

Editorial

Teachers' issues in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia—this is the theme of the main section of this Moscow issue of *Voprosy obrazovaniya/Educational Studies*. On this occasion we have invited Gita Steiner-Khamsi from Columbia University (USA) and Elena Lenskaya from the Moscow school of Social and Economic Sciences as Guest Editors. We thought it would be interesting for our readers to gain two different perspectives on the same issue—from a Russian and an international expert's point of view. We gave our Guest Editors the freedom to choose the authors and research topics for the thematic section. As a result we have a selection of works by Russian and international authors as well as by young Russian researchers who are currently working in different American universities. The subject of their studies –the theme they all have in common—is the current developments in the education systems in the CIS countries. We are aware of the debatable nature of many of the materials published in this thematic section, and see it as part of the mission of the journal that was originally intended to provide room for expressing different opinions on a very wide range of issues in the area of education. We are looking forward to getting feedback from our readers.

Letter from Guest Editors to Readers

Dear Readers,

This special issue comprises a collection of articles devoted to teaching challenges in several countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The studies published in this issue are written by authors based in the region as well as by researchers from other European countries and the United States.

We were happy to accept the invitation to serve as editors of this issue, as we believe the future of reforms in this region hinges on the active participation of teachers. It matters a great deal whether they themselves believe in the importance of improving the quality of education, enhancing their own competencies, and ameliorating their status as teachers. There is much to be gained from analyses of the current situation of teachers in schools of the region, produced by scholars based both inside and outside the region.

Two articles, written by Russian authors, focus on the results of TALIS-2013, in which Russia took formal part in for the first time. Marina Pinskaya, Alena Ponomareva and Sergey Kosaretsky discuss the problems of training young teachers for school work and the challenges they face. The authors present compelling findings of how young teachers suffer from the lack of active learning methods and

group-based training programs. This shortcoming negatively affects young teachers' attitudes to the profession and to the school they work in. Naturally, these problems have always been recognized, but the study supports the general sentiment with empirical data. The study shows that mentoring of young teachers is purely formal and support for them is insufficient in Russian schools. In the other article, Elena Lenskaya and Irina Brun analyze whether Russian school principals are adequately prepared for exerting "transformational leadership." The study reveals that there is no pre-employment training for principals, their workload leaves them with almost no opportunity for creative activities, and nearly half of the respondents report being unable to delegate powers and that they prefer managing their educational institution on their own. Apparently, the fundamental educational reforms that took place over the past few years had little or no impact on the attitudes of newly appointed principals and others who had to pass strict certification criteria. Both articles purposefully refer to experiences of "league leaders" or educational systems with the highest student achievements, given the tremendous interest of education authorities and possibly the readers of this journal, to understand teacher and staffing policy in countries of this region.

The article by Azerbaijani authors Ulviya Mikayilova and Elmina Kazymzade investigate similar problems in that they analyze the readiness of teachers to implement the new education standards. The study used a comprehensive sample and provides evidence that teachers continue to face challenges at work, despite the assertion of the government to provide support. The authors conclude that teacher education will not become effective unless the teacher becomes the one making the decisions on their professional development and unless a professional community is created to help them. Studies associated with transformational change, the need for instructional leadership, or the huge value in creating a "community of learners" among teachers have greatly resonated in the region. The important study by Mikayilova and Kazymzade is therefore likely to draw attention from researchers and practitioners from other countries of the region.

The article by Elena Aydarova from the University of Arizona (U.S.) is dedicated to the case of Russia. It defines the problem of teacher retention in a situation where mass media shape an extremely negative image of school. Unsurprisingly, teachers in many schools indeed feel humiliated, disempowered and without any rights. The author discovers a compelling paradox: the amount of clinical practice has been increased, of which the Russian reformers insisted for a long time. However, extensive clinical practice in present-day school with its off-the-scale bureaucracy and meaningless standards forced on teachers has made students flee from the profession in the middle of their studies, ultimately increasing teacher turnover. It is important to bear in mind that the study focuses on a group of prospective teachers of English, who, compared to teachers of other subjects,

have excellent employment opportunities in the labor market. However, even if the other teachers cannot afford to lose their prospects for employment, the negative image of school will definitely affect their attitudes and mitigate their desire and enthusiasm to work in school. The authors propose that greater attention should be given to the school environment, assessed differently by different stakeholders including the media.

In an interesting study, William Smith and Anna Persson investigate teacher attrition, in particular the flight of teachers from disadvantaged schools in Latvia, Estonia and Georgia. They see the root of the problem in the exclusion of teachers from the decision making, their insufficient autonomy and dependent position due to the absence of a permanent contract, if not in their lack of rights. In this respect, the article resonates with both the work of the Azerbaijani authors and that of Olena Aydarova. The research was largely based on OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in which the number of children from disadvantaged families is exclusively obtained through reports from school teachers and principals; some of whom, in their reports, are possibly raising the socio-economic status of the parents of their school community just to give socially desirable responses. It becomes obvious when we compare the proportion of disadvantaged schools in Estonia and Latvia to that of Georgia with its lower standard of living. It turns out that the proportion is lower in Georgia, according to the teachers' answers, and it cannot but cause concerns.

In many countries of the region, teacher remuneration systems have undergone significant transformations, taking into account the excessive teaching loads that teachers take on to boost their low income. The assignment of additional teaching hours has a negative impact both on the quality of life of the individual teacher and on the quality of education, especially if the additional hours are taught in subjects for which the teacher has not obtained any formal qualification. Steiner-Khamsi explores the key features of the stavka system which remunerates teachers based on the hours that they teach and includes additional supplements for specific tasks (classroom teacher, grading notebooks, after school classes, etc.). The stavka system, also known as the "teaching load" system, is—according to Steiner-Khamsi—structurally different from a weekly workload system, in which teachers are paid based on 36–40 hours of work. In other words, the stavka system tends to encourage not only part-time teaching positions (half a stavka or weekly workload, or less) but also excessive teaching loads (more than 1.5 stavkas) with detrimental effects on the quality of instruction. Her article focuses on two countries of the region—Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia—that attempted to move away from the teaching load system (stavka system) and instead established a new remuneration system that takes into account the statutory weekly workload. The reforms in the two countries were meant to remedy

some of the negative side-effects of the stavka system, notably, the low base salary, fragmentation, unpredictability and last but not least the practice of assigning excessive teaching loads.

Raisa Belyavina's article also deals with teacher remuneration. She investigates the implementation of the incentive supplements which the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic introduced as part of the fundamental salary reform in 2011. The so-called "stimulus fund" represents 10 percent of a school's salary fund and is supposed to incentivize effective teaching by rewarding high-performing teachers with a bonus payment. The schools are in charge of determining the award criteria and selecting the awardees for the bonus payments. The study draws on a comprehensive study, funded by UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, which included among other data collection instruments a survey of 217 teachers. First, the study finds that schools use a broad array of award criteria, of which only a few directly measure effective teaching. Second, the intention of the stimulus fund policy to pay big bonuses to only high-performing teachers does not apply in practice. The school committees, in charge of disbursing the stimulus fund, tend to pay a small supplement to all teachers at the school with a few additional bonus payments for select teachers. Third, Belyavina finds that schools use the stimulus fund to offset some of the salary cuts that older teachers had to endure due to the elimination of teacher ranks (known as teacher "categories") and the upgrading of teacher qualifications, implemented in the 2011 salary reform. The monetization of teacher qualifications benefitted mostly younger teachers because they completed a Master's or Bachelor's degree and therefore were entitled to a higher base salary. Belyavina's study is fascinating because it examines how schools modify a reform over the course of its implementation, or, to use the title of one of Larry Cuban's well-known articles, *How Schools Change Reforms*. In a different vein, Steiner-Khamsi reminds us that, "Every fundamental reform, perhaps most visibly in the area of salary reform, implies a re-stratification process." This is a useful and important implication that applies especially to the last two articles, written by Steiner-Khamsi and by Belyavina, and will definitely resonate with most readers.

This is our first experience of creating a themed collection of articles by Russian and foreign researchers. We believe that the dialogue it has produced is something we have worked for for a long time, and we will be happy to keep working in this direction, provided that our readers share our enthusiasm.

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