Educational Reforms in the Soviet Union

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Introduction

Educational Reform in the Soviet Union is the 14th in our Occasional Papers series and the first one by an author, Professor Delbert Long of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who has not been directly associated with the Comparative Education Center at SUNY-Buffalo. We felt that Professor Long's subject, educational reform in the Soviet Union, deserves the kind of thorough attention that is exemplified in this paper. Debate concerning the nature and implementation of a thoroughgoing series of reforms is now taking place in the Soviet Union and these discussions have implications for current controversy about similar questions in the United States. One of the major current Soviet concerns is for the links between education and work and the adaptation of education to a rapidly changing labor market. In this regard, this echoes American worries about how education is to fit a changing economy and job market. Developments in Soviet education have not been highlighted in the Western education literature, not even in the field of comparative education, and it is important that we keep abreast of new trends in this important country. It is, in a way, hopeful that even a country with a centrally planned economic system has acknowledged problems in tailoring education to the job market and to vocational needs. It is also significant that the current wave of reform

in the Soviet Union has received such high level attention. Delbert Long provides an excellent overview of one of the most important debates regarding Soviet educational policy and practice to take place in several decades. His analysis has relevance to discussions in the United States as well.

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Educational Reform in the Soviet Union

On 28 August 1918 the founder of the Soviet state, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, proclaimed that a public school system "divorced from life and politics is lies and hypocrisy" and that the new school system must be "part of the struggle for overthrowing the bourgeoisie."[1] This behest did not fall on deaf ears. The Soviet school system is, and has been since its inception, a vital instrument of state policy. It is used by the Communist Party leaders not only to provide the state with the trained manpower necessary to make it an ever greater industrial and military power, but to mold youth into adults who do not question the right of Party leaders to control all property, control all institutions, control all forms of mass media--in essence, to control the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people. In giving the school system such an awesome responsibility, it is little wonder that Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev have given careful attention to educational matters and have mounted periodic campaigns to reform their country's educational system.

The first such campaign was initiated almost immediately after Lenin and his Bolshevik followers seized power in 1917. The tsarist school system inherited by the Bolsheviks was clearly inappropriate for a revolutionary state founded on communist principles. Many Bolsheviks considered it a despicable institution. They condemned the

hostile relationship between students and teachers and the excessive amount of homework and harsh punishment, unreasonable examinations, rote learning and drill.[2] But what most raised the ire of the Bolsheviks was their adamant conviction that the tsarist school system was an elitist, dual-track, religious- and academic-dominated system that served exclusively the interests of the privileged classes.[3]

The tsarist general education system was quickly dismantled and replaced with a single-track, secular "United Labor School" that, in theory if not always in practice,

* introduced free and compulsory general and technical education ("instruction in the theory and practice of the principal branches of production") for all boys and girls up to the age of seventeen;
* eliminated textbooks, homework, grades, examinations, corporal punishment, and teacher-dominated lessons;
* based its moral upbringing of children on communist, rather than religious, ethics;
* replaced lectures with more active, progressive methods of instruction.[4]

The progressive method of instruction most enthusiastically promoted by the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) and its Commissar, Anatoli K. Lunacharskii, was the complex theme. Complex themes, such as "Work in the Home" and "My Community," were supposed to be socially significant and relevant to the child's environment and personal needs and interests. Each theme was to be studied under the broad headings of labor, nature, and society. Proponents of the complex

theme assumed that the 3 Rs and knowledge of the academic disciplines would be picked up incidentally during the study of one of the themes. Students in the United Labor School were also to be taught simple labor skills and were expected to engage in such socially useful labor as planting shrubs around the school and caring for the school vegetable garden. School children were to have a voice in running the school and teachers were to be their friends and helpers.[5] Such a school was supposed to reflect some of the educational ideas of Marx and Engels and of such progressive Russian and American educators as, respectively, Konstantin D. Ushinsky and John Dewey.

By the mid 1920s, the laissezfaire educational system established by the Narkompros began to receive sharp criticism from parents, teachers, labor leaders, and Party members. As a result, from 1924 to 1928 certain modifications in the United Labor School were made that enhanced the systematic organization and teaching of basic knowledge.[6] But, with the inauguration of the first five-year plan in 1928, which stressed rapid industrialization of the country, and the subsequent rallying of young people to help meet the objectives of the plan, these modifications were held in abeyance during the so-called "Cultural Revolution Period" (1928-1931). During the Cultural Revolution, the project method was widely utilized in the schools. This method was based on the assumption that students would gain knowledge while working with other students and adults in achieving one of the goals of the five-year plan, such as draining swamps (to eliminate disease) and eradicating drunkenness and illiteracy.[7] It was no doubt rewarding and exhilarating for youngsters to play a significant role in combatting

serious societal problems, but they were not learning mathematics and the sciences very well, and the emerging, industrial economy demanded thousands of highly trained engineers with a solid knowledge of these disciplines.

In a series of decrees in the early and middle 1930s,[8] the Soviet state and Communist Party insisted that schools provide students with systematic knowledge of the traditional academic disciplines. Students were to be obedient and to respect the authority of teachers. The project method was repudiated and the lecture became the basic teaching method. Grades, homework, examinations, textbooks were reintroduced, and grades eight and nine, which during the late 1920s had been transferred to technical schools, were restored to the general education school. (Grade ten was soon added.) The upper grades of the rejuvenated general education school were geared to academically talented students who were trained specifically for entrance into an institution of higher learning. And, finally, in 1937, labor training was officially abolished from the general education school curriculum.[9] In short, the new school, which with minor modifications remained intact until shortly after Joseph V. Stalin's death in 1953, had many of the same features as the detested tsarist school.

In the early 1950s, it became increasingly clear to Soviet leaders that the critical need of the economy was no longer for a greater number of university trained people (the educational system was now providing an adequate supply of such people), but for a greater number of semi-skilled laborers and middle-level trained technicians.[10] Yet the Soviet secondary school continued to train their students in the upper

grades only for admission into an institution of higher learning. This practice was increasingly subjected to criticism by political leaders. By the last half of the 1950s, the criticism had greatly intensified and become more blunt. Without mincing words, Nikita S. Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, and members of the Central Committee condemned Stalin's ten-year school for being snobbish, bookish, and remote from life.

Such condemnation was reflected in several decrees that demanded that the ten-year school become an eleven-year school that would provide students in grades nine through eleven not only with a general education but with a vocational skill that would enable most of them to assume a job in the local economy immediately upon graduation.[11] Those students who did not desire to continue their education in the secondary school could, upon completion of grade eight, enter a vocational school or a technicum, or go to work. Appropriately, the secondary school soon got a new name that, though ponderous, reflected what its functions were supposed to be: "Secondary General Education Labor Polytechnical School with Production Training."

In reflecting on the highlights of educational reform during the first four decades of Soviet rule, it is tempting to conclude that educational reform movements during this period consisted only in doing almost the opposite of what was done before. There is obviously some basis for this conclusion, but it must be heavily qualified for two reasons. First, educational reform proposals embodied in various Soviet decrees and resolutions are often imperfectly implemented, if not virtually ignored, in practice. Most Soviet teachers during the 1920s, for

example, were totally bewildered by the methodological directives from Narkompros and simply closed their doors and continued to teach as they had done in the tsarist schools.[12] The most glaring example, however, is the 1917 goal, previously noted, of providing free, compulsory education for all children up to the age of seventeen. Implementation of these ambitious goals has turned out to be a long, tedious struggle. Fees have been charged parents during a good portion of this struggle. Furthermore, in the 1930-31 school year, young people in the Russian Republic averaged only 3.9 years of schooling in urban areas and 3.0 years in the rural areas.[13] As late as 1972, the U.S.S.R. Minister of Education complained that fourteen to fifteen percent of Soviet children did not complete the daytime eight-year general education school.[14] These examples are given not to demean Soviet educational achievements, which are considerable, but to emphasize that a person should be very cautious in equating Soviet legislation on educational reforms with actual implementation of the proposed reforms.

The second reason for qualifying the above conclusion is that it overlooks the persistent influence on Soviet educational policy of such long-standing educational principles as:

* use of the school as an important weapon for promoting policies of the Communist Party;
* coordination of the work of the school with youth, community, and political organizations, and with industrial and agricultural enterprises;
* combination of polytechnical labor education with general education;

* combination of polytechnical labor education and aesthetic and general education with moral education;
* equation of moral education with the communist ethical system delineated by Lenin;
* union of academic and ethical knowledge with practical application in "socially useful" activities.

Each of these principles has been interpreted and implemented in the schools in different ways over the years--sometimes stressed, sometimes de-emphasized, sometimes ignored--but not one has ever been abandoned in theory.

Since the Khrushchev educational reforms of the late 1950s, there have been a number of educational decrees and resolutions, but none has called for a sudden, radical shift in educational policy. In general, educational legislation in the Soviet Union the past twenty-five years might be viewed as a continuing effort to improve not only the same phases of the educational system that would receive attention in any capitalist country (improvement of curriculum content, textbooks, teaching aids, education of teachers, etc.) but to implement in a more comprehensive, coordinated manner the six educational principles just mentioned. The Khrushchev reforms represented the first all-out effort to implement simultaneously all these principles, but for a number of reasons--the most important perhaps being competition for students among directors of general education, vocational, and technical schools, resistance of parents and plant managers, shoddy equipment, decline in scholarship, and lack of financial resources and adequately trained teachers--these reforms fell far short of expectations and a number of

adjustments were soon made. The eleven-year general education school, for example, reverted back to a ten-year school, and academic education in the senior grades was again emphasized and production training in most of the schools was eliminated.

Soviet political and educational leaders of the 1980s are again making a determined effort to improve all aspects of their educational system and to implement in practice, in a more coordinated, comprehensive manner, the six principles listed above. This effort has been receiving national attention in the past two years in the Soviet Union. According to G. A. Aliyev, a member of the Communist Party Politburo, 120 million people took part in discussion of the Soviet state's initial draft of the proposed educational reforms.[15] Since there are only a little over 276 million people in the Soviet Union, it is questionable that four out of every ten Soviet people participated in these discussions. But we should accept this claim with the same generosity as Huckleberry Finn's assessment of Mark Twain's veracity in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Said Huckleberry: "There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."

Recent Soviet educational reform proposals are outlined in general terms in the 12 April 1984 legislation titled "Basic Guidelines for the Reform of General Education and Vocational Schools" (henceforth cited as "Guidelines"), and in more specific terms in subsequent resolutions designed to implement some of the proposals of the "Guidelines."[16]

The Khrushchev educational reforms attempted to implement immediately substantive content and structural changes, some of which represented a radical departure from previous educational policy. In

contrast, the "Guidelines" and companion resolutions provide a long-range strategy for gradual implementation over a five- to ten-year period of innovations that have been for a number of years an integral part of Soviet educational thought, and on a limited or experimental basis, practice.

In this paper I describe and discuss the major components of the "Guidelines" and subsequent educational reform documents. The paper is divided into four sections: 1) Structure of the Public School System; 2) Polytechnical Labor Education; 3) Instructional Process: Content and Methodology; 4) Recruitment and Training of Teachers.

Structure of the Public School System

At present Soviet children begin school at the age of seven and attend the same general education school (obshcheobrazovatel'naia shkola) through the eighth grade. This school is organized into primary education (nachal'naia shkola), grades one through three; incomplete secondary (nachal'naia sredniaia shkola), grades four through eight; and complete secondary (sredniaia obshcheobrazovatel'naia shkola), grades nine and ten (eleven, in national schools where the native language is not Russian). All students must complete ten years of general education, but the last two years may be completed either in the general education school, a vocational school, a secondary specialized educational institution (srednee spetsial'noe uchebnoe zavedenie), or in an evening or correspondence school (respectively, vechernaia shkola, zaochnaia shkola).

The vocational schools are one- to three-year institutions. The three-year institutions provide students with a trade and a complete secondary education. Eighth grade graduates attending the short-term vocational schools must complete their secondary education in an evening or correspondence school.

The secondary specialized educational institutions, often called technicums (tekhnikumy), are four-year institutions that provide students with a complete secondary education and prepare them for a highly skilled job such as a medical technician or an elementary school teacher. Upon graduation from the eighth grade, most young people complete their secondary education in the general education school; but about forty percent enroll either in a vocational school or a secondary specialized educational institution, or go directly to work and complete their secondary education in a correspondence or evening school.[17]

The "Guidelines" call for three major changes in the structure just described. First, children will start school at age six, rather than seven, and will be required to complete eleven, rather than ten, years of general education. Elementary school will comprise grades one through four; incomplete secondary, grades five through nine; complete secondary, grades ten and eleven (twelve). Second, the vocational schools will all be consolidated into a single, relatively new, institution called a secondary vocational-technical school (srednee professional'-notekhnicheskoe uchilishche). The length of study in this school for ninth grade graduates of the general education school will be three years; for eleventh grade graduates, one year. Third, in order to receive a secondary school diploma, all students--even those in the

general education school--must acquire a skill proficiency in some common occupation. Thus, for all young people in the Soviet Union a universal eleven-year general education program is to be combined with universal vocational training.[18] Plans call for

* doubling the amount of time devoted to labor education in the general education school;[19]
* doubling the enrollment in vocational schools and technicums.[20]

There are several explanations for this strong emphasis of the Soviets on labor education:

* Labor education is an integral part of Marxist ideology. In the Manifesto of the Communist Party, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels proposed that academic education be combined with technical education.[21]
* In the Soviet Union labor is basic to moral development. As Lunacharskii pointed out in 1918, "A really thoughtful and experienced pedagogue cannot help but note that to all three questions: how to educate the will, how to form character, how to develop a spirit of solidarity--the answer is one magic word: labor."[22]
* The Soviet Union is currently experiencing a severe labor shortage.[23]
* Roughly two-thirds of the graduates of the Soviet secondary general education school go directly to work in some enterprise without any vocational training.[24]

* The annual growth of the economy is slowing down from about four percent annual growth in the 1970s to about two to three percent in the 1980s.[25]
* The productivity of Soviet workers is only fifty to sixty percent that of American workers, and agricultural productivity is only twenty to twenty-five percent of the U.S. level.[26]

The poor productivity of Soviet workers, of course, is not a new phenomenon. As Lenin noted years ago, "The Russian is a bad worker compared with people in advanced countries. . . . The task that the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is--learn to work."[27] The urgency and magnitude of this task for Soviet leaders have not diminished over the years. The late Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko, for example, constantly reminded his countrymen that "one should never forget the simple truth: to live better, we must work better,"[28] and Mikail Gorbachev in speech after speech drives home the idea that "quality of output should be a matter of not just professional, but national pride."[29]

Polytechnical Labor Education

As defined by Marx, polytechnical labor education "imparts the general principles of all processes of production, and simultaneously initiates the child and young person in the practical use and handling of the elementary instruments of all trades. . . ."[30] Marx's assumption that polytechnism should combine "teaching and learning about economic production with practical work experience"[31] was endorsed by Lenin and his education Commissar, A. Lunacharskii. It is a simple concept