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## Review of *Child Care in Russia: In Transition* by Jean Ispa

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## BOOK REVIEW\*

*Child Care in Russia: In Transition.* Jean Ispa. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1994. 230 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-89789-390-5. \$55 cloth.

Jean Ispa first observed and studied Soviet child care centers in 1993–94 as part of her doctoral research on toddler social behavior. In 1991, just before the demise of the Soviet Union, she returned to Russia for an intensive 3 months of research on current practices. Growing up in a household of Russian immigrants, she is fluent in the Russian language. Her knowledge of Russian language and culture, coupled with the long time horizon of her experience with American and Russian systems of education, render this new book a particularly enlightening, thoughtful, and balanced description of a system of child care outside our country.

Probably all Americans who lived through the Cold War possess many feelings and judgments, and facts and misfacts, about Soviet and Russian history and education. It is fascinating, therefore, to read the chapter titled “Some History” about the forces that have shaped Russian child care over the past two centuries and gain a picture of how changing societal priorities have shaped educational goals. The period from the Revolution of 1917 through the 1920s is portrayed as a time of experimentation and innovation, involving influx of certain North American and Western European progressive educational ideals. This time was followed by a more rigid and dogmatic period of Soviet control, with emphasis on socialization for collectivism, lasting until the 1960s. The most recent period, from the 1970s to the present, has seen a resurgence of questioning, reform, and change, as part of the massive political and economic shifts sweeping the country. No doubt conditions have continued to change even since this book was written, as the breakup of the Soviet Union has meant many fewer central state resources for such services as health and education.

After establishing historical perspective, the author offers a few notes about the language and translation. The Russian teacher is called

*vospitanel'nitsa*, one who brings up children or “up-bringer,” and teachers often show their fondness for children by using the diminutive form for nouns when speaking with children. Next, all aspects of center life and curriculum are described: management and staffing, educational and social goals, physical space and equipment, daily routine, free play, instructional lessons, outside time, meals, naps, discipline, and relationships with parents. The data on which the account is based include running-record observations in six Moscow child centers as well as interviews with directors and teachers. The main limitation is the small number of schools observed, and heavy focus on the 3-to-5-year-old age group.

To frame and interpret these materials, Ispa draws extensively on earlier and current writings of Soviet pedagogues, and analyzes how the behavior and events she herself observed appear to represent or contradict good practice according to Russian standards. For example, she talks about the short daily teacher-led lesson, long hours of outdoor play, cozy sleeping quarters, pleasant and clean surroundings, and adults’ general kindness and heavy use of praise as being consistent with the stated goals of Soviet and Russian early childhood texts. Further, a loose adaptation of the video-reflective ethnographic film technique (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) was used to elicit reactions of Russian and American educators to each others’ classrooms, materials, and techniques.\* The multiplicity of perspectives and use of direct quotations provide insight into the teachers’ intentions, goals, misgivings, daily life and job stresses, and attitudes toward their group of children, and also reflection on where the Russian thinking and practices conflict with current American ways.

While the observations underlying the book were not collected in order to bear quantitative analysis and hypothesis testing, nor to support theory building, nevertheless the richness of the account provokes continuing reflection and allows readers to form their own conclusions about Russian values and childrearing.

CAROLYN EDWARDS

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\* Tobin, J., Wu, D., & Davidson, D. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.