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The Court Is Now in Session: Professor Discourse on Student Attrition

This article presents the results of a discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with professors from nine Russian universities. This analysis focuses on narratives of student attrition and its causes and reveals the generally accusatory nature of the professor discourse. All the narratives can be integrated and described in terms of the metaphor of the trial. In its most obvious form, the accusation that students are to blame for attrition is developed as a type of discourse that can be called prosecutorial, but it can also be developed in speeches resembling those made by defense attorneys and judges. These three types of discourse build figurative barriers

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between the university and professors, on the one hand, and students, on the other hand. These barriers encourage professors to feel uninvolved in student attrition. Not one of the three discourse types articulates the university's mission or problematizes the principles and goals of its activities. We suggest that the "bad student" discourse reflects some real problems associated with the massification of education and inevitable changes to the student body. An analysis of the professor discourse allows us to hypothesize that their response to these changes is limited to stating the problems and disassociating themselves from them. The construction of figurative barriers may result in professors' self-distancing not only from students, but also from the changes affecting the education system. Such self-distancing complicates the process of adapting to these changes and makes it difficult to control.

Student attrition is generally studied by identifying factors that may determine student's academic trajectory and by analyzing how these factors influence academic success. In most cases, these factors are associated with various student characteristics (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson 1997). This research strategy has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the causes of student attrition and has certainly become the mainstream approach to studying attrition, but it has a number of drawbacks.

First, when analyzing specific factors presumed to have influenced a student's decision to drop out, researchers frequently ignore the cultural and social context in which the education system functions. This context, however, is critically important for understanding specific aspects of the system, particularly attrition (Mehan 1997). Second, focusing on students as the main players in a situation of expulsion means that researchers pay almost no attention whatsoever to the role of professors in student attrition (Gruzdev 2013). This role certainly cannot be ignored, especially within the context of the Russian education system due to the type of attrition specific to it. The important aspect of the Russian system is that university professors and administrative staff are the agents of attrition, while students are more likely to

be involuntary participants in this process (Gruzdev, Gorbinova, and Froumin 2013).

An alternative strategy to researching specific factors that influence attrition is studying attrition discourse. On the one hand, using discourse analysis methods is a fairly nonstandard solution to researching student attrition. These methods are traditionally used when studying ideology-driven spheres or problems, where different means of articulation may be presented as a manifestation of concrete positions produced by certain social conditions. On the other hand, in studies on the education system and attrition in particular, sociologists and anthropologists have found it useful to consider discourse. A discourse analysis of student narratives makes it possible to gain a better understanding of the possible causes of attrition (Lessard et al. 2009). Studying the discourse of different groups about expulsion allows us to draw conclusions about society's prevailing opinion of people who have been expelled (Choi 2004; McDermott 1989; Mehan 1997).

This article presents an analysis of the discourse of professors at Russian universities on student attrition and its causes. The study assumes that professors monitoring students' knowledge as part of their professional activities participate directly in the attrition process and cannot help but have their own opinions on policies that universities should have in regards to student attrition. This work analyzes professors' narratives, the causes of student attrition, and the scale of attrition. Data for this analysis was obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Empirical base and research methodology

The empirical base of the study consists of 33 interviews with professors at Russian universities. The sample was structured so that different types of universities would be represented. The following criteria were used during the selection process: location (both in Moscow and in various regions of Russia); selectivity (average score on the Unified State Exam by department); and

profile (technical, classical, socio-economic). The interviews were conducted at nine Russian universities (see Table 1).

The sample of professors included professors from socio-economic and engineering specializations. Five of the respondents held the position of the dean of faculty along with their teaching responsibilities, and one respondent also held the position of vice-rector for academic affairs. The interviews were conducted in 2012–13.

The discourse analysis model developed by Austrian sociologist Ruth Wodak was used to analyze the interview texts. Unlike most other approaches to (critical) discourse analysis, which focus on decoding political ideologies in written texts, this model can be applied to analyze any practical

Table 1

The consolidated data on the interviews taken within the framework of the study

Institute of Higher Learning	Interview No.	Location	Selectivity*	Profile
1	2, 21, 27, 31	Moscow	High	Socio-economic
2	1, 33	Moscow	High	Socio-economic
3	15, 16, 24, 25, 26	Moscow	Medium	Technical
4	28, 29	Moscow	Medium	Technical
5	4, 5, 6, 7, 8	Ulyaanovsk Oblast	Low	Classical
6	17, 18, 19, 20	Yaroslavl Oblast	Medium	Classical
7	23	Orlov Oblast	Low	Classical
8	3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14	Ulyaanovsk Oblast	Low	Technical
9	30, 32, 33	Tomsk Oblast	Medium	Technical

*Selectivity is determined by the average grade of students enrolled at the university in 2013 expressed in terms of one subject. Selectivity was rated high where the average grade was over 80, medium where the average grade was 70–79, and low where the average grade was under 70. This data is from the study “Admission Quality at Universities–2013,” conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics and RIA Novosti.

applications of written or oral communications. Specifically, Wodak studied communication and language barriers in courts, schools, and hospitals (Meyer et al., 2009).

Wodak's model is based on three levels of analysis: linguistic manifestation, strategies of argumentation and content (Meyer et al., 2009; Wodak 1997). The first level comprises the unique aspects of the linguistic representation of discourses within the framework of specific narratives. With respect to an analysis of the professor discourse on student attrition, at this level we identified characteristic ways of speaking about student attrition, that is, words and expressions professors used to describe the situation with expulsion and its participants. At the level of strategic argumentation, we analyzed typical models for constructing narratives on attrition. When we analyzed content, we focused on the factors that professors view as causes of attrition, their attitudes toward expulsion, and how they legitimize these attitudes. We will introduce the term "expulsion policy" to signify attitudes toward attrition and the term "logic of reasoning" to signify typical models for legitimizing these attitudes.

Discourse on student attrition as a trial

It can be concluded from the results of the narrative analysis obtained during the semi-structured interviews that the factor of expulsion policy is the most distinguishing factor in terms of how professors represent student attrition. So, different models for describing attrition may refer to the same causes, but will still vary in terms of the resulting conclusions. In this context, the causes themselves become "floating signifiers" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) that take on different meanings depending on the discourse context of their articulation.

An example that best illustrates the core idea of this thesis is the different ways used to describe students' social immaturity. In one discursive model, this factor serves as an accusation against a student, while in another model it serves as a defense. Accordingly, opposing expulsion policies take shape. Some narratives articulate the viewpoint that students are adults who

must take responsibility for their actions and that expulsion is consequently a fair way to punish people who do not meet this requirement. It legitimizes a strict attrition policy in accordance with which expulsion is an important tool for managing the education process that professors must use actively. Other narratives, conversely, indicate that students must be treated with tolerance, since they are children and need to be given the chance to correct themselves. This discourse legitimizes a lenient policy of attrition in accordance with which expulsion is an extreme measure that should be used only in exceptional circumstances when students have already been given one more chance to show their worth. A third common position is that professors should not take factors like social immaturity into account and should instead focus only on formal indicators, thus avoiding any emotional involvement in the process of expulsion, which could have a negative effect on the functioning of the education system overall and on the work of specific professors. The lack of a specific policy on expulsion is characteristic of this discourse. Professors avoid answering the question of how many or how few to expel by appealing to university norms as formal rules of the game.

Thus, out of the total array of narratives obtained we can identify three main ways of representing student attrition that are based on different expulsion policies. We will use the terms “prosecutor discourse,” “defense attorney discourse,” and “judge discourse” to signify these ways.

Using the metaphor of the trial is quite productive in this case. First of all, it makes it possible to demonstrate in the most vivid manner the essence of the distinctions identified. The key elements of the trial—the presence of an accused person; a prosecutor, who has the role of accuser; a defense attorney, who represents the accused person; and a judge, who ensures justice—structure the narratives and describe the main discursive differences. However, it is important to understand that the terms “prosecutor,” “defense attorney,” and “judge” do not apply to professors but to specific ways of representing student attrition. For example, we may find various types of discourse in the narrative of one single professor.

In this sense, it is not appropriate to use the proposed classification model for professors, since this would overlook the complexity and polydiscursive nature of the actual narratives.

Second, the metaphor of the trial focuses attention on the important narrative feature of assigning agency in the education process exclusively to students. Since it is specifically the student who is the main actor, it is the student to whom blame and responsibility for academic failure and expulsion are attached to varying degrees. And even though in a number of interviews some accusations against students are accompanied by various types of justification logic, the overall accusatory mode is retained. Moreover, responsibility is removed from other participants in the education process, primarily professors and the university in general, who play the role of any other participant in the trial aside from the accused person. In this context, the expulsion discourse is a space for issuing a formal decision regarding preventive measures for the “accused” and not a discussion of the definition and causes of attrition. Thus, it is appropriate to use the metaphor of the trial. In the logic of this metaphor, the advance selection of an accusation against a student by a teacher may be defined as the “presumption [of the student’s] guilt.”

Finally, the metaphor of the trial is intended to emphasize the critical nature of the proposed view of the representation of student attrition in the professor discourse. The drawing of figurative boundaries between professors and students, which is effectuated within the framework of professors’ narratives, creates barriers to an effective resolution of problems arising under the conditions of global transformation that the Russian education system is experiencing. One of the most important goals of this article is to discover means for the discursive reproduction of these boundaries, which could become a starting point for future changes.

Thus, the metaphor of the trial makes it possible to give a general framework for understanding the professor discourse on student attrition. Moreover, the single discourse on attrition can be broken up into three discourses corresponding to the positions of three key participants in a trial: the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the judge.

In the prosecutor discourse, which is the dominate discourse in the array of interviews, particular emphasis is placed on the accusation of the student. Here professors introduce the concept of a “bad student” or “weak student,” through which a rationale for the need for attrition is formulated and evidence of the other party’s lack of involvement in attrition is introduced. Conversely, the defense attorney’s discourse conveys various justifications for students, but does conflict with the overall logic of the student’s trial. What is developed is not evidence of students’ “innocence,” but justifications for their violations. In other words, this discourse lists mitigating circumstances for the “defendant.” A key element of the judge discourse is *formal rules* or laws that form the basis for adopting decisions. It assumes a certain depersonalization in descriptions of how students’ academic performance is monitored and of the student–professor relationship in general. Here attrition is presented as the result of the work of bureaucratic machinery and the professor as an ideal, exacting official in the Weberian sense. Now we will examine each of these discourses in detail.

The prosecutor discourse

In most narratives, the professor takes a pronounced accusatory position in relation to the student and places the full measure of responsibility for academic failure and expulsion on him or her. This position corresponds to the role of a prosecutor, whose main task is to set forth arguments against the person accused of a crime. In this context, the defendant is a “bad” or “weak” student who is being charged with the crimes of being “lazy” and lacking the “desire to learn”:

Expulsions happen not because students are stupid or not inclined to study, but because they don’t study. *They don’t want this, they don’t try.* It’s not because of their minds, but because of their *laziness.*” (Interview 15)

In adopting the role of the prosecutor, professors form a conception of a special social status of students that corresponds to a stable set of role expectations. These include the need to

demonstrate a desire to learn and a certain level of diligence. If a person does not meet these expectations, he or she is marked as “de facto not a student,” and the expulsion situation itself is described in terms of student dysfunction. Classifying students as weak becomes a way of stigmatizing them. The effect of this is heightened through the use of lexical constructions that have stable negative connotations, for example imagery of quagmires or tailings (missed assignments):

I also try to structure my classes for strong students, and *weak* students will catch up if they want to. But if they don't, they'll get stuck in a quagmire no matter what you do for them. (Interview 7)

An important quality of this discourse is the construction of a relationship model where students are given the status of adults who must bear responsibility for their actions. A “weak” student is viewed as an “ignoramus,” whose infantilism takes on the significance of an aggravating circumstance increasing the degree of accusation. At the linguistic level, this model takes shape through the use of nomenclature to represent underachieving “children.” Examples of this include “little ones,” “guys,” “children,” and “kids,” which are used to show that the “weak ones” are not serious students. These names are frequently used in demeaning forms. A perfect example is the following quotation, where the professor uses the word “child” to describe an instance from his teaching experience:

I'll tell you a true story. *Someone* was attending school for two years. Everything was fine: *this child* went to class, returned from class, until it became clear that he had quit school. *This child* took money from his parents for bribes. And now we're losing these people *in the rear*. I hope to God we lose them quickly.” (Interview 3)

The prosecutor discourse establishes alibis for two agents of the education process—professors and universities. Prosecutors take the position of defense attorneys in relation to them by proving their noninvolvement in expulsion. Professors are struck from the list of suspects on the basis of their professional and moral disinterest in expulsion, while the university's alibi is

established by noting that attrition is not profitable for an institution's existence:

Professors are not generally interested in *student attrition from a professional standpoint*. It's no secret that this situation is unpleasant for professors from a *moral standpoint*. It's unlikely that there are any teachers who would be happy to expel students." (Interview 23)

Universities have been placed in a situation where they *rely on extrabudgetary funds*, because this is *cold hard cash that comes into the university*. . . . And the universities need to hold on to these failing students." (Interview 12)

Here it is important to emphasize one important detail about these justification strategies. The prosecutor discourse does not create an image of the university as a special type of organization pursuing educational and scientific goals. Instead, the university is described as an economic agent that maximizes profit and minimizes expenses, while its mission to participate in culture and humanization (Ortega y Gasset 2006), develop science (Humboldt 1998), or seek the truth, including through research, culture, and the transfer of knowledge (Jaspers 2006), remains unspoken. In some sense, a logical continuation of this definition of a university as a business entity would be treating students as consumers who pay for education (themselves or using state funds) and can relate to it the same way they relate to other services that can be acquired (Delucchi and Korgen 2002). However, the prosecutor discourse is characterized by the demands it makes of students. Also, students are assigned responsibility for the result of the education process. Thus, the prosecutor's discourse is contradictory in nature: the description of the university that it offers does not correspond to the definition of the student's role that the professors use. This contrariety is most likely a consequence of the difference between some professors' factual and normative views of the university. They note that universities are dependent on funds received from students and emphasize the significance of the economic aspect of learning; however, they also express their disagreement with this state of affairs. At the level of linguistic manifestation it is

manifested in the use of the passive voice: “The institution has been placed in this situation.” This particular aspect of the discourse fits easily into the context of overall dissatisfaction with neoliberal changes at universities that has been documented among members of the academic profession (Giroux 2014).

The assignment of responsibility and agency to the student in the prosecutor discourse creates a special type of ideology about the education process in accordance with which receiving education is in many ways viewed as the student’s task and the result of the student’s activity. Expulsion is seen as the student’s failure to perform functional responsibilities and is based on the model of professor–student relationship where the professor does not assume the role of mentor or savior. This kind of ideology corresponds to a strict expulsion policy: professors should not drag low-performing students along or give them another chance, and may expel a significant portion of the student body. Professors take on the role of “forest orderly” or “gardener” (Gruzdev 2013), who rises to defend education quality and pulls up “weeds” or destroys “sick specimens” (the “weak” students) to preserve the forest. However, another contradiction in the prosecutor discourse is that, due to the ambiguousness of the university’s mission, and, as a consequence, the task of teaching, the criteria for determining which students are subject to expulsion are quite vague and are defined differently in different situations: in relational terms, people are subject to expulsion if they are worse than the rest (“tailings,” “quagmire”), or on the basis of the professor’s normative views of student behavior developed from the professor’s personal experience: “When I was a student, *things were strict.*” (Interview 20)

To legitimize this expulsion policy, professors turn to several justification logics representing the main types of threat to education quality from students stuck in a quagmire: *peer effect*, *injustice*, *lack of motivation*, and *moral corruption*.

With the *logic of peer effect*, the main argument in favor of a strict expulsion policy is that the state of the academic collective influences students’ academic attitudes. Professors note that by creating inappropriate behavioral reference points, poor students

weigh down all the other students, which creates a threat to education quality overall:

If we orient ourselves in relation to the weak, then *public opinion will be dragged down*. If we orient ourselves in relation to the strong, where there are people who want to learn something, *people will see examples, people will reach for that*. If there are more weak people, then people will be drawn into something else. That general tendency does exist. (Interview 3)

The *logic of injustice* corresponds to the notion that grades should reflect a student's actual activities: a person who invests a great deal of energy and effort in learning should be graded higher, and a person who has not invested anything in learning should be expelled. In this context, attrition solves the problem of dissonance, which may arise in cases where a student sees that others are achieving certain results without applying any effort:

If they ["bad students"—Authors] somehow manage to stay in school but don't invest any effort in this, the rest of the students will see this and, of course, they will start to feel dissonance: why is this happening? (Interview 18)

The third justification logic for the need for attrition is the *logic of lack of motivation*. The main idea here is that fear of expulsion is an important motivating factor that prompts students to be more involved in the academic process:

If the weak students dropped out entirely, there would be no students in the group who did not want to study and *the fear that you could be expelled* would be preserved. (Interview 5)

Some professors note that attrition has a disciplinary function. They believe that the absence of strict rules corrupts students:

So if he doesn't complete the work and I assigned it to him, that corrupts him. If a task was assigned, that means do it. (Interview 9)

At the level of strategic argumentation, this discourse takes shape through the active use of graphic examples, which create the effect of great emotional involvement. In demonstrating actual events from their own experience, professors move the

conversation about attrition from the plane of abstract thinking about the functions of the education system as a whole and the university in particular to the plane of specific situations representing the most vivid marginal cases.

Another characteristic of this discourse is the use of comparative constructions that increase the effect of accusation by demonstrating the contrast between normal (“good student”) and deviant (“bad student”) situations. A widely used strategy is comparing the educational experience of “bad students” with the professor’s personal experience:

When I was a student, *things were strict*. For each course there was a minimum you had to know to pass. And if you didn’t know that minimum, you didn’t pass. . . . And everyone was scared, even those who were struggling, and everyone crammed and passed that minimum. (Interview 20)

The defense attorney discourse

The attrition discourse in general takes an accusatory tone in relation to the student, but in some narratives professors try to find a reason to hand down a less severe “sentence” or even an exoneration. This fact makes it possible to place these narratives in a separate category, which we will designate “the defense attorney discourse.” The metaphor of the trial is especially relevant in this context, since professors appearing in the role of defense attorneys turn to typical strategies for defending accused persons, such as justification or release from responsibility. It is important to note that in these narratives the roles of the university and the professors as key agents in the education process is not problematized and is excluded from discussion.

There is variation within this discourse, which can be separated into at least three different types of narratives; however the presence of a general mode for considering attrition and attitudes toward attrition means that we can define this discourse as an independent conceptual unit. The unifying principle of narratives of this type is the formation of an expulsion policy that could be called a *policy of chance*. Its main postulate is that we must give

students a chance to correct themselves. The following quotation is an excellent example of the representation of this kind of expulsion policy:

I think that *everyone should be given a second chance*. That's why I try to give as many simple additional questions as possible from different sections on quizzes and tests. (Interview 23)

To justify this expulsion policy, professors turn to three main logics of argumentation: *the logic of the new generation*, *the logic of childhood*, and *the logic of criticism of the education system*.

In the argumentation built into the *logic of the new generation*, partial responsibility is shifted from students to independent factors of social development. Some narratives, for example, note that the appearance of the Internet and mobile phones changed the structure of communications and that this change has had a negative effect of students. In other cases, evidence is cited of how the mass media influences the formation in young people of poor value models and role expectations, which have a direct impact on the academic process:

They watch TV, those sitcoms and other programs that brainwash, so it seems to them that life is beautiful—two bosses got together, drank whisky, and went off to solve some problems. . . . *Why study? The television shows them that there's no need*. (Interview 11)

This logic forms the concept of a “new generation,” which takes the place of the “bad student” in the role of the accused. At the level of strategic argumentation, in most cases this logic takes shape through a description of the differences between the old Soviet generation as the norm and the new generation as a deviation:

I don't want to speak about the younger generation the way the older generation usually does, that we were so great and that they aren't like us at all. I don't like this position. They have something different now, some different interests. But, on the other hand, sometimes it really is clear that *we're heading in the wrong direction*, that something isn't right, because I see real *degradation* in a number of things. (Interview 20)

Within the framework of this logic, an expulsion policy takes shape that could be called a policy of necessitated chance.

Its main idea is that professors must give students a chance, since they will be left without students if they follow the formal rules too stringently.

If I start being too strict with everyone, then I'll have to send out at least half the students. Take my colleague—he and I discussed this, he teaches advanced mathematics—he said only about 10 percent of his students can actually master the material. . . . You can understand that if there aren't any students, there won't be any university. (Interview 20)

If we use legal metaphoric language, we are speaking not of making excuses for the student but of seeking mitigating circumstances that would force professors to reject a stringent position in terms of expulsion.

Another variation of the justification of the *policy of chance* is the *logic of childhood*: professors should be more lenient with students because they are children. Infantilism, which qualifies as an aggravating circumstance within the framework of the prosecutor discourse, is used in this context in the exact opposite sense—as a ground for lessening or completely removing guilt. The position of professors within the framework of the defense attorney discourse can be described as mild parental paternalism.

The difference between the prosecutor discourse and the defense attorney discourse can be described in terms of role expectations. While the prosecutor discourse corresponds to the notion that students must behave like adults, the defense attorney discourse views the student as a child in relation to whom an allowance for age must be made. Accordingly, while poor performance is interpreted as student dysfunction within the prosecutor discourse, in the defense attorney discourse it is interpreted as the result of the unreasonably high expectations of the professor, upon whom part of the responsibility is placed:

Every university professor truly believes that every first-year student has a little bit of Lomonosov in him, that he is outstanding, a genius, and that we will tell him something and he will get it right away and amaze us tomorrow with his brilliant knowledge. But it doesn't always work out this way. (Interview 24)

One common justification strategy in this logic is an indication of external, “objective” factors connected with difficulties adapting to new life conditions, the arduousness of a university education, and specific examples that should be taken into account when making a decision on expulsion:

I’m not even talking about time management, moving from another city into a dorm, or making new friends and work connections. Forget about studying! These things alone can cause enormous disruption for a person. (Interview 23)

In contrast to the ideology that “getting an education is the student’s task,” with this justification logic the ideology is that “providing an education is the professor’s task.” Under this ideology, the professor assumes the role not just of teacher but also of mentor:

I understand a student who’s a *normal person*, who’s young. He has to run around all day like crazy from the crack of dawn, do everything all the time. I think he needs to be reminded, to be spoken to, especially in the first couple of years. Is this really so hard for a professor to do? (Interview 15)

The idea of the student as a child is clearly manifested at the level of linguistic manifestation: “children’s” nomenclature like “youngsters” and “kids” is actively used in narratives. However, unlike the manner in which this nomenclature is used in the prosecutor discourse, here it is presented in its standard, as opposed to abated, form and in a context that is positively marked. At the level of strategic argumentation, turning to specific examples that promote the emergence of empathy toward the expelled student is characteristic of this justification logic.

I knew this *young boy* for five years. Everything was fine with him, but then he started stuttering. It turned out that he was just trying to get attention, that there were problems in the family. His parents were divorcing. These things happen. I had to call the mother. We spoke with the *young boy* and then everything was fine. (Interview 26)

Turning to the metaphor of the trial, here we can speak not of absolving the student, but of releasing him from responsibility

due to his age. A direct analogy is the special juvenile laws that most modern states have in their legal systems.

We call the third justification logic the *logic of criticism of the education system*. This is potentially the most radical logic since, unlike the other two, it suggests the possibility of the student's partial or complete exoneration through the transfer of blame to another agent of the education process. Nevertheless, in most narratives, the education system is introduced only as an "accessory to the crime," and the main responsibility is placed on the student. Thus, the metaphor of the trial is also relevant for this type of narrative.

A key point of criticism in this logic is the weakness of the education system in schools. It is postulated that the general level of preparation falls with each year and that this leads to the degradation of the student body.

Well, I have one favorite phrase—"First it was very bad, then it got *worse and worse*." It seems to me that with the students who have enrolled here recently, the baseline just gets *lower and lower, lower, lower, lower*. (Interview 22)

At the level of strategic argumentation, this logic frequently takes shape through comparisons with the Soviet education system, which is represented in the form of nostalgic recollections of the "old-school Soviet style" and the "Soviet pedagogical school."

During that time teachers of the Soviet pedagogical school, of the *old-school Soviet style* were working, and, well, they were much better teachers. And also *during those years*, in society as a whole, in families, there was a much more appropriate attitude toward education, and children were raised in a certain way. (Interview 7)

Professors label changes in the school program brought about by the introduction of the Unified State Exam (USE) as one of the main causes of the current crisis. They believe that test prep does not develop creative thinking skills or oral communication. A lowering of barriers to enrollment is linked to the introduction of the USE. Its result is that students select an area of study not based on their own interests or abilities, but according to the

principle of “I’ll enroll wherever I can get a budgeted place.” In this way “random” people come to a university when they are not motivated or suited for studying the specialization they selected.

The new rules for enrolling in a university absolutely *do not orient students toward a specific specialization*, profession, or even area. Now applicants have 15 options for enrollment . . . and *one task—to find a budgeted place*. So he could care less what he becomes: a builder, a power engineer, a mechanical engineer, or a carjacker. This is the cause of all our problems. (Interview 13)

Professors at regional universities note, among other things, the problem of potential students leaving their regions for Moscow. This problem has increased in connection with the fact that students no longer have to pass individual university exams but only have to submit USE results. At the linguistic level, this problem is represented in some narratives as leading Moscow universities “draining” the regions of the best students and is viewed as one of the most important causes of the lower level of student preparation.

The quality of incoming students has worsened. . . . This is connected purely with demographics and integration processes in Russia. These processes are specifically expressed in the *USE, which the best universities in the country use to drain away the best students*, . . . How it used to be was that you had to travel somewhere, take a test, enroll somewhere. And now you’ve already enrolled just by taking the exam. (Interview 3)

Professors observe a disconnect between the school and university stages of education, which is problematized as a lack of correspondence between the education process in schools and the content of education at universities. The USE is a key cause of this disconnect. According to university professors, the learning process in school is aimed at test prep and not at receiving an education as such. Schooling is described as oriented at making the transition to university, but this transition is linked to taking the USE, which has no direct connection with universities. Therefore, high school education is characterized by a high degree of alienation from education at universities, which is labeled as

“real” in narratives. A distinctive demonization of schools and idealization of universities is taking place. Professors criticize the school system of education while sanctifying the university as the more important agent of the education process.

Thus, the defense attorney discourse contains elements of nostalgia for the Soviet education system and criticism of education reforms linked to the introduction of the USE. It works simultaneously to remove responsibility from the figure of the student and to provide an additional justification for the university’s lack of involvement in the problematics of student attrition.

The judge discourse

Within the framework of the judge discourse, the student’s guilt is substantiated by his or her failure to comply with formal rules. The narratives assembled in this type of discourse differ from prosecutor narratives in that the accusation is not a central point in them. While the prosecutor discourse contains emphatic, occasionally emotionally-tinged rationales to justify a student’s guilt and his or her responsibility for attrition by using demeaning vocabulary, for example, in the judge discourse these rationales are recorded neutrally with reference to a system of codified norms or laws featuring various types of formal rules adopted at the university. Thus, students are not stigmatized here. They are not called “weak” or “bad,” but are instead monitored for compliance with “the rules of the game.” And herein lies the corresponding attrition policy: students who cannot or do not want to follow the rules of the education process are expelled. Moreover, the scale of attrition is not problematized, and there are no normative qualitative parameters of attrition.

An important part of the judge discourse is the postulation of the totality of formal rules. The narratives stress that in the first place these rules are in effect for everyone and that in the second place they cover work to monitor students’ skills at all levels.

N University is notable because it has simply been ingrained in the ideology from the very beginning, a system of formal rules is in operation here. Administrators speak about this all the time, and this system, it operates at all levels and is applicable to all aspects of work. These are simply rules that are in effect for everyone: for teachers and for students . . . and these rules, they penetrate to a fairly deep level even at the level of class year. (Interview 31)

The sources of these rules are documents regulating the activities of the entire university (for example, the charter) and regulations for interactions with students within the framework of a specific academic course of study. It is important for the rules to encompass both the organizational and content-related aspects of learning. Some criteria for attrition include normative requirements for what a student should know within the framework of a specific academic course of study. In this case, the source of rules could be the program for a course of study. Meanwhile, the certainty of these criteria in this case does not necessitate a clarification of the end purpose of the education process. Within the framework of this discourse, the university's mission remains unstated.

Formal rules act as a substitute for the professor's agency in the process of attrition. In some sense, monitoring of students' skills is automated—the professor implements a procedure prescribed by the rules. In extreme cases, the student interacts exclusively with a set of rules. Thus, an additional justification of professors takes place within the framework of the judge's discourse. This justification is contained in the very name of the discourse: after all, the judge is always above suspicion. This figure, which personifies Themis, represents a triumph of the law, and without it the trial itself loses all meaning.

You see, we can't simply say here whether we expel a lot of students or not. We don't actually expel. We evaluate how a person works in a specific course of study, what this person knows or doesn't know in the end. Strictly speaking, *I have no responsibility whatsoever to determine who will have what problems.* (Interview 33)

The rules actually allow me to speak about the personal relationships, positive or negative, that may arise between professor and student—they don't play a big role because *we have these rules.* (Interview 31)

One of the justification logics of formal rules as a main element in the attrition process follows from the concept of “judge.” It appeals to the idea that the absence of rules increases the risk of the “profanation” of the entire education process, since students may put pressure on the evaluators.

Because if professors face such pressure, *the risk of profanation will increase significantly.* (Interview 31)

Using our metaphor, this logic can be described as follows: without a code of laws, judges are deprived of their “Archimedean” point for adopting decisions, and there is an increase in the likelihood that a false exoneration or guilty verdict will be issued. It is interesting, however, that in narratives formal rules are described as protection from pressure more from the side of the accused than from the side of the prosecutor. In other words, rules are needed to maintain rigorous monitoring, not to restrict monitoring.

Another justification logic used in the judge discourse is the *logic of moral economy*. Here formal rules act as a means for protecting professors from moral dilemmas that may arise as they monitor skills and they are directly connected with expulsion:

It’s hard when someone dumps a jumble of stories, explanations, causes on you and you understand that you are taking moral responsibility to a certain extent. But *what can I do if there are formal rules?* (Interview 2)

Another justification logic involves the assertion of the advantages of formal rules over personal preferences. Here formal rules are presented from the standpoint of the advantages that students can obtain from them. The main advantage is that everyone has an equal chance. The rules are a kind of apologia for everyone’s equality before the law.

From a legal standpoint, if there must be three people on a commission, we don’t need any other grounds. Three people, period. We always have to understand why it’s three people and not one. So that three people gather for a person’s last chance, to review his work.

Regardless of anything ... *I must follow the rules that we have.*
(Interview 2)

The special linguistic aspects of the judge discourse include the use of vocabulary that works to depersonalize descriptions of the causes of attrition and the procedures for monitoring students' skills. Words like "formal" and "objective" are used frequently.

If we are speaking about expulsion, when there is no way a student can pass a certain course, then the role is most likely how the *objective* demands of the course correspond to the *objective* skills. (Interview 31)

A key argumentation strategy used in this discourse involves describing how the process for monitoring students' skills using formal rules is as objective and fair as possible and does not depend on specific subjects of interaction. After analyzing interviews, we were able to identify two means for developing this strategy. The first consists of the use of specific synonymic rows. An example is the following fragment where the informant is speaking about grading criteria: "of course, it is possible to determine completely clearly, exactly, and formally" (Interview 31). Here the word "formally" is placed in one row with "clearly" and "exactly," which creates the feeling that the word "formal" is synonymous with something precise and obvious. The second means consists of presenting rules as objectively logical, i.e. factually true: "*I try to find a logical basis [for rules – Authors] and 99 percent of the time I do*" (Interview 2).

Conclusion

After analyzing these interviews, we can conclude that overall the professor discourse is accusatory in relation to the student. All the narratives may be integrated and described within the framework of the metaphor of the trial. In its most obvious form, the accusation that students are to blame for attrition is made in a type of discourse that can be called prosecutorial, but it can also be made in the discourses of defense attorneys and judges. These three types of discourse build figurative barriers between the

university and professors on the one hand and students on the other. These barriers encourage professors to feel uninvolved in student attrition. The construction of symbolic barriers is reflected in how the figure of the university is represented in the professor discourse on student attrition.

In the prosecutor discourse, it is the economic aspect of the organization. The university's "innocence" in student attrition is justified because a shrinking student body results in financial losses. In the defense attorney discourse, the university exists as a bulwark of "real education," but this representation is not included in the description of the policies and causes of expulsion. Criticism of the education system, which is introduced as an "accessory to a crime," is aimed chiefly at schools and does not apply to universities. Finally, the judge discourse describes the university as a system of formal rules or as a bureaucratic machine. Thus, none of the discourses articulate the university's mission or problematize the principles and goals of its activities.

The fact that this articulation is missing in discourses on student attrition may be an indication of the overall ambiguity of professors' positions in relation to students. If we look at university models proposed in classical works, we can see that they all assume that there is a clear understanding of the role that students may play in a university. W. Humboldt's model of the classical university is founded on the idea that there is an unbreakable connection between knowledge and education. Students act as a kind of junior colleague to professors. These two groups are useful to each other and are together oriented toward the overall goal of developing knowledge (Kurennoy 2006). J. Ortego y Gasset, on the other hand, defines the university's mission as "teaching the main culturally significant disciplines," assigns professors the function of mentoring, and gives students the place of pupils, not colleagues (Ortega y Gasset 2005). According to J.H. Newman, universities should turn students into gentlemen (Newman 2006).

The ambiguous nature of the professor's mission in relation to students that was revealed during our analysis of discourse on expulsion may present a serious barrier to forming a new notion

of the university's mission in today's Russia, a topic that is being actively discussed by experts in the area of higher education (Auzan 2013; Dubin 2007; Strogetskaia 2010).

The fact that the roles of universities and professors are not problematized in the discourse on student attrition may have a number of consequences for the education system as a whole. Over the past several decades, university education in Russia has seen a sharp jump in the number of institutions and students (Carnoy et al. 2013). It can be assumed that the discourse on the "bad student" is a reflection of real problems connected with the massification of higher education and inevitable changes in the student body. An analysis of the professor discourse allows us to hypothesize that their response to these changes is limited to registering the problems and justifying their lack of involvement in them. The special aspects of the defense attorney discourse serves as indirect proof of this hypothesis. Here we see nostalgia for the Soviet education system and a suspicious and even critical attitude toward educational reform. Thus, the construction of figurative barriers may include the setting of boundaries not just in relation to students, but also in relation to changes taking place in the education system. Such barriers do a great deal to complicate the process of adaptation to these changes and make this process difficult to manage. In particular, instead of shaping an informed policy on student attrition at the level of specific institutions, there could instead be an elemental adaptation to the existing situation, whose consequences cannot be monitored in terms of quality of student preparation.

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