At the beginning of the 20th century, in most developed countries experiencing rapid modernization, ‘child science’ emerged as a loosely organized scientific and professional movement. ‘Child science’ brought together different professions and disciplines, especially those in education, health, psychology and criminology. All these groups claimed some aspect of child development and socialization as a territory of specialist investigation and expertise.

The appearance of the ‘child science’ movement was closely linked to the rise of the modern welfare state. The early 20th century was the era of mass warfare, mass migrations and mass industrialization that led to seismic social shifts, prompting advanced states to see their rapidly transforming populations as requiring large-scale rational management. In this context, the child population was perceived not only especially vulnerable, but also as the most obvious embodiment of the future. Science, in the broad sense of systematic rational enquiry, was widely deferred to as the principal means of reliably and effectively shaping that future.

‘Child science’ fostered the establishment of a whole host of at that time new disciplines, including: developmental and educational psychology, education research, child psychiatry, developmental physiology and neuroscience, special education, juvenile criminology, and the sociology and anthropology of childhood.

As a subject of public discourse, ‘children’ came to be discussed in a way not unlike ‘the environment’ is today – in terms of the values invested in them and anxieties surrounding them – in the context of unprecedented upheavals, risks and uncertainties associated with ‘modern times’. Yet the child population was seen not only as requiring care and protection; it also, crucially, invited cultivation and positive transformation. ‘Child science’ was thus enmeshed in a mixed rhetoric that juxtaposed appeals to wellbeing and welfare, civilization and progress, meritocracy and democracy with efforts to create an efficient and competitive labour and military force through forms of social engineering.
Child Science in Russia and the Soviet Union

1880s – 1910s

Russia was among the first countries to start developing ‘child science’, and arguably the country that went furthest in formally institutionalizing it in the early Soviet era. By 1900 Russian ‘child science’ was growing independently, creating a fast-expanding network of psychological laboratories, training courses for those working professionally with children, institutes devoted to child development and education research, medico-pedagogical sanatoria for children with developmental and behavioural problems, and large-scale conferences for professionals involved in the field (especially teachers, psychologists and doctors).

At the same time, ‘child science’ was a volatile arena of intra-disciplinary squabbles between rival scientific groups (especially within psychology) as well as of inter-professional politics that involved strategic collaborations and bitter jurisdictional conflicts between different professions – namely teachers, psychologists, doctors and jurists – around ‘children’ as a common territory of enquiry and expertise.

Early 1920s

After the collapse of tsarism in 1917, state interests and ideological concerns emerged as decisive factors on which the fate of ‘child science’ in Russia depended. In the 1920s ‘child science’ was strongly supported by leading Bolsheviks. At this time ‘child science’ was given considerable intellectual freedom and wide scope for institutional development. In this period Soviet ‘child science’ produced such major theorists of developmental psychology and education as Lev Vygotsky, whose influence in these areas is felt internationally to this day.

Early 1930s

In the course of the early 1930s, mounting ideological criticism of the ‘child science’ movement eventually led to the notorious 1936 Party decree on the so-called ‘paedological distortions’ in the Commissariat of Education. In a remarkable reversal of fortunes, ‘paedology’ was denounced as a ‘reactionary pseudoscience’ and expunged from the institutional map of Soviet research and education. All scientists involved in this research had to publicly denounce their ‘errors’. ‘Paedology’ became an odious word.

It was only during perestroika of the late 1980s and after the collapse of Communism that interest in the ‘purged science’ of ‘paedology’ truly remerged, with calls for it to be ‘rehabilitated’ as another one of Stalin's victims. At issue here is also the significance of the legacies of early-20th-century ‘child science’ for contemporary disciplines involved in the study of child development, psychology, and education in the context of extensive reforms in child welfare and education that are currently being debated in the Russian Federation.
Professions, Disciplines, Expertise: Collaboration and Conflict

The research currently carried out by Dr Andy Byford (Durham University) will result in the first comprehensive book-length history of the rise and fall of Russian ‘child science’ between the 1880s and the 1930s, placing it in the wider, international, historical and contemporary context.

The project investigates the institutionalization of this multidisciplinary field in Russia, with particular focus on the problems of **collaboration and conflict between different stakeholders** – including representatives of different disciplines and professions, state structures, the wider society, and parents – around children as objects of study, knowledge and care. This research examines what generates and makes possible highly heterogeneous fields of scientific and professional work, carried out through multiple interactions and collaborations between actors belonging to a range of disciplinary, professional and administrative structures and environments.

**Key Questions**

- What happens when experts in *different* disciplines and professions lay claim to children as objects of research? How well do different experts *collaborate* in such cases? What are the main conflicts and obstacles that arise in the process? How do experts in different aspects of childhood *interact with the wider public*, especially parents and carers?

- How can history help us understand contemporary *controversies* surrounding the mental testing of children? What has been the historical role of psychiatry in the *public management of ‘problem children’*? What has historically been the relationship between the medical, legal, psychological and educational professions in areas such as juvenile criminology? How are parents *mobilized* into the scientific study of child behaviour and development?

The enrolment of parents in ‘child science’, with particular focus on how and why *parent diaries* of early child development proliferated in Russia/USSR between the 1880s and 1930s.

The controversial *rise and fall of mental testing* as a key method in ‘child science’, with particular focus on the way it *enabled interaction and collaboration* between psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, parents and administrators around children.

Neurological behaviourism as a distinctive strand in Russian/Soviet ‘child science’, with attention to the *esoteric scientist language* of the theories of reflexes developed by the famous physiologist Ivan Pavlov and neuropsychiatrist V. M. Bekheterev.

The mobilization of teachers into ‘child science’, with particular focus the *influence of psychologists* on educational theory and teacher professionalization.

The doctors’ *infiltration of the field of education* as a major feature of ‘child science’, with particular focus on the institution of the ‘school doctor’, paediatric prophylactic social medicine, and the influence of psychiatry on special education.

The *rise of juvenile criminology* in the early 20th century, with particular focus on the connections between the *institutional management* of juvenile delinquency in institutions for young offenders, on the one hand, and the construction of juvenile delinquency as a distinct *domain of knowledge and expertise*, on the other.
About Dr Andy Byford

Dr Byford is Lecturer in Russian at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University, a position which he has held since 2009. Prior to Durham, he was Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford University.

He is the co-editor of *Making Education Soviet 1917 – 1953* [special issue of the Journal *History of Education* 35 4-5]. For a full list of publications, please see his Durham University staff page.

Recent Publications


2008 ‘Psychology at High School in Late Imperial Russia (1881-1917)’, *History of Education Quarterly* 48, pp. 265-297.

2008 ‘Turning Pedagogy into a Science: Teachers and Psychologists in Late Imperial Russia (1897-1917)’, *Osiris* 23, pp. 50-81.

2006 ‘Professional Cross-Dressing: Doctors in Education in Late Imperial Russia (1881-1917)’, *The Russian Review* 65, pp. 586-616.


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