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Education in transition: A critical analysis of the transition from communism to capitalism after the end of the cold war, how has it impacted on the education system in Russia?

This article explores the education system in Russia, concentrating on pre-school and primary education. The system is evaluated on a historical and contemporary comparison between today and under communist rule during the Cold War. The twentieth century was dominated by an ideological battle between Communism and Capitalism, after World War II this battle intensified and resulted in the Cold War. The Cold War was an ideological battle of East versus West, the world's two 'Superpowers,' the USA and the USSR were in ideological opposition (Heywood 2011: 38).

The Cold War was considered 'cold' because the ideological tensions did not result in a full scale military war; although there was a fear of nuclear war, the height of this was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The Cold War officially ended in 1990 and in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed (Heywood 2011: 41).

In the mid-twentieth century there was a powerful upsurge in the Russian education system which raised it to a world-leadership position (Andreev 2009: 20). Throughout this period the education system was very effective in reforming the outcomes of the Russian people by eradicating

illiteracy, training a work force, growing the scientific potential of the country, and providing universal education (Borisenkov 2007: 6). The Soviet School system focused on natural sciences and mathematics as vital to future success; consequently by the 1960s the system was considered world-leading for the outcomes it produced (Borisenkov 2007: 7). The Soviet system was considered world-leading not only for educational outcomes but also in terms of the attention it gave to the upbringing of children which was viewed as a state responsibility, this can be seen through its excellent pre-school education and provision (Borisenkov 2007: 7).

Soviet rule came into effect in 1917 after a revolution which overthrew the Tsarist autocracy; the perception is that prior to this was a period of 'darkness' with near total illiteracy, with the period after 1917 being categorised as a "flowering of enlightenment" and the Soviets are often wholly credited with these reforms (Andreev 2009: 21). However prior to this there were educational reforms taking place; in the 1880s there was a drive to teach literacy to 'peasants,' by 1889 there was over nine-thousand peasant schools demonstrating a rapid period of development (Andreev 2009: 24). Andreev (2009: 24) argues that this paved the way for education reforms in the Soviet era and acted as a 'revolution before the revolution'; therefore the cultural revolution of Russia cannot be attributed purely to Soviet rule.

Borisenkov (2007: 7) acknowledges the many successes of the Soviet school system but also pays consideration to the discerning contradictions in the systems development; arguing that there was total domination over the administration of the schools, indoctrinating the communist ideology in the teaching and upbringing of its children. Education was one of the ways the common people were indoctrinating into the benefits of the communist system (The Stalin Project 2008). The education system was not set up with the aim of encouraging individuality but of universal averaging and unification of thought to accomplish the social mandate (Holowinsky 1985: 139)

Borisenkov (2007: 8) further argues that although the education system provided people with knowledge it did not teach practical skills, which meant that graduates lacked initiative and independence. Soviet education was designed to promote uniformity and until 1988 was subject to a strict curriculum that offered no flexibility in pedagogy and was orientated towards a 'typical' child with no room for differentiation depending on individual abilities or needs. This philosophy extended through all the levels of the education system (Borisenkov 2007: 8; Holowinsky 1985: 139). From 1962 to 1985 pre-school education was compulsory through the "Program of Upbringing in the Kindergarten" which set to instil communist morality from an early age (Borisenkov 2007: 8). The aim of pre-school education was the indoctrination to collectivism and promoted collective activity through play, thought to be children's

‘work’ (Holowinsky 1985: 139).

From the mid 1980s onwards the education system underwent rapid reforms; indoctrination aspects of the system reduced to allow greater flexibility of the curriculum, freedom of ideological expression, the introduction of independent fee-paying schools, and individuality and creativity were encouraged (Borisenkov 2007: 9). However the reforms destabilised the system and created a feeling of crisis within educational institutions. The move toward freedom from school uniformity was welcomed, but resulted in a loss of control of the Ministry of Education; this, coupled with a funding crisis meant that teacher’s salaries were not paid and the system fell into a state of near collapse (Borisenkov 2007: 10).

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, Russia experienced a period of transition and a program of reforms continued in order to attempt to restore and stabilise the education system (Borisenkov 2007: 11). However financially things were still extremely difficult; schoolteachers became one of the lowest paid sectors; an inability to replace failing equipment and provide resources for learning had a profound effect on the quality of provision and the outcomes for children (Borisenkov 2007: 11).

These reforms continued for many years, and suffered from further budget cuts and a lack of clear direction resulting in many education professionals feeling undervalued and dissatisfied (Borisenkov 2007: 12–13). These reforms introduced a westernised attainment based approach to education which was heavily opposed by the Russian people (Borisenkov 2007: 12–14).

The reforms in the 1990s did not just affect the Education System, there was a complex interaction between Political will of the time and the Economic crisis that Russia faced. The reforms were pushing Russia into capitalist markets and resulted in Russia playing ‘catch up’ with the rest of the world (Nikandrov 2008: 59). They led to a deep recession whereby public spending fell sharply and directly impacted the quality of life of Russian citizens, the effects of which are still being felt with Russian life expectancy ranked 111th in the world, in line with countries such as Iraq (Nikandrov 2008: 59). This demographic issue is a cause for concern for President Putin; it poses a direct threat to the Human Capital of Russia and is reflected in low living standards and inequality (Nikandrov 2008: 59).

Russia then began to experience a period of economic growth and relative stability compared to recent years; this is due to the production of raw materials and high oil prices which affected Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which was growing at a rate of 6-7% a year and the Russian people hoped this would improve living conditions through greater expenditure on public services (Nikandrov 2008: 59). This is reflected by UNESCO (2008) who found that expenditure on education was 3.5% of GDP which is similar to other G8 countries.

However this period of economic growth came to a sudden stop with the worldwide recession; leading the OECD to predict hard times ahead for the Russian people as public spending was predicted to fall once again (BBC 2009).

Nonetheless President Putin actually promised an increase in public spending on education of 1.6% of GDP occurring after the next election; however sceptics view this as a vote-winning policy and are doubtful of this happening in reality (Forbes 2012).

In contemporary Russia the education system is structured as a three-tiered approach; Kindergarten education (ages three to six), followed by Primary education (ages six to ten), and basic secondary education (ages ten to fifteen). Following from basic secondary school is a choice between further education or vocational options (Ministry of Education and Science (MES) 2012a).

Pre-school education is not compulsory and free provision is not guaranteed by the state; however when children join primary school they are expected to have mastered certain skills (Oberemko 2006: 38). The responsibility for ensuring that children have achieved the necessary development rests with the family and is therefore dependent on socio-economic status (Oberemko 2006: 38). There are limited free places for Russia's most deprived children, but accessing these are challenging, many parents spoke of having to give 'bribes' to the administrators in order to secure places (Oberemko 2006: 39). The alternatives are a professional nanny (only for the most affluent), or taught at home by parents, which the majority of less wealthy families opt for; this in itself raises concerns about the quality of provision that parents are able to provide, dependent on their own education (Oberemko 2006: 39).

This differs greatly to preschool education in the Soviet era; the kindergarten movement took shape under Soviet rule and was seen as a vital link in the education system (UNESCO 2007: 4). The pedagogy of Soviet preschools was world-leading with such theorists as Vygotsky being influential in Russia and many other countries (UNESCO 2007: 4). The Kindergarten movement in Russia was heavily influenced by pioneers such as Froebel and Montessori and some of these practices remain today (UNESCO 2007: 2).

However despite the importance placed upon preschool development, after the removal of compulsory attendance only 57% of children had completed kindergarten when they entered formal schooling (Holowinsky 1985: 139). This figure is similar to present day Russia whereby around 60% of children attend kindergarten before formal schooling (UNESCO 2011).

The curriculum for Primary education in Russia aims to develop literacy, numeracy and general academic ability including theoretical thinking and 'self-control' (UNESCO 2011). A framework curriculum for

general education was adopted in 1993 and affords the flexibility for regional variance and institutional differences (UNESCO 2011). The core learning areas of the curriculum are Russian language, literature, arts, social studies, natural sciences, mathematics, technology and physical education (UNESCO 2011). Technology as a key component in the curriculum reflects the growing global trend of the salience of technology for the future development of societies.

The principles that underpin the education system, according to the Ministry of Education (MES 2012b) value holistic approaches to education, unification of cultural identity, universality, secularisation, freedom and autonomy. Furthermore the education system is said to be underpinned by principles of equality and inclusion, stating that formal education is provided universally regardless of race, nationality, language, gender, health or wealth (MES 2012b). However these notions are representing political ideology and the rhetoric, and may not reflect the reality of the situation for the Russian people

In fact the Ministry of Education then goes on to contradict itself in a very shocking and extreme way by describing it's approaches to children with additional needs stating that special conditions are provided "to correct the abnormalities of their development, and to become socially adapted" (MES 2012b). This statement is contradictory of the previous statement on equality and inclusion, and is scandalous for those who value inclusion and diversity in the classroom.

The underpinning notion of education unifying a national cultural identity is not completely dissimilar to the notion of indoctrination to particular cultural and ideological values experienced under Soviet rule (Borisenkov 2007: 7). Nevertheless the education system today is very different on the basis of economic factors; contemporary Russia has struggled financially to support the education system and the modernisation that formed part of the collapse of the communist economic system.

There are some environmental issues which impact the provision of education; Russia is a vast country and sparsely populated in places; the quality of provision of rural schools has been disputed (Gurianova 2006: 58). Under Soviet rule the practice was to create a standardised provision regardless of location; however today's practice is more flexible to allow differentiation of regional difference and access, to ensure the universality of education (Gurianova 2006: 58–60). Nonetheless education is moving back toward standardisation with the influence of globalisation.

The outcomes that the system produces today are inferior to the results produced under the Soviet system. Throughout the Cold War, the USSR was considered a Superpower in terms of its defence capability, its political influence and its economic stability (Heywood 2011: 39). This was reflected in education which produced highly educated citizens and

scientific prowess as demonstrated by Russia's contribution to the 'Space Race' (Andreev 2009: 20). Conversely there have been concerns about the quality of education in contemporary Russia over the knowledge, skills, abilities, and creative development of its citizens (Zhlokov 2010: 42). This is resulting in a lack of social mobility, putting further financial strain on the government; Russia lacks the Human Capital to drive its development in line with other westernised countries (Zhlokov 2010: 43).

Dronov and Kondakov (2010: 77) suggest that the future of the Russian education system is going to rely on further modernisation and reforms, arguing these reforms need to move beyond economics and involve an overhaul of socio-cultural aspects. This will produce a new administration, resulting from complex interactions between social, economic and political relations (Dronov and Kondakov 2007: 77). This is beginning to be addressed by a national initiative named "Our New School" which among socio-cultural and economic changes is introducing national examinations to ensure greater quality and accountability (Lebedev 2010: 3–4).

Inequality in provision has resulted in a lack of opportunities; investment into education and human capital is not effective, resulting in high poverty rates and low economic output (Nureev 2010: 3). Investment in Human Capital is seen through investment in education, by creating an educated workforce, citizens are able to provide for themselves putting less strain on the economy and creating economic productivity, ultimately resulting in a growth of GDP (Nureev 2010: 4–6).

Education is now a top priority for national projects as seen by the "Our New School" reform; however the details of such reforms have been highly debated and contentious. Particularly debateable is national examinations and whether these reforms are indicative of the influence of globalisation (Filippov 2011: 3). Arguments in favour of the reforms and a 'globalised model' are in favour of the democratisation and accessibility of the system (Filippov 2011: 4). Conversely Filippov (2011: 4) argues that this will result in standardisation at the expense of quality and flexibility of valuing student's unique abilities. Filippov (2011: 4) suggests that these reforms fit into a framework of a global socio-cultural trend of 'McDonaldisation' as described by Ritzer, which has spread into a number of social spheres, including education. There are four basic criterion of McDonaldisation; efficiency, calculability, control of quality and predictability (Filippov 2011: 4). Globalisation of public services means that they are a part of a society focused on mass consumption (Filippov 2011: 4). The goals of education fit into the four requirements of McDonaldisation; it has to be efficient to achieve the results quickly; this is seen through standardised testing and acquisition of academic knowledge purely to pass the examination. It is calculable, seen as a quantitative economic based calculation as reflected by the Human Capital Model, the 'investment' in

education has to be meaningful by producing self-sufficient employed citizens (Filippov 2011: 5). There is control of quality which is reflected in curriculum documents and the standardisation of testing and there is predictability in the results (Filippov 2011: 6). Filippov (2011, p.8) argues against these criteria for reforms saying that it deprives education of variation, culture and creativity. However the globalised model is seen in most Westernised countries and is considered a vital part of integration with Western culture (Fillippov 2011: 9). Despite these reservations Fillippov (2011: 10) argues that Russia needs to adopt a McDonaldised model of education in order to provide universal accessibility of quality provision in order to compete in global markets, bolster GDP and create greater social-mobility. Furthermore Onokoi (2005: 51–60) suggests that Russia is on a path of European integration in regards to education, but innovations must be carefully considered towards the progressive development of the education system without the destruction of its national, cultural and pedagogical traditions.

This article has reviewed the education system of Russia under Soviet Rule and has seen that it was effective and classed as world-leading in terms of universality and increased rates of literacy. Soviet education valued not just academic ability but also general childhood care and upbringing which was a role for the state. However this article has demonstrated that the political will behind the education system was of indoctrination into a communist worldview and morality. Communist rule was focused on a unified Russia, with no room for individuality, valuing society as a collective.

This article has evaluated the current education system which has seen ongoing reforms since the 1980s. These reforms took education into a more individualised, holistic approach. There have been economic issues which have seen public spending on education fall, bringing the system to a brink of near collapse. Further to this there have been concerns over the quality of provision of education which is not allowing for social-mobility and not increasing human capital.

The latest reforms are moving Russia back into an education system based upon standardisation; this is reflected in the national initiative “Our New School” and the introduction of standardised testing. This is marking a change to a globalised McDonaldised model of education that Ritzer described whereby standardisation is creating better accountability with the aim of improving the quality of provision and boosting Human Capital to ultimately boost GDP. Nevertheless the globalisation of education in Russia has come under criticism as it does not value cultural or individual diversity.

Overall the Russian education system has seen many changes over the last thirty years. The influences on the education system are multi-faceted and complex. Economics have played a major part in the reforms of the system with historically a severe lack of funding; however public

expenditure is now in line with the rest of G8. Political will and ideology has had a major impact on the system, moving from communist collective rule to a more westernised approach valuing capitalist ideology. Furthermore the need for Russia to compete in global markets has led to ongoing cultural and education reforms, with a goal of increasing human capital and allowing for upwards social mobility.

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