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# **SCHOOL SYSTEM AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN A HIGHLY STRATIFIED POST- SOVIET SOCIETY: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT**

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## **SCHOOL SYSTEM AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN A HIGHLY STRATIFIED POST-SOVIET SOCIETY: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT**

This article presents the results of a study on Russian education policy. It explores how compulsory and secondary education meet contemporary social challenges, and how they should be adjusted to account for acute social inequality.

The authors present evidence of the growing social polarization in post-Soviet Russia. This is discussed against the current situation in compulsory and secondary education, which is characterized by strong differentiation between schools in terms of their performance, enrollment, and availability of resources. They further discuss the possible impact of major turns in Russia's education policy on the processes of social stratification, and whether it was effective enough to provide equal access to quality education for all social groups.

The analysis concludes by making several suggestions about how education policy in Russia needs to be adjusted for it to become more targeted and relevant to the context in which its education institutions operate..

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Keywords: educational inequality, social inequality, education policy, school social context, school resources, academic performance, post-soviet Russia, compulsory education, secondary education

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## Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that an uneven distribution of wealth in society together with a strong education stratification have a profound negative impact on the level and quality of education received by individuals (Alexander et al. 1987; Gambetta 1987; Attewell 2001; Betts and Shkolnik 2000; Veselý 2012). Recent findings from several international surveys, such as PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA, suggest that these factors also apply to Russia (Mullis ., Martin I, Kennedy , Foy , 2007; OECD 2007, 2010, 2012).

However, little is known about the extent of education stratification in Russia and inequality of access to quality education. This is important as it corresponds to the evaluation of Russia's education policies over the last 20 years in their capacity to mitigate the widely acknowledged association between academic performance and socioeconomic background (Veselý 2012).

A number of studies reveal that education policies carried out from the end of 1990s to the beginning of 2000s in a number of other countries, and which were based primarily on neo-liberal and neo-managerialist approaches, have failed to effectively reduce education inequality, or at least avoid its adverse effects (Apple 2001; Little 2000; Crossley 2000; Kliebard 1986; Forsey and Davies 2008; Walford 2006, etc).

On the other hand, there are certain cases of national education policies (e.g. in Sweden, Finland, Spain) which have proven quite effective both in equalizing educational opportunities for children with different social backgrounds and in improving education achievement (OECD 2007). And the number of such successful cases is growing. According to PISA 2012, 9 out of 39 participating countries demonstrated a high level of educational equality that went along with high education achievements (OECD 2013).

Tucker (2011) identifies several common features of such successful education policies which promote equality of opportunity without necessarily sacrificing the high quality of learning. Generally speaking, these features include the more demanding standards of teaching curriculum and teacher skills to be established in all education institutions. For instance, Finland, which is often the illustration of such policy, has ensured high standards in all of its education facilities with targeted support for students who experience problems with learning, students with special needs and students from disadvantaged families (Sahlberg 2011).

Let us now draw attention to the Russian case, the evolution of its education policy in the post-transition period and the impact it had on the structure of social inequality. Russia appears to be of particular interest to the international debate because of the particular historical and institutional context in which these processes have developed. Namely, it was the core country of the Soviet Union – an ambitious project to implement socialism as a distinct model of society. One of the essential principles on which this model was built was to ensure the equality of all citizens. Equality in access to education was one of its major imperatives. It was radically different from the policies which were at that time implemented in most Western countries, where, according to Tucker (2011), equal access to high quality education was not such a major concern.

Soviet social policies were also different from those of the modern welfare states. They not only provided free or subsidized public health and education benefits, but also allocated greater resources to students in need of academic intervention (Sahlberg 2011). However, with Russia's transition to a market economy, all of this changed practically overnight, leading to a steep rise in social inequality and deprivation for the larger part of the Russian population. This, of course, not

only resulted in serious education stratification, but became a major challenge for Russia's education policy.

This study is based on the assumption that the rise in inequality among the population observed in post-Soviet Russia in parallel with the differentiation that took place among education institutions meant that schools have stopped performing the function of "equalizing life chances." In contrast, they have started acting as means for consolidating and reproducing social inequality. Under these conditions, it has become important to question the possible, necessary (effective) and actual reactions to education policy in this evolving situation.

The following are the main research and practical questions we attempt to answer in this article:

- What is the state of inequality in wealth and income, poverty and deprivation in post-Soviet Russia?
- What is the current level of differentiation in the institution of school?
- How has education policy responded to the challenge of rising differentiation between schools, and how has this impacted education inequality?
- What foreign models of education policy have proven to be effective in protecting against rising education inequality or helping reduce it when there is differentiation among schools?
- What recommendations can be made to develop a new political agenda for Russian education?

We use the above questions as the basis for the design of our study and the structure of this article.

In the first part we review some findings from research on Russia's transformation in the post-Soviet period related to issues such as poverty, deprivation and social inequality as a whole, to describe the context in which its education system developed. We then present evidence from our own research about the differentiation and stratification of schools in Russian regions. After that we describe the changing content of education policy in post-Soviet Russia, particularly with respect to its impact on education stratification and inequality based on the analysis of strategic political documents and several expert interviews. Finally, we discuss the limitations and challenges for Russia's current education policies in dealing with these problems and how these challenges should be met.

## **Social and educational inequality in post-Soviet Russia**

Although a certain extent of social inequality was acknowledged in Soviet Russia, it was far from being such an articulate phenomenon as it was in most Western societies (Quality and Way of Life of the Population of Russia 1989-2009, 2011). There is also broad consensus among both Russian and foreign scholars that access to education (and, consequentially, social mobility) was more meritocratic in socialist Russia than in advanced capitalist countries (Yanowitch and Fisher 1973; Teckenberg 1977; Radaev and Shkaratan 1996; Frumin 1998). And although many of them recognize that certain social transitions (particularly to the upper echelons of the social ladder) were administered by the state and political elite itself (both through direct assignments and discrimination in access to elite education institutions), the majority of young people in the Soviet Union still enjoyed relatively equal opportunities in access to general, vocational and in some cases even higher education.

The situation changed radically in the beginning of the 1990s with Russia's market transition. This led it to adopt a completely new form of social stratification characterized by

higher levels of differentiation in terms of social and economic resources (Shkaratan, Radaev 1996). The excessively uneven distribution of wealth in today's Russia is widely recognized as one of its major social problems (Quality and Way of Life of the Population of Russia 2011). And although it ranks among averagely unequal countries according to its Gini coefficient for income distribution (being, for instance, less equal than USA, Brazil, Mexico and dozens of developing countries in Africa and Latin America), it ranks among the most unequal in terms of wealth inequality with the wealthiest 10% holding 87.6% of the national wealth (Global Wealth Report 2012).

The impressive growth in affluence of the richest part of Russian society took place at the cost of a sharp rise in poverty for the rest of population. In the 1990s absolute poverty peaked at nearly a third of the population, and it only began to decline at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (reaching the tolerable 13% in 2011) (Oxfam Policy Brief 2012; Tikhonova 2013). However, relative poverty (i.e. those with income below 60% of the median) is still high, accounting for 21%-33% of the population according to different estimates (Tikhonova 2013; Ovcharova 2013).

For larger parts of the Russian population poverty is also reinforced with situation of deprivation, i.e. lack of access to quality health services, social care for the elderly and children, and limited access to education opportunities. Families that consider themselves poor express pessimism about the possibility of improving life chances for their children (Ovcharova 2013). Specific features of poverty in Russia, uncharacteristic of many other countries, include higher level of child poverty (Report on Development 2010: p. 35) and the phenomenon of the 'new poor', i.e. people who are poor even if they are formally employed (that is employment itself ceases to guarantee protection from poverty) (Yaroshenko 2010).

Such dramatic change in social inequality could not but affect the situation with education and its function. Several authors have stressed that high social inequality seriously undermines meritocratic social selection, especially in the education system (Young 1958; Johnson 2006; Meroe 2012). This has been exactly the case with post-Soviet Russia where education became a factor of reproduction and perpetuation of social advantages (and disadvantages) rather than a factor which equalizes opportunity for different social groups (Danilova et al. 2004: p. 202; Krivocheev et al. 2004; Roshchina et al. 2006).

*De jure* the Russian Constitution and the Education Law guarantee universal access to free schooling. And according to formal indicators the school system in Russia ensures such access at scales comparable to those of countries with similar levels of economic development (Report of the Expert Group 2012: p. 27). However, *de facto* the Russian system of compulsory and secondary education appears to have adopted features of the Anglo-Saxon model, whereby education is implicitly separated into elite and mass segments which differ significantly with respect to the quality of education in spite of the formal similarity. Between these segments there exists a radical difference in the amount of human, cultural and social capital, which are required to successfully accomplish the learning process. A characteristic feature of modern Russia is that its elite education is highly selective not only with respect to ability, but also (and at times to a greater extent) with respect to social and economic status, access to information, social connections and other non-cognitive advantages (Shishkin 2005). Such a situation makes it particularly difficult for the more disadvantaged families to secure better life chances for their children, thus enhancing the already high levels of social inequality and leading to a vicious cycle of its perpetuation and accumulation across generations.

According to findings from PISA 2009 and PISA 2012 Russia's index of social inclusion is significantly below the OECD average (OECD, 2010, 2012). Moreover, students from

disadvantaged families tend to concentrate in schools with fewer resources, both financial and human (OECD 2010; Konstantinovskiy et al. 2006). There is also evidence that elite and regular secondary schools in Russia vary significantly in terms of the academic performance of their students measured by the results of the Unified State Examination<sup>4</sup> (USE) (FIPI 2008), as well as chances of being admitted to higher education institutions (Roshchina 2005). According to our own studies, where we focused on how social contexts promote disparities in academic performance between Russian schools, we have also shown that school performance consistently depends on the social composition of the student body, and that this association is reinforced by the fact that disadvantaged students indeed tend to concentrate in schools with fewer resources (Pinskaya 2011; Yastrebov et al. 2013).

### **Differentiation and Stratification of Schools in the Russian Regions.**

We employed statistical analysis to analyze interscholastic differentiation in education results and what impact they have on the characteristics of the demographics/student body and resources of schools, and the regions in which they are located. The survey that we use in our research was conducted at the school level in two regions, the Moscow Region and Yaroslavl Region. The statistical analysis was based on data from 1,294 schools.

The first priority was to compile a list of performance indicators. All indicators were divided into several concepts:

- Unified State Examination (USE) results
- Results of administrative testing (AT)
- Measures of student performance
- Results of academic competition
- Grade Point Average (GPA) breakdown

The proposed approach to defining weak schools was based on the typology of schools using the chosen parameters. As previously mentioned, we analyzed education performance indicators exclusively. To assign types, we chose the SPSS two-step cluster analysis, which is based on the estimated distances according to the method of maximum likelihood. This allows us to include in our analysis both continuous and discrete variables, and effectively work with large amounts of data.

Further analysis was carried out in connection with the socioeconomic characteristics of students in the school, the school's material and human resources, and its location.

Accounting for socioeconomic differences in evaluating school efficiency has become a tradition in many developed countries (see *Measuring Improvements ... 2008*: pp.135-137 for a list of contextual school data recorded in some OECD countries). The typical characteristics of

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<sup>4</sup>Unified State Examination (USE) is a universal federal exam in Russia (or, in fact, a series of exams in different disciplines) taken by secondary school graduates. It serves as an entrance exam for higher education institutions. Prior to its introduction each school had the right to administer its own final exams, however, their results could not serve as the only necessary criteria to be admitted to other education institutions, i.e. universities had the right to develop and implement their own forms of entrance examinations to decide upon admission of candidates apart from taking school grades into account.

families (or aggregate social characteristics of the student body) accounted for in their national evaluation systems usually include parental education level and family income. In some countries these are substituted with data on various forms of social support received directly by students or their families (e.g. the eligibility status in the National School Lunch program in the U.S. [Improving the Measurement of Socioeconomic Status ... 2012]). Accounting for ethnic minority, migrant status and/or competence in the native language among students is another tradition in evaluating school performance and research in inequality of educational attainment (e.g., Borjas, 1995).

Assumptions about the impact of territorial factors are based on studies of neighborhood effects in the works of a number of authors (Wilson, 1987; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Evans, Oates, and Schwab, 1992). In our study, we tried to answer the question of whether Russian schools face more socioeconomic-related difficulties based on territorial location.

Our analysis of the relationship between the success of the schools and the resources at their disposal relies on the tradition of research evaluating the same connection – how the performance of schools is affected by the resources they possess, e.g. educational facilities, financial support, quality of teachers and school programs, etc. (Hedges, Laine, Greenwald 1994; Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain 2005; Rockoff 2004).

The indicators characterizing school resources were broken up into several concepts:

- Financing
- Material and technical support
- Staffing
- Special training

Official school statistics served as the source of information for evaluating these factors.

In order to reveal the influence of characteristics of the territory on the achievements of the school, we used the following available statistical data from municipalities. This data characterize the social structure and economic condition of the territory where the school is located.

- *Total population* (i.e. the size of settlement, an approximation of its urbanization)
- *The area of deteriorated housing as a share of total housing stock* (an approximation of local housing conditions)
- *The share of families receiving state social support to pay for housing and communal services* (an approximation of local household deprivation)
- *The number of healthcare personnel per 1,000 people* (an approximation of access to local medical services)
- *Street area provided with lighting as a share of total street area* (an approximation of the state and security of local urban facilities)
- *Average monthly nominal wage in for-profit and non-profit organizations* (an approximation of the state of local economy and household earnings)

The analysis confirmed a differentiation of schools in terms of quality of educational outcomes, resources, and territorial characteristics. The next step in the research carried out from 2011-2013 was the isolation of contextual characteristics and determination of their presence or absence in relation to the academic results at the schools. We analyzed the relationship between average results on the USE and (1) socioeconomic characteristics of students and their families; (2) material and human resources at the schools; and (3) the characteristics of the municipalities or territories in which the schools are located.

This analysis leads us to conclude that the education outcomes of schools are consistently associated with several characteristics of their context.

We summarize the results of the first phase of the study as follows:

- In general, the mass of schools is divided into those that firmly demonstrate good results on a complex of education indicators, and those consistently unsuccessful schools that for a number of years are unable to mitigate their shortcomings. A part of schools consistently occupies a middle position.
- As a rule, schools with high results are usually prosperous in every respect: they have a favorable social context and adequate human and financial resources. These are predominantly urban schools, a large portion of which are lyceums and gymnasia.
- Schools with low educational outcomes tend to serve children from the most disadvantaged families and have fewer resources; these include both urban and rural schools.
- The most significant correlation established was between academic achievement and the socioeconomic characteristics of the student body. This was followed by the characteristics of the schools and their staff, and then to a lesser extent, the territorial location of the schools.

At this stage of the research we can confirm the fact that there is a pronounced differentiation between education institutions. There are persistently lagging groups of schools that no longer provide their students with chances to succeed in a competitive society.

### **Education policy in the post-Soviet period: evidence from expert interviews and official documents**

To evaluate the impact of changes in education policy on equality of opportunity in post-Soviet Russia, we employ the following set of tools. First, we analyze the official supporting documentation of the reform (concepts, strategies, programs, reports, etc.), as well as discussions which followed it in the mass media.

Based on the existing literature we identified the following key trends in Russia's post-Soviet education policies, which have greatly influenced the growth of inequality in general education:

- The emergence of a competitive market for education services and withdrawal from equalization policies (particularly in the reallocation of resources) (Kolesnikova 2008).



- The promotion of policies which favor diversity and variability among educational institutions and programs, i.e. the emergence of different types of schools and the legitimization of selectivity practices within them (Cherednichenko 1999; Stolyarenko and Merzhoeva 2011).
- The decrease in federal spending on compulsory and secondary education, and the shifting of the burden of financing educational institutions towards the municipal level (Stolyarenko, Merzhoeva 2011).
- The introduction of the Unified State Examination (USE) and the increase in associated tutoring, which requires additional substantial investments from families (Efendiev and Resetnikova 2004; Prakhov et al. 2010; Bray 2007).
- Targeted state support which explicitly favors leading schools (Waldman 2012).

Our own qualitative analysis of the formal documents also reveals the following changes in education policy, which potentially hold the risk of increasing inequality and undermining the capacity of schools in promoting social mobility:

- Giving students and households the freedom of choice to select schools, programs, additional classes, duration of learning, etc.
- Expanding the financial, economic and academic autonomy of schools.
- Permitting fee-based services and accepting voluntary contributions from parents and sponsors.
- Making schools responsible for the enforcement of students' individual rights to education.

The above-mentioned measures can be considered characteristics of meritocratic policies.

However, we argue that their implementation largely neglects the context of extreme social inequality, which has become an important issue in post-Russia.

According to our analysis, the trends and risks of growing inequality in general education were absolutely neglected in formal documents until the end of the 1990s. In spite of a formal declaration to ensure equal access to education, nowhere was it listed as a top priority and no exact mechanisms of its implementation in real practice were present. In the late 1990s, however, this issue was partially addressed by suggesting certain compensatory measures for the socially disadvantaged families in the form of subsidies and educational loans. But these ideas were never fully implemented.

In the beginning of the 2000s education policy-makers started to express particular interest in creating a system which could effectively monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in schools, its conformity with accepted educational standards, as well as increasing the general transparency and efficiency in allocation of funding to educational institutions. Two key measures, which were associated with this period, include the introduction of the USE and per capita financing<sup>5</sup>.

This period also saw a continuation of policies aimed at stimulating competition among schools through targeted support of upper-level schools and the so-called school leaders. For instance, an initiative to launch a grant program for schools as part of the National Project,

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<sup>5</sup>I.e. state-regulated funding, which reflects the cost of teaching one student and makes the overall funding of an institution directly tied to the number of students it succeeds to attract (making it analogous to voucher system adopted in some other countries). Prior to this system authorities would allocate resources to schools depending on the type of school and other institution parameters without actually taking the size of student body into account.

‘Education’ in 2006-2009, according to which grants were assigned to the schools displaying exceptional educational achievements.

To evaluate the consequences of implementing these measures and policies on we now turn to our expert interviews.

We analyzed a sample of direct in-depth interviews with experts, i.e. representatives of federal, regional and local authorities, who were responsible for implementing the reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, and school principals (N=36). Interviews were conducted in the fall and winter of 2013 in four Russian regions (Moscow region, Moscow, Yaroslavl region, the Republic of Karelia). The method of in-depth interviews, as opposed to quantitative methods, is characterized in that, in this case, we have an opportunity to get acquainted with the existing wide range of opinions dominant in society, and to analyze the main theme, the causes of certain respondents' answers. The expert interviews as one of the varieties of in-depth interviews are characterized in that the status and the competence of the experts play a key role.

One of our federal experts stated that *‘the situation needs to be analyzed not just in abstract terms, but by relating it to certain institutional norms’*, which came as a consequence of certain political decisions.

The variability of education, which was initially perceived as a principle of ‘flexible’ equality that enabled individualized education pathways, suited for each student’s natural talents, is now largely perceived as a cause of increasing inequality. According to one of our regional experts, this has led to a situation where *‘on the one hand, the quality of education has significantly improved in some schools, but, on the other, it has dramatically deteriorated in others’*.

*‘There are actually two processes at hand: one is the increasing differentiation in society, the emergence of different demands; but the other is the differentiation of schools themselves. And this is the cause of educational inequality – everyone has his own understanding of the quality of education’* (a quote from federal expert). *‘The reform has enabled the choice of education programs and curricula, but hardly anyone could make real sense of it’* (a quote from regional expert). Some of our interviewees even make reference to Russia’s enduring *‘paternalistic tradition’*, which has manifested itself in the actual behavior of households, of which only *‘25-30% appear to be fully aware that they now have to make choices with respect to their children’s education and accept the responsibility for these choices’* (a quote from federal expert). Thus, policy makers appear to explicitly recognize that imposing choice and variability as a universal principle has proved effective for those families prepared to seize this valuable opportunity when it became available.

Such appropriation of educational opportunity by the more active social groups (which, in fact, exploits the weak awareness of the others rather than fulfils the principle of individualized educational pathways) is a widely spread phenomenon in other countries as well. Some authors stress that it is usually higher SES (socio-economic status) parents which enjoy greater political advantages and use it to promote their children’s needs with school officials (Lareau 2000). Moreover, educational achievement and the choice of education pathway depend not only on the cognitive ability of children and the SES of parents, but whether family itself promotes certain educational values.

The expansion of market for paid education services could also be viewed as an organic component of policies aimed to meet the increasing and differentiated demand for education. But

this was clearly a step towards raising additional barriers for the disadvantaged groups in access to quality education: *'Ok, we provide free education here, but low-income families can't afford classes and services that go beyond the standard'* (a quote from regional expert). *'To be admitted to lyceums or gymnasia, students have to know things which they cannot master in ordinary schools with their ordinary standard curriculum. They have to get additional classes and tutoring, which implies by definition that children from low-income families are less likely to make it to better institutions'* (a quote from regional expert). *'It is highly unlikely that students' talents alone can help them win in rich parents' purse competition. I don't like putting it this way, but that's how it really works today in education'* (a quote from school principal). *'Owing to the expansion of paid services, there is a change in access to quality education, indeed. But to judge the change in opportunities you simply have to look at whose wallet is thicker now'* (a quote from regional expert).

Commenting on the negative effects of expanding market for paid services in Russia we may relate this case to the so-called practice of 'shadow education', which is observed in some other countries as well. In Russia, it is clearly manifested in the form of informal tutoring – an enduring phenomenon, which existed even in its late-socialist period, but became an especially widespread practice in the more competitive context of Russia's post-transitional history (Silova, Budiene, Bray 2006; Mischo, Haag 2002). According to Bray (2007) this ever increasing demand for tutoring in Russia is a natural trend boosted by individualization and the marketization of education and the introduction of a high-stakes school exam such as the USE. Under such circumstances the USE itself could barely change the order of things, according to which socially advantaged families would always seek ways to reproduce their advantage through additional training (Meroe 2012).

Even so, the experts in our interviews expressed different opinions on the effect which the introduction of the USE had on the situation with education in Russia. On the one hand, idea behind the USE was to equalize opportunities for children by protecting them from selection practices, which were widespread in higher education institutions prior to its introduction: *'...for someone from a very distant place it was practically impossible to be admitted to such places as MGIMO<sup>6</sup> or the Higher School of Economics<sup>7</sup>, even if he or she proved to be a bright student at school. The situation has changed with the USE... Unlike before, say, a girl from Buryatiya<sup>8</sup> now has a quite realistic chance of being admitted to these universities if she has a sufficient score'* (a quote from regional expert). On the other hand, *'...although formally the introduction of USE has brought equal opportunities, it has articulated the existing inequality between Russian regions, and, in fact, legitimized this inequality to a certain extent'* (a quote from municipal expert). *'It helps maintain the existing inequality, as it provides huge advantages to those who are sufficiently energetic and active in securing them'* (a quote from federal expert).

The creating and promoting of incentives for competition between education institutions has also been set as a political priority in Russia's education system. Its explicit goal was to encourage the self-selection of best education practices, which would be rewarded by the market system itself. In turn, this was thought to highlight the benchmarks of success that would encourage other schools to emulate them, thus tugging the whole system towards better education.

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<sup>6</sup>MGIMO – Moscow State Institute of International Relations – one of the top Russian universities.

<sup>7</sup>National Research University "Higher School of Economics" (HSE) – a public institution created in post-Soviet Russia, one of the prominent universities and research centers in the country.

<sup>8</sup>Buryatiya is a very distant Russian region located as far away as 5486 kilometers from Moscow.

*'This competition was stimulated by numerous grants and contests', but it is worth noting that this policy was implemented in a demographic decline, which actually weakened the competition: '...despite the fact that competition itself is for the benefit of the system, and should have a positive influence, in reality there was no stimulation' (a quote from regional expert). The really strong schools, which were prepared for such competition, indeed, gained significant advantage in collecting funds, but promoting higher quality for the system in general was never achieved: 'we only stimulated the top quarter of schools, mostly gymnasia and lyceums: they already enjoyed teaching the best students, but now they got paid for it. And, in fact, they get paid for what they are: gymnasia and lyceums have always enjoyed the benefit of receiving generous support from parents and sponsors, which was used for training of teachers, allowing them to travel and so forth. Now it's "winner takes it all", they say' (a quote from school principal). 'This so-called formal "support for equality" in reality created a situation, where better schools gained an even greater advantage through massive infusion of additional funds and resources. It was assumed that if we support leaders, they would actually pull other schools towards their standard. But it has not happened that way: the leaders have no such obligation as to pull the others' (a quote from federal expert).*

The state made no effort to intervene in this policy because it appears to have been satisfied with its effects: the policy was effective in maintaining and even increasing the funding of better schools with a of shortage in public funding. And so it, at least, guaranteed the preservation of strong teachers and the upkeep of higher achievement in the narrow segment of Russian schools.

The natural consequence of increasing competition between schools was that schools have adapted to it by increasing the selection of students, who could either ensure higher achievement for schools with their ability and talent, or bring the financial resources of their parents at the disposal of education institutions: *'Regional authorities particularly value schools which manage to secure more money for their programs. Thus it is extremely important both for a school, and a region that a school succeeds in securing its status of being the best in the region, or even in the whole of Russia. It is a matter of prestige, which may have either social reasons (like social status), or economic reasons: if more funds are invested in a given school, this signals that this school is prestigious. This increases the competition between students and their parents for the chance of getting into such schools, and that is where intellectual and economic criteria start to become of extreme importance. Both of them matter'* (a quote from federal expert).

*'"Higher-quality institutions" suggests that they provide higher quality education. But this does not always correspond with reality – it only suggests that it might be... The strong deficiency of this system is that sometimes this "higher-quality" status becomes too inflated for no real reason: it often detaches from the true merits of an institution, and yet leaves it with the legitimate possibility to be highly selective with respect to children'* (a quote from school director).

These observations overlap with two negative and partially interconnected effects already been documented by other scholars. In highly competitive systems, education institutions seek ways to identify and reward those students who are most capable of academic success. However, it appears that most schools fail to accomplish a similar task.

The competition between schools has also been greatly intensified through the introduction of school choice. *'I am quite confident about this, as I have learnt it from international studies: the introduction of choice (as opposed to unification) increases competition, which, in turn, increases inequality, but it also leads to a general reduction in educational achievement'* (a quoting from federal expert). *'School choice is, of course, responsible for the growth of inequality.*

*The more affluent families use this opportunity to select schools with greater resources and better teaching staff... and although to my knowledge more or less same thing existed in the Soviet Union, the scales were much more humble then* (a quote from federal expert).

The possibility of school choice in Russia has intensified the process, which has already been described by Johnson in *The American Dream of Power and Wealth*: 'In a context in which education is seen as the key to success and schools are persistently segregated and unequal, school decisions become pivotal for the life chances of a child. The ideology of meritocracy and the reality of the wealth gap operate together, and in the simple act of sending children to school, we contribute to perpetuating inequality' (Johnson 2006: pp. 172-173).

The introduction of 'normative per capita funding' (i.e. a Russian version of a voucher system), according to which a certain share of funding is assigned per student and thus creates incentives for schools to compete for them, is also believed to have played a major role in increasing inequality. *'It was only assumed that schools would get just what they need'* (a quote from regional expert). *'From an economic point of view this may look effective, but it is, in fact, a sign of reduction in general funding. Schools had received more or less equal funds before this principle was introduced'* (a quote from federal expert). *'It had a major impact on differentiation between schools as the only thing that started to matter was the number of children. But it has completely ignored the complexity of the student body itself and its social composition, and the fact that some schools have historically specialized in teaching students with specific needs and problems, rather than rushing to attract as many of them as possible'* (a quote from school principal). *'The differences have increased..., but not because the principle is so bad, but because we were not fully prepared for it – it was introduced with many unresolved issues, as we did not allow our education institutions to develop to the level at which they are indeed capable to act independently, to engage in competition and attract additional fund rising'* (a quote from regional expert).

In summarizing the results of this section we may highlight the following. Our analysis of expert interviews reveals striking similarities between the consequences of the measures pursued by Russian policy-makers and the effects of neo-liberal, meritocracy-oriented strategies in countries with high social inequality. Therefore we may conclude that the processes which unfolded in the 1990s and carry on today are more typical than specific to Russian context.

What might distinguish Russia from other countries, however, is the lack of supplementary policies, which are widely present in other countries and which foster targeted measures to alleviate extreme disadvantage and deprivation in which certain schools might be trapped. Lacking such policies, the threat of diminishing the capacity of the Russian education system is real and ever increasing.

And it would be logical to carefully utilize and adapt experience from other countries which have succeeded in adjusting their policies (Ainscow 2006; Hargreaves 2007; Fullan 2010). Such policies are typically characterized by deliberate and targeted measures that into account the particular circumstances in which education institutions operate and in which families make their decisions.

### **Policies to reduce inequality when there is differentiation in the institution of school**

International experience shows that accounting for the context in which schools operate when creating education policy is a necessary component of its success. In particular, the OECD's 2012 analytic review (OECD, 2012) emphasizes the importance of identifying schools that are

facing the greatest difficulties in teaching a socially disadvantaged student body and the education policy aimed at reducing the risk of their failing.

This report highlights the main characteristics of schools that must be considered:

- Students' results (grades, level of qualifications, growth and development, improvement).
- Physical and human capital (financing, material resources, staff, administration).
- Student characteristics (socio-economic, migrant status, specific social groups, language barriers, special education needs).
- School context (e.g. violence ).
- Geographical areas and regions.
- Historical or traditional issues (e.g. support for certain ethnic groups that are considered to be disadvantaged).

When evaluating educational achievements, the conditions under which the school operates are first considered. Research carried out in OECD countries confirms the importance of considering context and equality in effective systems of evaluating schools (OECD 2012 b.). As a rule, this assessment is used as the basis for developing targeted programs to improve results, including targeted support. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education (Van Twist et al., 2013) provide an example of how a comprehensive analysis of contextual information for each school and targeted policy to improve results led to a significant reduction in the number of weak schools.

Global experience provides a sufficient number of examples of how accounting for school context and related special education tasks become the basis for comprehensive solutions to education policy (OECD, 2012).

For example, to ensure equal access to quality education, a number of countries are developing financing strategies that account for the fact that the cost of teaching is higher in schools with students from dysfunctional families.

This strategy makes it possible to provide additional funding to students according to their socio-economic background and educational issues. The expectation is that this will help support students through additional class time, special teaching materials, tutoring and, perhaps, smaller classrooms.

In 2008, Chile succeeded with this type of financing by launching a voucher system that provided additional resources to disadvantaged children and extra support for schools with a high concentration of such students. In parallel with this additional funding, quality assurance measures were put in place, including improvement plans for schools that accept these vouchers and supplemental reporting (Ramirez M-J., 2012).

The Netherlands introduced financing for elementary schools based on a formula that provides extra funds for disadvantaged students. Schools with a significant number of such students received much more resources in accordance with the difficulty of the student body, including additional money per student based on the education level of the parents.

Empirical research on the Dutch financing system showed that it leads to the successful distribution of differentiated resources in accordance with a school's needs (OECD, 2012).

Another example of this is targeted financing. In the UK, additional funding to support schools is based on such indicators as the number of students who receive free meals (provided to socio-economically disadvantaged families). They have been implementing the program for several years, narrowing the gap in outcomes across the five Every Child Matters (ECM) areas for vulnerable groups in the context of improving outcomes for all (Kendall, S. et al., 2008). Since 2011, schools annually receive additional funds for every disadvantaged student. The schools with

the most difficult student bodies are thus able to attract highly qualified teachers and administrators.

Some countries like Canada have programs that help establish a link between administrative salaries and school factors (Andreas Schleicher, 2014).

There are also cases where social context is considered when designing staff policy. In Korea, when a school director is hired at a disadvantaged school, he or she receives professional recognition and a significant financial reward. Administrators in these schools are ranked among the most professionally successful (OECD, 2011).

There are also special measures to incentivize teachers who are willing to work at disadvantaged schools: higher salaries, fewer students per class, shorter workdays, accelerated career growth and a high likelihood of transitioning to administrative positions. The result of this policy is that students with low socio-economic status are more likely than other students to have highly qualified teachers (Kang, N., & Hong, M., 2008).

Spain offers another example of creating a positive and safe educational environment at socially disadvantaged schools. They created a state observatory to study the school climate and research mechanisms that would create a safe atmosphere and reduce the level of violence at disadvantaged schools (Ministerio de Educacion, Spain, 2011) In France, as part of the ECLAIR program (Écoles, collèges et lycées pour l'ambition et la réussite), measures were taken to improve the climate and reduce violence in schools with a high share of students that demonstrate disruptive behavior (OECD, 2012).

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools program implemented in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; OECD 2012 c) is a systematic and successful policy that accounts for differentiation of educational institutions based on results and student body. The program was aimed at schools with a concentrated level of disadvantage. It introduced a standardized system to define the level of social disadvantage and academic problems at a school and developed a comprehensive support program.

This involved reducing the number of students per teacher, targeting distribution of trained administrators, allocating additional funds for textbooks, and providing access to supplemental education programs and other services.

In addition, students at disadvantaged schools are offered tutoring support for planned education after elementary.

This program resulted in an increase in the share of students who graduated from secondary school from 68.2% to 73.2%.

In this way, the leading countries in the world have started accounting for the contextual characteristics of schools, which has been effective as one of the leading principles for organizing the administration, financing, and staff policy in education. It has also been the basis for targeted interventions aimed at providing equal opportunity to receive a quality education.

## **Conclusions and Future Considerations**

Our findings reveal that Russia's post-Soviet education policy was a strong factor in increasing and perpetuating social inequality. It has become so since Russian policy-makers have failed to account for the social context in which it was implemented: a fundamental change in the system of social stratification, the sudden widening of a wealth gap, severe deprivation in some of Russia's territories, the influx of migrants, etc.

By promoting meritocratic strategies this policy was actually focused on satisfying the demand of the more powerful social strata and education institutions which were prepared to seize new opportunities and utilize them for their own benefit. And this effect has eventually overwhelmed the positive effects of reform, thus discrediting the reform to some extent and creating the risk of its future regression.

Russian educational policy (from the 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s) provides a great lesson in terms of how important it is to carefully account for the context in order to devise a truly effective policy that meets its goals and avoids unfavorable side effects.

There is one particular way which we believe might help alleviating the adverse effects of the current policies without necessarily sacrificing the incentives for competition. It is a system which promotes contextualized assessment of school performance: assessment which allows to identifying schools operating in similar social conditions and to reward them on the basis of their true effectiveness, rather than the factors which lie beyond schools' control. It might also help identify education institutions with particularly high concentrations of disadvantaged students and provide them with additional human and financial resources to ensure quality education. The use of contextualized measures of school performance in managing the education system and the allocation of funds might also have a positive effect as it stimulates objectivity and transparency.

However, there are certain risks inherent in the idea of promoting such targeted measures. First and foremost is the risk of 'spill-over', as any measures designed to reduce inequality would inevitably provoke the advantaged households into seeking new ways of securing their advantage, potentially reducing the effectiveness of such measures in the long run (Lucas 2001).

Furthermore, there are risks which stem from Russia's particular education system and the structure of its inequality:

- Difficulty with defining the recipient for such targeted measures. The potential risk here is that in situation of incomplete information and/or its manipulation by education institutions (which is a real issue in Russia) this might lead to making false decisions. Besides, the required data on education institutions that is required to inform on such decisions is still largely absent and/or difficult to collect.

- The risk of losing the balance between concentrating effort on compensatory measures for disadvantaged schools and families and keeping the system of incentives at the expense of households with articulated demands for education. Some recent international studies show that this risk is, indeed, real (OECD 2013), revealing, for instance, that students from socially advantaged families in Russia seem to under-fulfill themselves with respect to their background.

- Reliance on hasty interventions and measures without empirical testing or evaluation of their real efficiency. Evidence-based policy measures remain a weak point in the Russian education system.

However, the presence of these risks does not justify inaction. They need to be considered carefully in devising accurate reform strategies which account for social context and improve national education policy. So far we would suggest that such an approach is contextualized at three levels, from local to national by:

- Considering the specific features of schools and territories, i.e. an integrated assessment of the negative impact of multiple deprivation on the quality of education due to family background, scarcity of school resources and local deprivation.

- Considering the context of the educational system as a whole, i.e. an optimal strategy, which improves education opportunities for the disadvantaged groups without reduction in the general quality of education.



- Considering the national context and, particularly, the situation whereby the structure of the economy, which perpetuates poverty, and the narrowing of the channels for social mobility might mitigate the efforts concentrated in one area (the area of education). While paternalism and the lack of initiative and responsibility, particularly spread among the disadvantaged, reduce the effectiveness of measures to equalize starting conditions.

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