researchers have paid more attention to the different ways in which social networks function (Moroşanu, 2016). By keeping in mind the distinction between weak/strong connections and the importance of their emotional intensity, I investigate the interactions between Russian-speaking parents, and the various types of social networks which have been established on the basis of their relationships.

## Methodology

*I do know how I could describe our parents and teachers, we are so diverse and have such different demands towards the Russian schools. (teacher, Edinburgh)*

In order to address the diversity of the Russian schools' communities and the complexity of the investigated processes mentioned above, I chose a mixed qualitative method approach. Following Francis (Francis et al., 2010), I explored the opinions of the parents, teachers, and children who are the main stakeholders of the Russian schools. For the study, I chose one Russian school from each of the Scottish cities: Russian Edinburgh, the Russian school based at RCS Haven in Glasgow, Slovo in Aberdeen, and Dundee Russian school. In Aberdeen, I chose the oldest Russian school, which had survived after the division of its Russian teacher team. In Glasgow, I chose the RCS Haven Russian school because the other, orthodox Russian school provided a religious Russian education that made it less comparable with the other Russian schools operating in Scotland. At the time of my research, the estimated number of pupils in the Russian schools were as follows: 25 pupils in Dundee, 50 in Aberdeen, 60 in Glasgow, and 100 in Edinburgh.

From November 2013 to April 2015, I conducted in-depth interviews with the following groups of respondents from the Russian schools: 13 face-to-face and two skype interviews with parents; ten face-to-face and two skype interviews with Russian teachers, and five face to face interviews with the directors and founders of the Russian schools. All the interviews were done in Russian and then translated into the English language. The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour.

In Russian-speaking society, the socially and culturally constructed role of mothers in family decision-making assumes that they are more deeply involved in their children's upbringing than the fathers are (Kay, 2006), which means that mothers are assumed to be more naturally able to answer questions about their children's upbringing. This pattern seems to continue when Russian-speaking families migrate abroad (Kliuchnikova, 2016, Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009). All the interviewed parents were mothers: three of them were between 20 and 30 years old; seven were between 30 and 40; and five others were older than 40. Seven of them were born in Russia, and the others were born in different countries of the former USSR. Five women had Scottish partners and, three had Russian partners. Four interviewees were students, three preferred to describe themselves as housewives, one respondent was unemployed but looking for a job, and the others had different occupations. In addition, I carried out participant observation on numerous different occasions including 12 times in school corridors, eight in classrooms, and four times at community events organised by Russian schools.

## Social networking processes in the Russian schools

The Russian schools provide opportunities for parents to become involved in various networks which cut across their different experiences and social positions. The parents, whose children attend



the Russian school can be involved in different groups such as close friends, acquaintances, or just Russian-speakers. These are now discussed in turn.

### **Close friends**

*The majority of our friends are from the Russian school. There are several families who are our friends. We have our own circle; we are friends with them. We often phone each other and chat about anything. (Alisa, parent, Glasgow)*

Alisa, who had a group of close friends in the Russian school in Glasgow, described her relationships with other parents whose children were attending the Russian schools. The parents from this group highly appreciated the friendships they had made there, which gave them a special feeling of closeness, describing those in their relationships as 'our circle' and 'our people'. Here, it is worth exploring some of the specific meanings attached to the use of the word 'friend' in Russian. In Russian culture, the word for friends, *druz'ya*, is used to highlight the special quality of relationships between people in inner circles of close friendship who share intimate feelings (Efremova, 2006).

The main features of such a network connecting people who have formed close friendships in the Russian schools' spaces include mutually close emotional attachments and regular contact, both during school hours on a Saturday and at other times outside the Russian schools. These families have developed friendships not only between parents but also between their children too. Referring to Eve's idea about the importance of relationships for social networking in specific places (Eve, 2010), the extension of these relationships outside the Russian schools can be recognised as a key characteristic of this network which distinguishes them from other parents who prefer to meet only for Russian school activities.

After asking some of the parents who their friends from the Russian schools were by occupation, I found several examples which show that similarities in children's ages can be an important factor in the networking of parents from different socio-economic backgrounds. While migrants generally tend to seek friends of a similar background (Rabikowska, 2010), it is apparent that this divisions in a migrant community can be overcome if a parent is looking for a friend for their child who can be involved in various family activities.

### **Group of acquaintances**

*Nowadays, the Russian school replaces other social activities, we see other mums here, sometimes we go to a café together, but only on Saturday; we do not usually see each other on other days. (Valeriya, parent, Edinburgh)*

Valeriya described her relationships with other mothers, highlighting that she only sees them occasionally because they only meet while their children are attending lessons at the school. This group avoided using the Russian word for friends, *druz'ya*, to describe their relationships with other Russian-speaking parents. Instead, the word for acquaintances in Russian culture, *znakomye*, was used to emphasise that a person, while known and perhaps liked, is not a close friend (Kuchenkova, 2017).

The Russian schools play an important role in planning weekend activities and developing social networks involving groups of acquaintances. Attendance at a Russian school brings benefits



for children, who learn the Russian language as well as enjoying the communication and socialising which occurs between parents. However, this group of parents rarely extends their interactions with Russian-speakers during the week; instead, they only communicate with them on Saturdays when the Russian schools operate, in contrast with the closer networks of friends who meet more often. The parents who fall into the category of acquaintances rather than friends never mentioned that they attend the Russian schools to find friends, as was observed among closer networks of friends. Valeriya told me that she is very sociable, and interacts with people from other nationalities. She did not come to the Russian school to find friends here, as some other Russian mothers had done. Valeria explained that:

*Some people communicate only with Russians, but I have a lot of local friends. I am Russian; one girl is from South Africa. My husband is not Russian. (Valeriya, parent, Edinburgh)*

She and her Scottish husband are involved in quite developed social networks, but also support several Russian connections.

More than half the interviewed parents spoke acquaintanceship rather than close friendship which was mentioned by several research participants. Acquaintance networks can include parents of more diverse nationalities, jobs, lengths of settlement in Scotland, home language use, and knowledge of Russian and English languages than networks based on strong friendships. Fauser et al. (2015) also pointed out that migrant networks of acquaintance united people who preferred to communicate with each other more infrequently. The common goal of teaching their children Russian unites these people.

### **Parents distancing themselves from others Russian-speakers**

*We attend the Russian school every second Saturday due to my work shifts. My husband also told me that he would bring us and wait somewhere on my day off. (Lyuda, parent, Edinburgh)*

Lyuda arrived in Scotland six years ago after marrying her Scottish husband. At the time of interview she divided her time between work and her child on Saturdays. Lyuda is the driving force for their child learning Russian, and she tried to balance different types of family activities, such as learning Russian and being with English-speaking relatives.

The Russian schools provide an opportunity for parents to socialise but, understandably, not all parents take up this opportunity. Many parents, especially in the larger schools such as those in Edinburgh and Glasgow, prefer not to be in close contact with other members of the school community; these parents were also less accessible for interviews and observations in this research. They quite often prefer to leave their children at the Russian school, and do not wait for them in the corridors. In general, communication with Russian-speakers is less important for parents who have decided not to be part of the Russian schools' community than it is for the parents described above as groups of friends or acquaintances.

The analysis of the Russian-speaking parents' experiences shows an interesting interplay between the opportunities provided by the Russian schools and the ways in which the parents take advantage of them (or do not do so). The networks existing around the Russian schools are dynamic in nature, and their development also influences the numbers and shared beliefs of Russian-speaking people whose children attend the schools.



## **Interplay between parents' networks and Russian schools' activities**

*I could not imagine where and how we would be linked with other Russian speakers if we had not attended the Russian school. (Zoya, parent and teacher, Aberdeen)*

Zoya not only had her own prior experience of disappointment in contacting other Russian speakers but also referred to the experiences of other parents whose children attended her class. In Zoya's opinion, the Russian schools provide safe places for meeting people willing to communicate with each other.

Parents' networks play a significant role in the developing of the Russian school community, through advertising and supporting school activities. The social networks around the Russian schools tend to work as sources of two-way communications. Some parents come to a Russian school to find social contacts, while others join one because of existing relationship. According to Reimer and colleagues (2008), the strong bonds which characterise networks with friends are also required in personal and open relationships between members. Consequently, these bonds tend to create closed groups with barriers to newcomers. However, my data showed that closed groups of friends more willingly attended the Russian schools, stayed in school corridors during their children's Russian lessons, and were more often found in parent groups supporting the Russian schools' activities. As a result, they often become the core of the Russian school's community. It also appears that the closed (but active) group started to change their networking strategy to help the Russian schools to recruit new members, with the purpose of supporting the schools' growth. This coincides with Ryan's idea about the dynamism of migrant networks (Ryan, 2011) evolving through migrant life. The original strong bond networks between close friends thus begin to transform into multiple networks with different types of connections, where strong ties are complemented by weaker connections with the arrival of newcomers into the Russians schools.

The Russian schools also enhance networking processes through the various types of relationships which emerge between parents whose children attend the same class. The general tendency observed in each of the four Russian schools was that the inflow of newcomer families was bigger in classes for the youngest children than in any of the other classes. In other words, pupils who had recently enrolled in Russian schools were more likely to have been born in Scotland than to have arrived with their parents at an older age. Every year, the Russian schools take on new groups of children who have reached the minimum age appropriate for attendance. The mothers of these new pupils more often stay in the Russian school's corridors, or nearby, in order to support their children's integration into their new school environment:

*I am waiting here because he is so small, and we agreed with the teacher that I would stay here a few times until he forgot about me. (Extract from field notes of observation, Dundee school)*

My observations identified an interesting group dynamic: the parents whose children were attending the same class preferred to keep close and communicate primarily with each other. However, they would also spontaneously start to communicate with other parents, so the Russian schools indirectly encouraged newcomers to join some of the social networks.

The Russian schools can also indirectly help people to cooperate in areas outside educational activities. As I was told during my interviews in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, the Russian school administrations do not have the right to advertise Russian-based services. Nevertheless,





parents are free to informally let other people know about their personal initiatives, in business fields such as hairdressing, sewing, child-minding, and others. For example, several women who provided massage and hairdressing services at their homes because they did not have office facilities preferred to invite people who were already known to them. However, the prices they charged for these services were usually lower than the market rate. I was told by one of these providers that she had a moral problem with charging Russian-speaking parents due to seeing them as friends. The services offered by parents from the Russian schools could be recognised as extensions of their domestic roles (Dedeoglu, 2014: 179), which were being used as sources of additional family income, rather than as the main breadwinning activities for migrant families outside the Russian schools (Kyle, 1999).

The Russian schools unite parents not only through regular meetings on Saturdays, but also by organising different school events. In Aberdeen, for example, Darya perceived the Russian school as being the main centre for Russian cultural events in the city. She noted that:

*Unfortunately, everything revolves around the school. There is nothing much left beyond it. (Darya, parent, Aberdeen)*

A quick Internet search shows that in Aberdeen, there are some other places organising Russian events,<sup>1</sup> but this parent seems not to have been involved in any of the other Russian-speaking migrants' social networks which have formed outside the Russian school. This point of view could also be found among parents in Dundee where, for example, Kseniya commented that "Generally, everything comes from the Russian school". For some parents, through their participation in their children's activities, the Russian school was the only place where they found any links with the wider Russian-speaking community:

*Russian events for adults are not interesting for us; we are mainly interested in children's events, as we do not have time otherwise. (Lyuda, parent, Edinburgh)*

Lyuda explained that the main reason for her participation in Russian events was that her priority was to give her children opportunities in the first place, and then to involve her family in such activities.

The complexity and density of the networks which exist in the Russian schools challenge previous explanations of Russian-speaking migrants' networking processes, which have usually focused on migrants' experiences, in particular their geographical locations, without a strong focus on migrant social institutions such as complementary schools (Kopnina, 2005; Morawska, 2004; Ngo et al., 2014). The Russian schools should thus be considered as places for networking, and also as organisations based on networks.

## Conclusions

This article provides valuable contributions to the existing research on the migrant social networks (Boyd, 1989; Eve, 2010; Ryan, 2011) through investigation of the role of complementary schools (Francis et al., 2010; White, 2011, Chen, 2007). The recognition of Russian schools as special places for migrant community interactions brings the theoretical insights drawn from network theory into a workable framework for the study of migrant complementary schools.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/876218042474046> [Accessed 2.12.2015]



Following Ryan (2011) and Boyd (1989), this study's framework was created with the purpose of investigating networking in Russian schools as a dynamic process influenced by the relationships between attendees and their cultural needs, which are wider than solely education for their children. After the collapse of the USSR, a high level of divergence between cultural traditions was noted in countries which had previously been united in a single state (Fassmann & Münz, 1995). The Russian-speaking community in Scotland has since created different social networks through which they are able to reconstruct their common visions and some united values which can support their relationships as friends, acquaintances, or simply as speakers of the same language.

The operation of the Russian schools in Scotland is underpinned by the social networking of their stakeholders. The heritage language preservation and social networking which have emerged around the complementary schools are mutually related and can be investigated from the perspective of how they enrich or contradict each other. On the one hand, the existing social networks can encourage new pupils to attend the Russian schools, and can promote cooperation between families, children and Russian teachers. On the other hand, for newcomers, the Russian schools provide opportunities to get involved in multiple networks with different types of connections, and to improve the relationships between members of the schools' communities. By providing places for meetings and ensuring regular contact, the Russian schools influence the everyday lives of the Russian-speaking families involved in the process of heritage language preservation.

The social networks in the Russian schools produce and support feelings of belonging among Russian speakers who understand each other due to the similarity of their positions as migrants, and their shared goal of educating their children. By using the schools as the context, the present study brings a new angle to understanding how social networks are created, and how they function among this specific migrant group, which had previously been described as lacking strong relationships (Kopnina, 2005; Molnar, 2011). It also can bring academic discussion of other ideas about the linkages between the formal and informal roles of the Russian complementary schools in Scotland. The Russian schools are formally constituted institutions which have their own authority and access to other formal institutions, and which also provide the frameworks within which informal networking and formal provision can overlap. The interference between formal rules and informal networking in the Russian schools requires further investigation.

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