

Teachers' Agency in Shaping the Educational Success of Schoolchildren: Roles and Beliefs

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Abstract All over the world, educational and, particularly, curriculum reforms cannot take root if their stakeholders are not engaged in the process. To implement reforms successfully, policymakers should seek to foster teacher agency—their proactive autonomous activity to question and then change their usual schooling routines. Yet, to adopt such an agentic attitude, teachers should feel confident that they have the capacities, ways, and opportunities to bring about a positive change in their students' learning.

Our study seeks to explore teachers' perceptions about the main factors of students' academic success—how it the latter are distributed between the school, the family, and students themselves. We use a mixed methods strategy to analyze the results of 12 focus groups (over 100 participants) and a Russian national survey of over 4,000 teachers.

As our results reveal, over half of the teachers believe that their efforts and other school factors do not affect students' academic success. The teachers are convinced that it is mostly children's own learning efforts, as well as support from their families, that contribute to academic success—and see both as lying beyond their immediate control. School, thus, is but an framework to unleash students' potential planted by the family. This brings us to the conclusion that, currently, teachers' beliefs are unlikely to allow for the level of agency needed to reconsider and transform usual routines, as may be required for a successful curriculum reform.

Keywords teachers agency, educational reform, curriculum reform, academic success of schoolchildren.

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Over the last decades, the education system in Russia, as well as in the rest of the world, has been undergoing continuous reform. One of the main components of today's reform is the regular updating of educational standards and programmes (curriculum). The educational standards are designed to regulate the so-called educational outcomes, which include not only the traditional subject outcomes but also metadisciplinary (universal) (e. g. students' ability to independently define goals and ways to achieve them, the ability to set up collaborative learning and joint activities, the ability to communicate) and personal ones (e. g. students' willingness and ability to engage in self-development and self-education and the competence of communicating with same-age peers). The new categories of educational outcomes aim to reinforce the traditional subject-specific, knowledge-oriented teaching with the development of metadisciplinary and personal competencies. The latter should enable students to apply knowledge in various situations, master new knowledge efficiently, i.e. to be capable of learning, and achieve personal and professional success both in the learning community and modern society.

The current standards of general education were adopted in the early 2010s. That version of standards gave schools more leeway in designing educational programmes and implied schools and teachers' active involvement in developing curricula. In 2020–2021 the standards were updated again. In particular, the 2021 version, which will soon be introduced in schools, describes metadisciplinary and personal competencies in a more detailed and systematic way, which is in line with the current policy of expanding the range of expected educational outcomes. In other words, according to the current standards as well as the new ones being introduced, teachers should both provide subject-specific knowledge and develop students' universal competencies.

The changes in the standards listed above imply a significant revision of teachers' pedagogical practices. Although the current version of the standards is already 10 years old, experts and researchers agree that it works for the most part only on paper [Dobryakova, Froumin, 2020]. The educational process and teachers' practices have not changed as was expected when the standards were being developed and introduced. Frontal instruction still prevail in schools. Knowledge transfer remains the main goal of teaching, and the development of competencies set out in the standards is not considered the school's responsibility at all [Dobryakova, Yurchenko, Novikova, 2018].

Some researchers consider the gap between the planned educational reform and its implementation to be quite understandable and predictable [Tyack, Tobin, 1994]. The fact that ambitious

education reforms are rarely implemented exactly as intended and only a few of them turn out to be sustainable and long-lasting was already discussed a lot in the 1990s. As much as reform transforms schools, schools transform the reform; it has even been proposed to redefine the success criteria for this kind of initiatives [Cuban, 1998]. By the 2010s, the indication of the discrepancy between intention and practice had become commonplace in studies on curriculum reform [Priestley et al., 2012]. At the same time, there is no agreement among researchers on the causes and mechanisms of this discrepancy and, consequently, the ways to reduce it. Some examine the quality of the policies being pursued and organizational arrangements for reform, for instance, assess the role of regulatory documents in the reform of educational standards [Bergqvist, Bergqvist, 2017]. Others highlight the role of the attitudes, motivations, and behaviours of the change agents: teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders [Kasprzhak et al, 2015].

The empirical evidence suggests that the relation between teachers' beliefs and the ideas that the reforms are based upon — whether they concur or conflict — is closely associated with the success of change implementation [Levin, Nevo, 2009]. However, the beliefs prevailing among teachers alone cannot be used to predict the outcome of reforms. The success or failure of reforms often depends not so much on teachers' beliefs and informed choices, but rather on the cognitive processes that take place when teachers are making sense of the reforms [Spillane, Reiser, Reimer, 2002]. Resources available to teachers, opportunities to participate actively in the discussion and implementation of a reform, and teachers' ability to reflect on its progress and consequences play an important role here. Research has shown that teachers' willingness to change their professional practices is closely related to their opportunities to actively engage in collective sense-making and discussion of the changes, both at the conceptual and strategic level and at the level of implementation [Spillane, 1999]. Since the early 2000s, teacher engagement in education reform has been studied by many researchers using the theoretical framework of agency. From this perspective, the previous studies seem to be somewhat simplistic and one-dimensional and overlook important aspects of teachers' work.

Social sciences and psychology have a long tradition of conceptualizing the notion of agency. Contemporary research defines teachers' professional agency as a socio-culturally determined possibility and ability to make decisions and act independently in the professional environment [Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley, Biesta, Robinson, 2015]. In the reform process, teacher agency refers to teachers' making sense of and interpreting the proposed chang-

es, as well as actively implementing them. Once in the reform environment, teachers make sense of the proposed ideas and imposed requirements, integrate them into their current understanding of the educational process, assess the possibilities and limitations determined by the context, and decide on how to act [Priestley, Biesta, Robinson, 2015]. Teachers' autonomous agentic actions are not always aimed at supporting the reform. Some teachers may consciously resist the changes. Therefore, active teacher engagement does not ensure the success of reform but is a prerequisite for its success.

Any significant transformation requires a shift in established practices and routines, as well as a revision of ideas and familiar roles, which cannot be achieved without teachers' active engagement in the process of change. Engagement is especially important when most of the teacher corps already have extensive work experience and established patterns of behaviour. In 2020, the average age of Russian teachers was 45–49 years; many of them had more than 30 years of experience¹.

The notion of agency is multifaceted. In this study, we focus on one of its components — self-efficacy, or teachers' belief in their ability to perform actions that influence the situation and the results of their work. A. Bandura was the first one to study the manifestations of agency through the lens of self-efficacy. In his classic article, he explicitly argues that the most important prerequisite for the manifestation of agency is an individual's belief in his or her ability to exercise control over events. [Bandura, 1989]. Bandura also managed to show empirically that self-efficacy is the key determinant of personal agency [Bandura, 2001; 2006]. Unless people believe they can influence the situation, they perform no agentic actions. The exercise of agency is also impossible when individuals have no choice and when they continuously pursue established modes of action.

During the ongoing reform of the Russian education system, teachers' role in implementing change has not been given the necessary attention. In recent years, several studies have been conducted on teachers' attitudes during the reform process. In particular, the research group of M. S. Dobryakova has set up a nationwide survey and focus group discussions with teachers who work in schools situated near Moscow to assess the teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and how these align with the focus of the education system on achieving meta-subject outcomes [Dobryakova, Yurchenko, No-

¹ Information as per the Federal Statistical Monitoring form No. OO-1 'Information about the organization carrying out educational activities according to the educational programs of primary general, basic general, and secondary general education' as of the beginning of the 2020–21 school year: <https://docs.edu.gov.ru/document/ed3ca74f26a1dc055a313991f66d2fa3/>

vikova, 2018]. Another study explores teachers' attitudes towards creative thinking as one of the metadisciplinary learning outcomes and how these attitudes affect teachers' efforts to change their practices [Avdeenko, 2021]. These studies certainly do not suffice and there is still a lot of work ahead to understand the specifics of Russian teachers' role in the curriculum reform.

Thus, the ongoing curriculum reform in Russia is aimed at transforming the educational process in a significant way. The list of expected educational outcomes has been extended to include metadisciplinary and personal competencies. Such reform is unlikely to succeed without active teacher engagement, which in turn requires that teachers believe in their ability to act independently and influence the outcomes. However, there is almost no data on how important Russian teachers consider their role to be in determining learning outcomes.

In this study, we seek to answer the following questions.

1. How do teachers reflect the role of school factors in achieving student educational outcomes?
2. What is the relationship between teachers' high level of agency with respect to student academic success and teachers' assumption of responsibility for achieving metadisciplinary learning outcomes?
3. How do teachers explain the role of particular factors in achieving student educational outcomes?

1. Methodology

The study uses data collected in the framework of the collaborative project *Key Competences and New Literacy* implemented by the Institute of Education of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) and the Sberbank Charitable Foundation *Investment to the Future*. As part of the project, a national online survey of Russian teachers² was conducted in February–May 2018 to identify teachers' views on education, school atmosphere, as well as teaching and grading methods. 4405 teachers from 84 regions of Russia took part in the survey: 95% of the sample were women; the average age of the respondents was 45 (SD — 10 years); 21% live in cities with a population of over one million, 20% in the cities with a population of 250,000 to one million, 27% in the cities with a population under 250,000, and 31% in villages and hamlets.

In May 2018, twelve focus groups were conducted in six schools of the Moscow oblast (in the cities of Orudyevo, Dmitrov, Podolsk, Fryazino, and Voskresensk) to find out teachers' general attitudes

² The HSE University conducted the survey in partnership with the *Russian Textbook Corporation*.

towards their work, students, as well as towards the objectives and the process of education. Each focus group consisted of 8 to 10 primary or secondary school teachers.

The results of the teacher survey were used to answer the first research question of this study. Teachers were asked about their responsibility for developing students' various skills and competencies: "Who do you think should be primarily responsible for ensuring that children can/know one of the following?" The answer options included "school/teachers", "clubs/groups", "family", "children". The respondents were asked to answer the question concerning the following items:

- 1) can think creatively and outside the box;
- 2) be responsible citizens interested in what is going on around them and ready to change things if necessary;
- 3) can express their thoughts well orally and in writing;
- 4) can get along and work together with different people;
- 5) be interested in learning new things and eager to study;
- 6) can manage time and prioritize;
- 7) can distinguish between true and untrue information (fact and fiction);
- 8) have a good knowledge of the main subjects of the school curriculum;
- 9) can apply the acquired knowledge in everyday life;
- 10) treat with respect all people they meet in life regardless of their status.

This list includes a group of skills that are identified as metadisciplinary and personal educational outcomes under the Federal State Educational Standards, and developing these skills is one of the goals of the standards' revision. These metadisciplinary learning outcomes are creative thinking (1), communication and collaboration (4), self-management (6), and critical thinking (7); the personal outcomes are civic responsibility (2) as well as motivation and interest in learning new things (5).

During the survey the teachers were also asked the following: "What would you consider the most important factor for children's academic success?" and "What would you consider the biggest barrier to children's academic success?" whereby they had to choose at least three of the ten answer options (Table 1). The option "Other" was available but was not used in further analysis.

Answer options 4, 6 and 10 imply the high importance of teachers themselves and the school factors, which are at least partially under the teachers' control, for children's learning success. If a respondent has chosen these answer options (we group them into the factor called "school"), this indicates the respondent's belief in

Table 1. Answer Options to the Questions about the Factors of Academic Success and Failure

What would you consider the most important factor for children's academic success?	What would you consider the biggest barrier to children's academic success?
1. Good innate abilities	1. Poor innate abilities
2. Children's efforts (diligence, discipline)	2. Children making no effort (not doing their best, poor discipline)
3. Children's interest in what they are learning	3. Children are not interested in what they are learning
4. Interesting instructional materials (textbooks, problem books, etc.) available in print or electronic format	4. Boring textbooks
5. Children's high ambitions	5. Lack of ambition
6. Children's positive attitude towards the school and teachers (psychological comfort at school)	6. Children do not like the school or teachers
7. High education level of parents, home environment (education is valued)	7. Low education level of parents, home environment (education is not valued)
8. Availability of financial resources in the family (private tutors, clubs)	8. No financial resources available in the family (no private tutors and clubs)
9. Parental support in the form of supervising children's learning process	9. No supervision of homework by parents
10. Teachers' good performance	10. Teachers' poor performance

his or her own ability to influence the learning outcome and, consequently, is associated with a high level of agency. Other answer options are grouped under the factors "student" (statements 1, 2, 3, 5) and "family" (statements 7 and 8). If a respondent has chosen at least one statement associated with one of these two factors, we interpret this as the selection of this factor.

To answer the second research question, a series of logistic regressions were performed. The dependent variable is the selection of the school / teachers as actors responsible for each of the skills or competencies. The independent variables are teacher characteristics (years of experience, teaching in primary school, and attitude towards work), the size of the settlement, and the selection of the answer options in the questionnaire where school factors are claimed to make an important contribution to student academic success or failure.

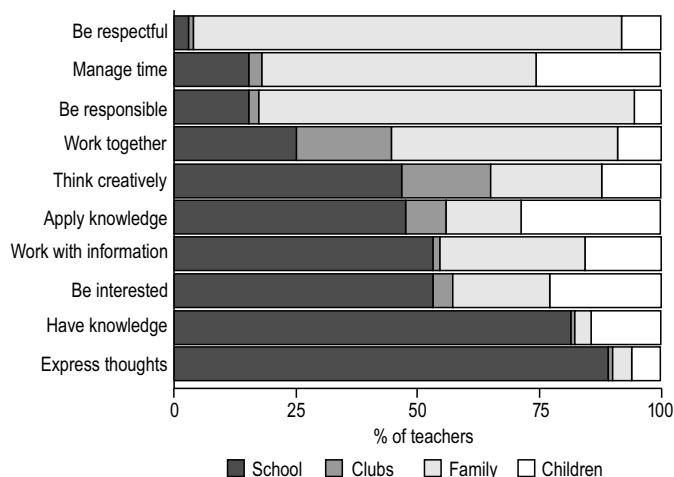
To answer the third research question, the results of focus groups were analyzed. The focus group participants discussed, among other things, teachers' understanding of the notion 'good/successful student' and the factors that help or hinder schoolchildren to achieve success.

2. Results

2.1. Teachers' assessment of the school, family and students' contribution to student academic success

Less than a quarter of the survey respondents believe that the school / teachers are responsible for developing in schoolchildren the skills of treating others with respect (3%), managing time and prioritizing (15%), and being a responsible citizen (15%) (Figure 1). According to the teachers surveyed, the development of these qualities falls under the responsibility of the family and the children themselves. More than a half of the respondents say that schoolchildren should learn to get along with others and work in a team, think creatively and apply the acquired knowledge in real-life situations outside of school — in clubs, at home, or individually. A little more than half of the respondents acknowledge that fostering students' interest in learning new things and willingness to study (53%), and developing the ability to distinguish between true and untrue information (53%) is the task of the school and teachers. Teachers most often consider the school and themselves responsible for teaching students to express their thoughts orally and in writing (89%) and ensuring that students acquire knowledge within the school curriculum (82%). Thus, teachers believe that the main role of the school / teachers is knowledge transfer, whereas the application of the acquired knowledge and the development of non-cognitive skills, such as working in a team, self-management, and creative thinking, should not be the school's responsibility.

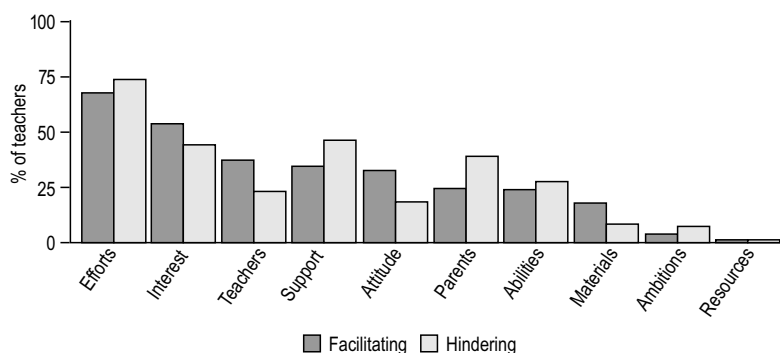
Figure 1. The distribution of responsibility for knowledge acquisition and skills development in students, according to teachers



The factor contributing to students' academic success that is most often mentioned by teachers is students' efforts: it is chosen by 67% of the respondents (Figure 2). The lack of effort is most often chosen as a barrier (74%). The second most frequently mentioned hindering factor is the insufficient level of parental assistance (46%),

while sufficient parental assistance is the third most frequently chosen facilitating factor (34%). The second most frequently chosen contributing factor is children's interest in what they are learning (53%), whereas the lack of such interest ranks third among hindering factors (44%). Thus, according to teachers, the three most important factors, which can both hinder and help to achieve success in school, are students' efforts, students' interest, and parental assistance. None of these factors implies a high level of teacher agency, especially given the fact that about a half of the respondents do not consider the school and teachers responsible for developing children's interest in learning.

Figure 2. **Percentage of teachers who selected a particular factor as facilitating or hindering academic success**



The factors that, if selected, would indicate high teacher agency, such as teacher performance, instructional materials, and psychological comfort at school, are considered the least important hindering factors. For these factors, the difference between how frequently they are selected as hindering and facilitating is the biggest. The positive role of the school factors in ensuring student success is much more often highlighted by the teachers. All other factors, except for children's interest in learning, are more often seen as hindering than facilitating. That is, teachers more often see them as barriers to success, while school-related factors are more often perceived as key to success.

In general, teachers are fairly consistent in their choice of students' success/failure factors (Figure 3). There are four factors, however, that are often chosen as facilitating but not as hindering ones: children's interest in learning, teacher performance, attitudes towards the school, and instructional materials.

One of the three groups of factors (related to students, the family or the school) is assessed more consistently: 95% of teachers evaluate the student-dependent factors as hindering and the same per-

Figure 3. **Percentage of teachers who selected each factor as facilitating or hindering**

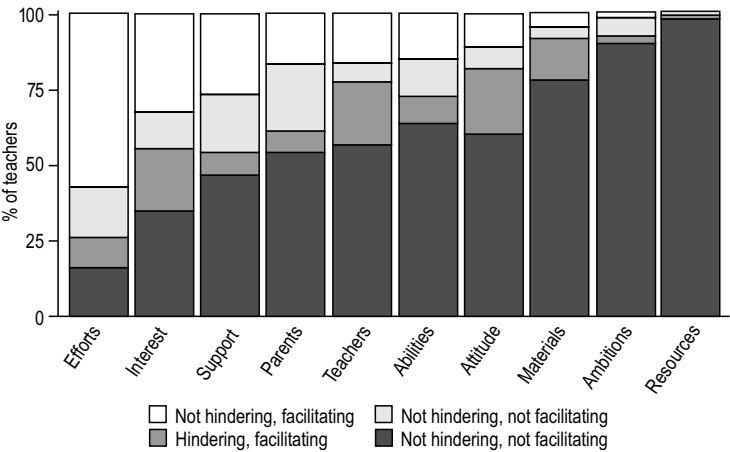
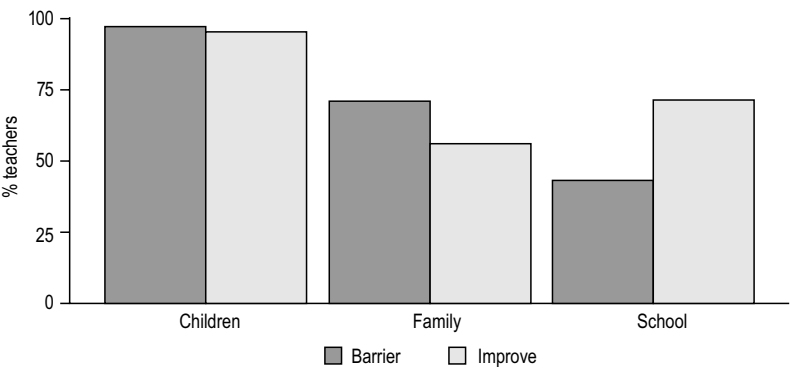


Figure 4. **Percentage of teachers who selected at least one factor from a particular group as facilitating or hindering**



centage of teachers see them as facilitating (Figure 4). While 70% of teachers perceive the school as a contributing factor, only 43% consider it a hindrance. 55% of teachers believe that the family helps to achieve academic success, while 70% think it hinders (in case the family contribution is insufficient).

The logistic regression analysis shows that the teachers who did not choose school factors as facilitating or hindering student success were less likely than others to believe that the school and teachers should be responsible for the metadisciplinary and personal learning outcomes, in particular for developing creative thinking, collaboration skills, and interest in learning (Table 2). For creative thinking and interest in learning, this relationship remains after controlling for such teacher characteristics, as years of experience, teaching in primary school, and the type of the settlement where

Table 2. **Logistic Regression Results, the Dependent Variable is the Selection of the School as Responsible for Particular Knowledge/Skills (Odds Ratio)**

	Thinking creatively	Being responsible	Working in a team	Being eager to learn	Managing time	Identifying untrue information	Applying knowledge
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Did not choose the school as hindering or facilitating academic success	0.91*** (0.02)	0.98* (0.01)	0.96** (0.02)	0.93*** (0.02)	0.98* (0.01)	1.00 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)
Constant	1.63*** (0.01)	1.17*** (0.01)	1.30*** (0.01)	1.733*** (0.01)	1.17*** (0.01)	1.70*** (0.01)	1.62*** (0.01)
Number of observations	4401	4403	4401	4401	4401	4401	4401
Log Likelihood	-3171.24	-1749.43	-2557.56	-3177.86	-1751.92	-3185.27	-3187.91
AIC	6346.48	3502.87	5119.12	6359.72	3507.85	6374.55	6379.82

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

a school is located (Table 3). Respondents who have been working in school longer more often choose the school and teachers to be responsible for developing creativity and critical thinking (the ability to distinguish between true and untrue information) and less often for fostering civic responsibility and collaboration skills. While primary school teachers are inclined to believe that the school and teachers should be responsible for developing creativity, compared to basic and secondary school teachers, they are less likely to recognize the school and teachers' role in developing critical thinking and the skill of applying knowledge to practice.

Thus, the majority of the respondents think that the school and teachers are responsible for transferring knowledge and ensuring that the students develop the skill of expressing their thoughts. More than half of the respondents believe that the school and teachers should not be held responsible for developing metadisciplinary learning outcomes. 50 to 75% of teachers are convinced that school factors cannot ensure student academic success. Consequently, it is assumed that the majority of teachers do not possess a high level of agency. Moreover, there is a relationship between considering school factors decisive in achieving academic success and assuming responsibility for developing other than subject-specific skills. In other words, low teacher agency applies to all learning outcomes. Using the focus group material, we will further analyze the incentives and barriers teachers identify when talking about the factors of student learning success.

Table 3. **Logistic Regression Results, the Dependent Variable is the Selection of the School as Responsible for Particular Knowledge/Skills, Control Variables Added (Odds Ratio)**

	Thinking creatively	Being responsible	Working in a team	Being eager to learn	Managing time	Identifying untrue information	Applying knowledge
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Did not choose the school as hindering or facilitating	0.91*** (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	0.97 (0.02)	0.93*** (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)
Years of experience (stand.)	1.08*** (0.01)	0.98*** (0.01)	0.98*** (0.01)	1.01 (0.1)	0.99 (0.01)	1.02*** (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)
Primary school teacher	1.07*** (0.02)	1.00 (0.01)	0.99 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)	1.02 (0.01)	0.91*** (0.02)	0.95*** (0.02)
Settlement type: village, hamlet (ref.)							
Settlement type: a city with a population of up to 250,000	0.99 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	1.03 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)	0.97* (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	1.04* (0.02)
Settlement type: a city with a population of 250,000 to 1 million	0.98 (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)	1.01 (0.03)	0.95*** (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.03)
Settlement type: a city with a population of over 1 million	0.95** (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	1.02 (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	0.97** (0.02)	1.04 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)
Definitely glad to be working as a teacher	1.06*** (0.02)	1.05*** (0.01)	1.04** (0.02)	1.04** (0.02)	1.03** (0.01)	1.00 (0.02)	1.03 (0.02)
Constant	1.56*** (0.02)	1.15*** (0.01)	1.25*** (0.02)	1.69*** (0.02)	1.19*** (0.01)	1.76*** (0.02)	1.61*** (0.02)
Number of observations	3408	3410	3408	3408	3408	3408	3408
Log Likelihood	-2391	-1320	-1948	-2457	-1394	-2443	-2461
AIC	4798.43	2656.44	3913.89	4931.14	2804.45	4902.67	4938.22

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

2.2. How teachers interpret the factors of students' academic success

Teachers believe that the academic success of students is closely interwoven with their personal qualities, such as "interest", "good manners", and "culture". Teachers often say explicitly that a good student is not the one with high grades, but the one who possesses a set of certain personal qualities. When speaking of success, almost none of the teachers mean academic progress (grades), and they limit the school's area of responsibility primarily to knowledge

transfer. This bias towards a student's personality has to be taken into account when interpreting the results of the focus groups.

2.2.1. Achieving academic success requires abilities, but the school and teachers cannot influence them

According to the survey results, the majority of teachers believe that student-related factors contribute most to student success and failure in school. Some 95% of teachers have chosen student-related characteristics as crucial factors of both success and failure, whereby 70% of teachers refer to children's efforts, about 50% choose their interest in learning, and about a quarter of the respondents mention abilities.

Focus group discussions have yielded similar results. Among student-related success factors, teachers primarily mentioned students' abilities and motivation. Some of them were convinced that schoolchildren possess a set of given, innate, unchangeable characteristics. In particular, they mentioned genetics, innate literacy, and certain predispositions.

Well, if a child is not predisposed to it [literacy], I think it is unlikely to happen. Literacy development... In this case, however hard you try a child will not become a literate person (school 1, focus group 2).

Interviewer: And what do you think prevents children from being what we consider "good"?

Respondent: Bad genetics... Yes, that's right! You either have innate literacy or not, it is an officially recognized fact (school 2, focus group 2).

Respondent 1: Their abilities.

Respondent 2: Nature. Whatever is given by nature.

Respondent 3: Some people are, for example, bad at reading, but good at counting. They were born with it (school 1, focus group 3).

2.2.2. Motivation is an important success factor, but it is a family responsibility

Interest, motivation, and its opposite — laziness — are mentioned as success or failure factors in almost every focus group discussion. Teachers often do not make a clear-cut distinction between the notions of motivation and interest. They consider this factor key to success. Moreover, interest is often mentioned as a key characteristic of a 'good' student, while the lack of interest is perceived as a serious hindrance to learning success.

Interviewer: What obstacles do children face?

Respondent 1: Laziness.

Interviewer: What is laziness?

Respondent 1: Disinclination to act.

Respondent 2: Lack of willingness.

Respondent 1: Lack of motivation.

Respondent 3: Being unaware of the seriousness, perhaps.

Respondent 2: Passivity.

Respondent 3: Lack of responsibility (school 1, focus group 2).

While only about a quarter of the survey respondents considered the family to be responsible for developing children's interest in learning, the overwhelming majority of the focus group participants identified the family as the main source of motivation and interest in learning. When elaborating on the family's role in stimulating children's interest in learning, teachers pointed to the fact that it is important to give children a good example.

Interviewer: What helps children to become good students? What can influence children so that they become good students?

Respondent 1: Motivation.

Respondent 2: In the beginning the home situation decides it all.

Respondent 1: That's what I am saying too — motivation, or what children go to school for. They have to understand it. This is something that is instilled in the family (school 4, focus group 1).

Children look at them [parents], they set an example which the children, naturally, follow. If parents read a lot of books, their child sees it and starts reading too. And if parents don't read, but say that it must be done, the child won't start reading (school 2, focus group 1).

Apart from motivation, teachers mention another important family-related factor of academic success — parental support, including psychological one. While almost none of the survey respondents considered the family's financial situation as a major factor, the focus group participants mention the relationship between the family's wealth and children's academic success multiple times.

The current education system is structured in such a way that without the family's support he [or she] is unlikely to be a good, honors student. This is because education relies a lot on self-studying at home (school 1, focus group 1).

This implies psychological and other support from parents since it is difficult for children to manage everything and get everywhere on their own. Parents can bring them to some events, or help them to buy textbooks or other school supplies (school 1, focus group 3).

Thus, elaborating on the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be concluded that it is the family that teachers consider the main actor determining the achievements of a student. Although

teachers most often link students' academic success to students' characteristics, they believe that these characteristics, in particular malleable ones, are determined by and developed in the family.

The respondents explain the primary role of a student in his or her academic success mainly by two factors. On the one hand, there are "innate abilities", which a student is or is not born with, but which in any case are beyond the school's control, no matter how hard it tries to support and develop them. On the other hand, there is motivation (or, more often, lack of it), without which a student cannot succeed in his or her studies. According to teachers, while abilities are completely fixed, motivation is malleable. At the same time, only about half of the survey respondents consider fostering a student's interest in learning to be the area of responsibility of the school and teachers. The remaining half believes this responsibility should be shared between the family and the child.

2.2.3. "Here we only build on the foundation laid there"

The focus group results confirm the survey findings: the prevailing perception among teachers is that the school is incapable of influencing student success. Some focus group participants note that teacher performance can be a powerful incentive for successful learning. A teacher can get students interested in and enthusiastic about the subject as well as discourage them from learning.

If a teacher has impressed children, it could spark their interest in the subject. If a teacher, on the contrary, has instilled disgust in children, even the most gifted student may simply be reluctant to study this subject, deliver any results, do anything (school 1, focus group 3).

I don't know whether it is only my perception: a teacher has always been a role model for me. In fact, only one teacher in my life has had an impact on me. That was it. There were no other teachers like that one. What I am trying to say is that teachers can not only motivate but also demotivate. Obviously, most of them do the latter (school 4, focus group 1).

A much more common belief among the research participants is that teachers are given some kind of "material" with fixed characteristics predetermined by children and family characteristics, and the teacher's objective is only to process this "material". From this perspective, the success of teachers' work is more likely to be determined by the factors external to the school.

If the family sets the right direction, the right direction for the child, if the child is given enough attention and does not feel unwanted, he or she studies well. This child understands what he

or she is studying for. And I think that this should primarily come from the family, of course. As for teachers, we just guide and help students to fulfill their potential: for some, it will be an A, for others a C. But even getting a C grade requires hard work... (school 5, focus group 2).

Respondent 1: In general, teachers do everything to help students to reach a certain level. But they do not always succeed, because you cannot chop wood with a penknife in most cases, and everything goes back to square one.

Respondent 2: It depends on the family, whether it provides support.

Respondent 1: It can be frustrating when you spend a lot of effort and suddenly you realize the student has not made any progress.

Respondent 3: Family is the main factor. It is all about what it has given to the child...

Respondent 1: Here we only build on the foundation laid there (school 2, focus group 2).

Thus, according to the teachers, family plays the leading role in building student success. Students' personal qualities come second and the school is only a tool to pursue opportunities that have already been defined by external factors.

Interviewer: One can distinguish between the roles of students, family, and school. Which would you put first?

Respondent 1: Family.

Respondent 2: Family.

Respondent 3: Definitely family.

Interviewer: And second?

Respondent 2: Then a student's personal qualities.

Respondent 1: Agreed.

Interviewer: And only then the school and teachers?

Respondent 1: The school brings it all together and delivers a product — let's put it that way (school 1, focus group 3).

2.2.4. "We have to do this, we have to do that — in the end, we don't have time for anything"

The attempts of some respondents to emphasize the role of the school often evoke a negative response and get rejected by their colleagues. Teachers emphasize that they are currently burdened with very demanding requirements and high expectations.

Respondent 1: I think that the school is of primary importance for personality development. I mean all aspects of the school.

Respondent 2: *How can you say that! Again the school is given the primary importance (school 1, focus group 1).*

I believe that the family should also play a significant role, one should not shift the whole responsibility to the school. It's a sad story, because the school is, obviously, a place where a lot of skills can be developed. Really a lot. And we are now just... I mean, the scope of teacher responsibilities is expanding exponentially. We have to do this, we have to do that — in the end, we don't have time for anything. That is the main problem (school 6, focus group 2).

At the same time, many teachers are convinced that parents and children do not fulfill their duties in the educational process and shift all responsibility on the school. This causes great concern and dissatisfaction among teachers. Such perception of the family and students' contribution to the educational process might explain why teachers seek to partially shift the responsibility on parents and their children.

Teachers are burdened with duties and obligations, while children only receive "recommendations". Besides, we are responsible for the life and health of children not only inside a school building but also outside the school. If something happens to a child there, it is our fault too... I am trying to say that parents have been neglecting their duties. They have shifted them all to school. Including upbringing. And they are teaching their children to be consumers like themselves. Children also think that we have duties. And obligations. But everyone seems to forget that children and parents have obligations too.

I think parents should have more obligations related to the upbringing and education of their children enshrined in law. If they do not take care of their children, they should be fined (school 5, focus group 1).

Thus, the focus group materials show that teachers explain the primary importance of students' characteristics in achieving academic success by students' innate unchangeable abilities, motivation, and interest in learning. Teachers assign a leading role in determining student achievement to the family. There is a widespread belief among teachers that the school is just a tool to process given "material", and that teachers do their best to support student effort in learning but are helpless without a conducive external environment, that is, without the support from the family and children. Such avoidance of the responsibility for students' academic success is often accompanied by the reference to overload, an increased number of duties, higher external expectations, as well as the family and students' failure to perform their duties.

Conclusion Russian teachers are not disposed to evaluate their role in determining educational outcomes as very important: most of them prefer to hold the school and teachers solely responsible for transferring knowledge and developing students' skills of expressing their thoughts. The factors of student academic success most frequently referred to by teachers are characteristics of students themselves: the overwhelming majority of teachers choose at least one of these in their answers. A quarter of teachers do not at all mention school conditions, including the quality of teachers' work, among the factors facilitating or hindering student academic success.

Teachers' opinions regarding metadisciplinary and personal learning outcomes differ: less than half of the respondents believe that the school and teachers should be responsible for them. Even when assuming responsibility for the knowledge-related component of education, only about a quarter of teachers acknowledge that the school plays a decisive role in producing the outcomes. Teachers' perception of their role in achieving learning outcomes varies depending on how the question is posed. In particular, teachers often mention their work and other school conditions as factors contributing to student success but do not see them as barriers.

The relationship between teachers' assumption of the leading role in ensuring student achievement and their belief that the school and teachers should be responsible for metadisciplinary learning outcomes is partially confirmed in this study. Teachers who identified school factors among the main factors of academic success are more likely to take responsibility for developing creativity and interest in learning. At the same time, no relationship could be found between a high level of teacher agency and the attribution to the school / teachers of responsibility for developing the skills of time management (self-management) and distinguishing between true and untrue information (critical thinking). To further study the relationship between these beliefs and attitudes, it is necessary to clarify, in particular, how teachers interpret the proposed questions and how they relate them to the outcomes outlined in the educational standards.

There is a certain fatalism in teachers' reasoning. The prevalence of such statements as "you cannot chop wood with a penknife" and the metaphor of "processing of given material" illustrate their belief that school is not capable of significantly influencing the final results. Teachers believe that they are doing their best, but the outcome is more dependent on external factors than on their efforts. According to many teachers, the key characteristics that determine student success either are given or result from something different than the school's effort. Teachers who say the latter particularly emphasize the importance of students' abilities and motivation (interest in learning). Building motivation is more often con-

sidered the family's area of responsibility: the dominant role of the family is mentioned in almost every focus group. When examined in more detail, the factor that in the questionnaire is considered to be student-related turns out to be the responsibility of the family.

When teachers reflect on the role of the school in delivering educational outcomes, they highlight teachers' high overall workload and a rapid increase in the number of duties and the level of responsibility. They are also convinced that parents and schoolchildren do not always cope well with their own "duties". Based on this, teachers often negatively assess the family's role in the learning process, on the one hand, and attempt to lower the expectations about the school and teachers, on the other.

The described system of teacher perceptions is not compatible with teachers' belief in their ability to influence educational outcomes and does not contribute to a high level of teacher agency. Teachers are therefore not likely to actively change their habitual practices. Teachers' low level of agency is one of the reasons why the curriculum reform has been such a challenge. It explains why the reform does not succeed to change everyday practices. The beliefs prevalent among teachers contradict a lot of empirical evidence according to which it is school-related factors that help children cope with a negative environment and achieve academic success [Zvyagintsev, 2021].

In Russia, the modernisation of teacher practices is achieved by changing the regulatory framework and increasing the level of school accountability. Such transformations result in escalating tensions and increased job dissatisfaction among teachers. Teachers are unable to cope with the increasing workload and rising expectations and constantly refer to the failure of other groups involved in the educational process to fulfill their roles. The complex and often negative relations between the school and the family have become an acute problem that cannot be ignored when seeking to improve the quality of education.

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