How has Russian public education changed since the fall of communism?

In late 1980s and early 1990s, it became obvious that the society was changing so substantially that education system could not cope with new requirements. People no longer wanted their children to learn Marxist dogmas, to read books written by good members of the Communist party; they wanted children to learn foreign languages, to understand market economy, and to be prepared for life in the new, open society. Therefore, the reforms were all aimed at unlocking the closed system.

The thrust of the reform was to do away with the Soviet highly politicized content of teaching and the unitarian school, which had 100% mandatory curriculum, one set of textbooks for all schoolchildren, and standard school buildings. Ten principles of education reform formulated in those days were:

1. Democratization and decentralization of school management and school life
2. Diversification of education curricula
3. National identity building
4. Openness of the system
5. Regionalization of school policy
6. Humanistic policy
7. Humanitarianism
8. Individualized learning
9. Developmental approach to education
10. Life-long learning

However, the system was grossly underfunded and was unable to implement such comprehensive changes. One significant accomplishment was diversification within the system—new school patterns began to appear, regions and schools got more control over curriculum, choices and options were introduced into the curriculum, the school textbook market began to develop, and parents could select schools for their children. However, in the absence of a new understanding of quality of education and rigorous quality assurance procedures, the acquired freedom was often breeding chaos and inconsistencies within the system.

In the late 1990s, a new set of comprehensive reforms emerged:
President Putin's new term (2004-2008) was marked by major investments in education via National Grants designed to celebrate best teachers, schools, and universities. However, this big initiative only contributed to greater discrepancy between the rich and the poor. Successful schools servicing either children of richer parents or students selected on the basis of their abilities and skills were becoming even better equipped while schools catering to children from socially deprived families were not seen as strong competitors when compared with the former and received no support.

Today, a more vertical, inputs-based set of reforms is being implemented, reforms that allow much less diversification in favor of uniformity. Of course, such attempts to find universal solutions for the entire system (Russia has over 120 ethnicities that are indigenous to their territories and an increasing migrant population) are doomed to fail. The growing nationalism is increasing xenophobia and suspicious attitude toward Western innovations. The dialogue with best performing systems has been reduced to traditional exchange visits. Although partnership projects exist, they experience massive logistical problems created by the new Russian legislation.

One area that has played a significant role is the system of external standardized exams—it has dealt with the obsolete, subjective, and time-consuming system of oral exams (school exit and university entry). It has brought more equity of opportunity, particularly for students of remote Russian regions who can now enter best universities in Central Russia without spending a lot of money on travel. External exams have provided a reliable feedback to the system allowing decision makers to compare school and university entry requirements. Russia can now participate in a majority of international surveys and reviews, whereas previously, it could not due to a lack of reliable data.

While Russia is making progress, several core challenges remain. Although Russia demonstrates very good results in PIRLS and TIMSS surveys, in PISA, Russia is below the OECD average in all tested skills, and the results are not improving. Teacher status is low, both politically and financially, and the system of pre-service and in-service training has not been reviewed since the Soviet days. Assessment for learning, though accepted as a concept, is seldom practiced in schools because teachers are not trained to use it and do not feel it is a priority. The very concept of public accountability is not a part of Russian educational or political thesaurus.

You are a part of the Analytical Centre of the National Training Foundation. How has the Russian teaching profession changed over the last two decades?

In the review of Russian education system done by OECD in 1996, the Russian teaching force was described as extremely committed and highly professional. However, the financial status of teachers in Russia remains very low—teacher salaries account for only 65% of the average in the Russian economy. The school population is aging—the profession is more attractive to older teachers who can combine their salaries and pensions and thus, provide for a decent
The workload of an average teacher has increased, partially because they now work extra hours to earn extra income, and partially because they now have to enter a lot of data into electronic database while their usual paperwork did not decrease. As a consequence, teachers do not have time for appropriate professional development. The expectation is that they will become facilitators of learning rather than knowledge providers, that they will teach key skills and not just disciplinary knowledge, that they will be able to measure individual progress of every child and help their students build an individual learning trajectory. However, they have very limited opportunities to acquire necessary skills as traditional pre-service and in-service training systems and thus, cannot respond to these needs.

The recent international TEDS survey sampling future teachers of mathematics has demonstrated that students studying to become teachers in Russia, regardless of whether they are in specialized teacher training institutions or in classical universities, show very high results both in disciplinary knowledge and in teaching methodology. Russia was among top five countries in every set of skills tested. However, the bad news was that only five percent of the sampled students were intending to work in schools upon graduation. This is not just due to a lack of motivation. Russian schools experience consequences of a demographic pit and school population is decreasing, while teacher training institutions continue producing the same amount of teachers. With teachers of retirement age staying in jobs, schools have very few vacancies for younger teachers. Support system for novice teachers is also missing, and this is why most of the well-trained young professionals choose alternative careers.

The government is planning to increase teachers’ salaries by 30% in the nearest future, but the expert body recommends a substantive reform of teacher education and staff policy to accompany pay raise, otherwise the turnover will only get worse.

In spite of many reform attempts, our in-service training system remains inefficient and input-based. In some regions of Russia, teachers get vouchers to take to an institution of their choice, but the choice is very limited. In most regions, teachers can only go to one institution. Every teacher must take a 72-hour course every five years. But TALIS review, in which Russia has participated unofficially, has demonstrated that a significant amount of teachers have not had any in-service training in the last seven to ten years. A comprehensive reform of in-service system is needed to make it accountable, user-friendly, and responsive to the real needs of teachers and schools, and plans for such a reform are already under discussion in the government. We hope that professional communities of teachers will start playing a more significant role in both informing the system and in designing the delivery of curricula, with the help of best practicing teachers.

The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” How is educational research disseminated and applied in practice to improve teaching and learning?

In the course of the last two decades, Russia has participated in many international surveys and reviews and acquired a lot of reliable data needed to improve its educational system. However, it has taken us almost a decade to make PISA data a subject of broad public discussions. Expert community has been advocating a need for evidence-based policy since the first outcomes of international surveys began to
be published, but to this day, financing of Russian participation in new rounds of international reviews is discussed by some decision makers in terms of whether Russia is likely to come out first in the league table, and if not, they are not prepared to pay. The examples of countries who have transformed their systems to improve results of their students have largely been neglected until very recently. Now, this experience is mentioned in a lot of policy papers, and best researchers in the country are involved in secondary analyses of data reviews. Thus, a very thorough analysis of PIRLS results have been done recently. Although Russia came out first in the last international rating, the researchers have compared results of individual failing schools to schools in similar circumstances who have done significantly better. They have analyzed likely reasons for success and failure and came out with a list of strategies failing schools could adopt to improve their outcomes.

The interest in data-driven decisions is higher in the regions which have been the leaders of educational change in Russia—Samara, Krasnoyarsk, Yaroslavl, Tomsk. Gradually, other regions are beginning to realize the importance of evidence-based management, and the subject of CPD course offered to regional leaders of educational systems this year is data-driven decision making.

The university entry exam has provided a lot of data. The exam results became one of the performance indicators for the Russian Federation Government to assess efficiency and effectiveness of regional education authorities as well as general performance of the executive authorities of the subjects of the Russian Federation. This assessment provides a direct impact on the size of monetary grants allocated from the federal budget to the regions. However, as soon as governors of the region became accountable for exam results, their subordinates started going to extremes to twist the statistics or, even worse, to get rid of children that might spoil the results of the exam. In absence of other reliable indicators, it is difficult to trace such distortions. However, on the positive side of it, regional quality assessment systems started to take shape. Regional Centers for USE (Unified State Exam) Information Processing served as the basis for regional education quality assessment centers in many cases. In addition to the USE-related work, they organized other procedures for education quality assessment, regional monitoring surveys. This allowed the system to take the full advantage of human resources, methodology, and technology capacity built as part of the USE effort. The Centers regularly provide information to schools, which helps them to focus on areas that cause concern in exams and monitoring surveys outcomes.

What is your vision for Russian public education in the 21st century?

Russia has always taken pride in high literacy rates of its population, but those rates may no longer be sufficient for the knowledge economy. Russian public education system should continue providing solid knowledge base, but also more effectively develop skills needed for global society and economy. I hope that the amount of school graduates performing at lowest levels of competencies will decline and that there will be no schools which fail to provide appropriate services to students.

The system of education should be open toward partnerships in the social sector and to cooperation with parents and communities in order to provide equal opportunities to all and to meet the needs of every child in order to ensure academic
progress and adequate socialization. The System should get rid of any social, geographic, gender, or ethnic discrimination. The system should take account of a new digital environment and re-think its traditional modes of delivery. And most importantly, the school ethos should model civil society we want to develop, so that children learn the core values and ethics not from books but in daily practice.

The core challenge is the quality of teaching and leadership staff, their readiness and willingness to implement changes. In order to address this issue, the pre-service and in-service system should become a role model for changes envisaged in the classroom. The system should become accountable for its outcomes, and to constantly adapt its programs to meet emerging needs of schools and teachers. In-service training institutions should be financed from multiple sources rather than regional authorities. They should have full authority to hire and fire staff, put staff on probation or, preferably, set an internship period for novice teachers with experienced mentors to guide them through their first year in school.

Another challenge is corruption in the system. In spite of many efforts, it is hard to create a corruption-free space within a corrupted environment. Unless we deal with corruption, the entire system of education will be undermined. New standardized assessment procedures have contributed to corruption eradication, but those have also made corruption visible, and this provides an opportunity to discredit the new procedures.

Russian society values education. Families are prepared to invest into their children’s future, as well as to cooperate with educational institutions in order to maximize their life opportunities. Continuous dialogue with parents, involving them in school governance is a great resource not yet fully explored. Resources available to education system are significant. Once those are used efficiently, they would be sufficient for transformations needed.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

The most pressing issue at the moment is completing the build up of the Russian Quality Assurance System and making every part of the system and every institution accountable for its outcomes. If national system of assessment, combining public exams, regular and efficient monitoring, providing immediate feedback into the system, and assessment for learning as its core is in place, schools would be able to deliver better services to every child.

Although we celebrate the introduction of standardized exams (in grades 9 and 11 now), we fully understand their limitations and consequences of making decisions on the bases of exam results only. One such consequence is that schools, in fear of bad school assessment results, are looking for ways to get rid of weaker children who might spoil the picture while taking two exams that are compulsory for all, English and mathematics. In some regions, schools are almost directly invited to tamper with results and procedures.

Schools must have a constant flow of data at every stage of a child’s education, and we are currently looking at inexpensive on-line system of testing Qatar has adopted in hope we can learn from it.

Value added approach should be seen as the backbone of the new system. At the moment, struggling schools are compared with elite ones and their individual progress is not recognized.
ELENA LENSKAYA

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