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ABSTRACT

A two-week exchange lectureship at the Russian Diplomatic Academy in Moscow is described by the American exchange professor. The focus of the lectureship was the vital role which public education has played historically in shaping the United States. The lectures were designed around three main themes in American education: historic purposes (religious, political, social, economic), governance, and relationships among American society, culture, and education. The project also included a visit to a Russian school specializing in teaching English and to education ministries in order to conduct comparative research in conjunction with the lectureship. Some findings were: recent social and economic changes in Russia have impacted teachers adversely, due to underfunding of education, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, slow growth of teachers' salaries, a general teachers shortage, and a loss of prestige for the teaching profession. Also, new legislation has made general education compulsory and a right guaranteed by the constitution. Tuition free higher education, with competitive admission based on merit, is provided at government institutions, and as a result, private evening schools have opened to supplement basic education. (ND)

TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSIAN EDUCATION

Decentralization

Differentiation

Democratization

Humanitarization

By Dale N. Titus
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
Presented at the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference
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"A teacher who loves his calling only will be a good teacher. A teacher who loves his pupils will be better than one who has read all the books but loves neither his calling nor his pupils. A teacher who combines love for his calling and his students will be a perfect teacher."

— Leo Tolstoi

The honor and privilege of participating in a two-week exchange lectureship at the Russian Diplomatic Academy in Moscow was afforded to me in 1995 through the International Studies program at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. In conjunction with the lectureship, I experienced Russian culture, explored Russian heritage through guided travel to historic sites, and conducted comparative field research into the rapidly changing Russian education system. This stimulating educational experience, which revealed the ongoing revolution in Russian education, is worth sharing with fellow educators.

The Russian Diplomatic Academy, a subsidiary of the Russian Foreign Ministry, trains foreign service officers for the Russian Federation and for other former Soviet Republics. Although diplomacy is important in the curriculum, approximately 80 percent of the class instruction is in the teaching of foreign languages. Students of American English and their professors are interested in all aspects of American culture and society. They especially want to learn all of the latest American slang and idiomatic expressions. It was heartening to discover that they were very much intrigued by the focus of my

presentations, the vital role which public education has played historically in shaping the United States of America.

In writing a proposal for the lectureship, careful consideration was given to the monumental changes which had been sweeping Russia since the August, 1991 democratic revolution. For a people who had lived a lifetime in a totalitarian state, the great difficulty in achieving a free society was recognized. As an educator, however, I knew instinctively that education would have to play a major role in the Russian transformation. The significance of an educated citizenry to the success of American democracy came to mind as I contemplated how the sharing of our experience might help the Russians build a democratic system of government.

The final lectureship proposal included a series of lectures believed to be of great interest to the Russians as they continue the development of democratic institutions. Horace Mann's vision of the common school and the vital role played by public education in shaping a free American society were prominent. The lecture series was designed around three main themes in American education: historic purposes (religious, political, social, economic), governance, and relationships among American society, culture, and education. The proposal also included a request to visit Russian schools and education ministries in order to conduct comparative research in conjunction with the lectureship.

Within walking distance of the Russian Diplomatic Academy, a magnet school for students between the ages of six and 18 which specialized in English language instruction was identified by my accommodating Russian hosts. An invitation was extended for me

to spend one entire day at the English Specialized School. My visit included class observations, meetings with administrators and faculty members, and the special opportunity to interact with students in three classes which I was asked to teach.

Experiencing the English Specialized School in Moscow induced a sensation of déja`vu. The traditional schooling reminded me of my basic education in Pennsylvania public schools of the 1950's. Well groomed, orderly students passed between classes without incident. Self-disciplined students sat passively in patterned rows. Direct instruction was used almost exclusively by teachers who were the center of the instructional process. Students were called upon for oral reading and for classroom recitation. Special needs students were invisible, simply because they were excluded or institutionalized. The only anomaly observed was that students beginning at age nine were learning a foreign language, English.

The classes which I taught were made up of juniors and seniors in their tenth and eleventh years of basic education. Interaction with these eager Russian teenagers was very stimulating. Their keen interest, genuine politeness, English fluency, and rich vocabulary impressed me greatly. As I surveyed the sparkling eyes and read facial expressions, I felt welcomed and energized by their nonverbal communication. Their questions reflected enthusiasm for my presentation concerning opportunities and admission requirements for international students to study at my parent institution, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Feedback from these students was indicative of the respect with which they honor their teachers and the reverence with which they value

education. I shall never forget my cordial reception, and I shall always cherish the hand-painted matryoshka dolls which were presented to me at the conclusion of my lessons.

After classes, I met with teachers in the faculty room of the English Specialized School. While conversing over tea, the realization came to me that teachers and faculty rooms are basically the same all over the world. Great teachers everywhere share the common bond of dedication to their students, and they gain fulfillment from the success of their protégés. Teachers' eyes glistened and their voices filled with emotion as they proudly detailed accomplishments of their graduates. Dedication and professional commitment were apparent, especially in their recent experience. Steadfastly, they have remained true to their calling although their standard of living has been eroded by inflation to the point where moonlighting at a second job has become necessary for survival. A close mentoring system for incoming faculty, designed to help new teachers experience the joy of teaching, was portrayed as the only way to retain beginning teachers.

Political, social, and economic upheavals in Russia resulting from the 1991 democratic revolution have, for the most part, impacted teachers adversely. Unfortunately, the recent economic transition to a market economy has caused underfunding of education. The resulting combination of overcrowded classrooms and slow growth of teachers' salaries, which is well below that of other workers, has precipitated a general teacher shortage. Recent changes in Russia have contributed to a disastrous loss of prestige for the teaching profession and have hampered the recruitment of education majors for pedagogical institutes.

Consultations with public school educators, Russian Diplomatic Academy staff personnel, and faculty members at Moscow State University confirmed my impressions of the Soviet system of education. The former Soviet Union, which achieved universal education, had a centralized education system with national standards and a uniform curriculum mandated by Moscow bureaucrats. In both basic and higher education, every subject was taught from a Marxist/Leninist perspective. Academic freedom, even in higher education, was unknown. All formal education was controlled by the state in a reconstructionist attempt to realize a mass society. With perestroika, however, themes formerly closed for discussion in schools penetrated the curricula of various academic disciplines. With freedom of speech enshrined in the 1993 Russian Federation Constitution, academic freedom is now a reality for Russian educators.

The law governing Russian education has been changed drastically in the 1990's. Article 43 of the Russian Federation Constitution refers directly to education, and the Russian Federation Law on Education was legislated in 1992. Basic general education is compulsory and a right guaranteed by the constitution. Tuition free higher education, with competitive admission based upon merit, is provided at government institutions. The constitution empowers the Russian Federation to establish federal standards for education. It also allows government support for different forms of education including school choice and vouchers for secular private education with parents making up any cost difference.

With quality public basic education accessible, private evening schools have sprung up. These private evening schools supplement rather than replace public basic

education. They give students a competitive edge for admission to Russian institutions of higher education, for study abroad, and for employment in global corporations. English, which accounts for almost 60 percent of foreign language instruction in Russia, is emphasized in the curriculum of private evening schools. This emphasis on English language instruction provides many employment opportunities for American teachers in Russian private schools.

Recent changes in Russian education were clarified for me by officials of the Russian Academy of Education, the scientific organization responsible for fundamental and applied research in the field of education. Formed in 1991 by resolution of the Russian Federation Government, the Russian Academy of Education has four regional departments, 14 experimental schools, and 23 institutes and scientific centers. Among 4,000 employees are 1,700 educational researchers. The Russian Academy of Education has a primary mission of exploring scientific foundations of education in Russia. It also takes into consideration social and economic changes, cultural traditions of Russia and other countries, development of educational sciences, and technological innovations in education. A huge responsibility of the Russian Academy of Education is the establishment of educational standards for all of Russia. Flexible national standards, which must be followed in all private and public schools, are still at the development stage. There is no longer one standard national examination. Locally prepared examinations are tailored to measure the quality of education in different schools. The international conference on the standards of education, sponsored by the Russian Academy of Education in October of 1995, reflected the dynamic nature of Russian

education in a main conference topic: "The role of education standards in democratization and humanization of education."

In Russia's fledgling democracy the communist ideal of a uniform basic education for all children has given way to differentiation, decentralization, and humanitarian concerns. Basic education of eleven years has been retained for students between the ages of six and 18 with the first nine years compulsory. For students in their last three years of basic education, some occupational, technical, and professional programs are offered. Magnet schools similar to the English Specialized School, with specialized programs built around single academic disciplines or career preparation for high school juniors and seniors, have become more popular. Seniors now are offered the opportunity to take advanced courses in their chosen higher education majors. The state supports secular private schools which educate approximately two percent of students, but the government is not obliged to assist religious schools financially. Educational programs now receive input from federal, regional, and local levels. The decentralization process has resulted in independent school planning by democratic school councils, school-based management, and diverse approaches to curriculum and instruction. Better than one half of the curriculum now is determined at the local level, and teaching methods have become a matter for the individual teacher to decide. The individual child's personality and unique needs now are viewed as the center of the pedagogical process rather than the lock step group orientation promoted by the former Soviet system of education.

Reflection upon my Russian experience led me to the full realization that the intense competition in education spawned by Sputnik, the Cold War, and totalitarian

Soviet society at last are relics of the past. I recognized how much we Americans have in common with the Russian people. I understood that I had witnessed a historic transformation of Russian education. Dildabeck, a foreign service officer from Kazakhstan, captured the essence and the spirit of change in the former Soviet republics when he described changes taking place as liberating the human potential through the creation of free societies.

Two significant questions relevant to the transformation of Russian education should be contemplated by all American educators interested in contributing to a more stable world order. What can we share from our national experience that will help the Russians develop a system of education which accommodates freedom and diversity, and how can we American educators help our Russian colleagues succeed in their valiant attempt to prepare children for life in a free society? Let us wish the Russians luck and success as they embark on a new path for so much depends on their efforts.

Dale Titus is associate professor of education at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. He recently participated in an exchange lectureship at the Russian Diplomatic Academy in Moscow.

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