

*Thematic Article***How It Started? The First Work on Post-Soviet Education (In honor of Wolfgang Mitter)**

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**Abstract**

I was privileged to lead the first work on education in the former Soviet Union after the breakup of the former Soviet Union and this constituted the first time that education had been analyzed without the control of the Communist Party. My first impression may be worthy of mention. In the discussion with ministers of education I was not the only novice. Few of the ministers had travelled outside of the former Soviet Union or had seen an education system anywhere else. What they knew of how education was financed and managed in France, Britain, Germany, Japan or the United States was superficial. What they knew of how skills were provided, how standards were maintained, how the sector was financed, how institutions were governed, how curriculum was designed, how institutions adjust to shifts in the labor market, their understanding was determined by stereotype and naivete. Newcomers were on both sides of the table.

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, political transition, Soviet education, comparative education, politics of education

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## **I. First relationships with Soviet Educators.**

From 1983–1989 I was a Division Chief for Education and Training Design in the Economic Development Institute at the World Bank. Developing countries were demanding assistance for textbooks. Textbook investments were rapidly becoming a major part of the World Bank's education portfolio so we wanted to sponsor policy discussions on the textbook industry. We cooperated with an institute in Budapest, as the site for the week-long seminar. The institute invited Victor Firsov, a Russian mathematics educator from the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Victor and I become fast friends and we remained friends until his death a decade later. Among the many things he and I discussed was the rationale for having private suppliers of textbooks instead of having textbooks designed and manufactured by the Ministry of Education. I had been working on textbook issues in a dozen countries and I described for him how textbook industry worked in France, Japan, Germany, the U.S. in which there were no occasions in which a Ministry of Education carried out the functions of a manufacturer. I found Victor to be remarkably open to new ideas, innovative and creatively provocative. In the beginning however Victor had no idea about the World Bank. I remember spending hours with him in Budapest trying to explain the origins and workings of my organization. He returned to Moscow and described our meetings with his friend Vladimir Shadrikov, then the Minister of Education, and that began my professional linkage to Russia.

Following the Budapest seminar, I received an invitation to visit the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. But the USSR was not a member of the World Bank and therefore contact from me could not be on an official basis. On the other hand, I had work to do in East Asia and I discovered that the cost of a return flight through Moscow was about the same as a flight across the Pacific. Since some flights stopped in Moscow anyway I thought I might take a two-day holiday and meet with Professor Shadrikov and Victor Firsov on the way back from working in Asia. They agreed.

The next thing I knew I was in the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences and allowed to discuss problems of education with anyone I wished to see. After one particularly insightful conversation,<sup>11</sup> Professor Shadrikov asked if I would agree to address the USSR Presidium. I was allowed 15 minutes. I described the World Bank, the sectors in which it was involved, the rate of interest, the numbers of countries which were members and the tiny sector of education in which I was working. I was nervous because I thought I may have over-stepped the bounds of World Bank diplomacy, given that the USSR was not even a member. No one in the Bank noticed, but in Russia the reaction was quite warm. I was

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<sup>11</sup> In this first conversation Professor Shadrikov described a 'voucher system' which he intended to put into place throughout the USSR. I had studied voucher systems but what he described to me was unique. It included: the division of the voucher (per student funding) between the national government, the regional government and the parent. The parents' portion would rise as a child got older and would be fungible. Parents could put their vouchers together as a group and do anything they wished --- fix the school roof, hire a new English teacher, teach ballet. I later described this system to a meeting of senior officials at a meeting on education finance in Oxford. A description can be found here (Heyneman, 1991).

told that my 15-minute presentation was seen on television throughout the USSR. Several years later, I would meet a director of education in an isolated oblast in Siberia and he would say "I know who you are. We saw you on television". Those two or three days in Moscow constituted the beginning of a strong, often combative, but thoroughly respectful relationship. I loved the exchange of views. We argued a lot, but always with respect because we learned so much from one another.

In 1988 I transferred to being a division chief for the Middle East and North Africa Region. A year later the Berlin wall came down. The USSR began to collapse in July, 1991 and was formally dissolved in December, 1991. By December all 15 republics and declared their independence. Including those in Eastern and Central Europe, 26 new countries asked to join the World Bank. I was asked to make original contact with three of them: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On that first visit to those countries I asked for help with interpreters from the Russian Academy of Education (the old USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences). I knew them well and we liked each other enormously. After that trip I was transferred within the World Bank from being a division chief in the Middle East and North Africa Region to be the Chief of Education, Health and Social Assistance for the 26 countries of the new Europe and Central Asia region. That was in 1991.

My first objective was to make contact with each of the ministers of education. Since the World Bank placed priorities on other sectors, there were no resources to make contacts individually. However, with the generous support of the government of the Netherlands, and the Minister of Education (Jo Ritzen), a meeting of education and finance ministers was held in a rural chateau on the Dutch coast in 1991. I was asked to make a 20-minute presentation to the ministers. That speech laid out what I believed were the major challenges to any nation making the transition from a party/state, (e.g. the production of textbooks outside of the Ministry of Education, the de-linking of higher education from sector ministries, the initiation of standardized achievement testing etc.). These remarks later appeared in several places and languages (Heyneman, 1994a; 1994b; 1994c) and became generalized to being education ethos for the region generally. Twenty years later a retrospective appeared which attempted to weigh the degree to which the early assessment proved prescient (Heyneman, 2010; forthcoming).

After that meeting I asked permission to work on education in the Russian Federation. That work commenced in 1992 and was completed in 1994. The report was published in 1995 (World Bank, 1995). I used those whom I originally met at the USSR academy of Pedagogical Sciences to assist me with the logistics of that study.

## **II. The most surprising or shocking thing about Soviet education**

There were many shocking things --- not all of them bad. I was shocked by some very good things which I have tried to recommend to other countries, including my own. Here is a list of both 'bad' shocks and 'good' shocks.<sup>12</sup>

### ***'Good' Shocks (things which deeply impressed me about Soviet Education)***

Creative experiments in public policy (e.g. voucher system mentioned above).

- Creative pedagogy and educational philosophies in kindergartens.
- Espirit d'corps among teachers --- willing to sacrifice even in times of personal hardship.
- Cross-age social cohesion within schools because of not being segregated by age group.
- Social protection within schools because of having health and welfare service personnel on site and considered to be a normal part of the education administration.<sup>13</sup>

### ***'Bad' Shocks (things which deeply disturbed me about Soviet Education)***

- Scientific pedagogy as though there was a single approach.<sup>14</sup>
- The division of the economy into 'sectors' and the control of schools and universities by sectors.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These are described in more detail here: (Heyneman, 1995a; 1997a; 1997b; 1997v; 1998; 2000).

<sup>13</sup> The merging different professions for the protection of children caused a brief but dangerous misunderstanding within the Bank. Country economists discovered the pupil/staff ratios to be drastically different from the typical OECD country. They assumed that all education ministry staff were teachers and that such a low pupil/teacher ratios could not be afforded. They concluded that teachers should be dismissed from employment. The first instance of this was in Hungary. Hungarian teachers threatened to strike. I was responsible for pointing out that education ministry staff in schools included dentists, doctors, nurses and social workers. In an OECD country these staff would have been counted as being under the Ministries of Health or of Social Protection. The confrontation was averted in Hungary when the Bank's economists recognized the distinction. But the lesson was clear: the Bank (and other Western agencies) had to be aware that deep misunderstandings were likely. In many instances I, and other educators, acted as defenders of the education sector against other parts of the Bank.

<sup>14</sup> The USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences had 'proved' that the ideal classroom should have 25 students regardless of the age, subject, or student learning ability. 25 students/class was the tripping point for a school to claim additional resources (26 students would justify an additional class). It was suggested that this was irrelevant to the science. I suspected however that there was a tendency to portray 'science' as the reason for making an administrative decision.

<sup>15</sup> We found this to be bizarre. One example: a minister of education from the USSR visited the U.S. for the first time and had a meeting with the Secretary of Education Richard Riley. During that meeting he offered to sell pencils to the United States education system. He had no idea that a Ministry of Education outside of the USSR did not manufacture pencils.

- The ‘ownership’ of vocational schools by a state owned enterprise.<sup>16</sup>
- The absence of education statistics available neither to educational managers or to the public.<sup>17</sup>
- The poverty of the typical library, science laboratories and the reliance on a textbook for teaching subject matter.<sup>18</sup>
- The mistrust of government statistics and the total disdain for courses or professions associated with Marxism/Leninism.<sup>19</sup>
- The lack of academic freedom in universities. Library books had to be stamped with the mark of having passed censorship.<sup>20</sup>
- The division of programs into a myriad number of obscure specializations. In vocational education there were hundreds. Training to sell shoes was treated differently from training to sell dresses or towels and it was assumed that an employee could not easily shift to a position which required a different training.<sup>21</sup>
- The term ‘engineering’. Over 60% of the graduates from higher education in the USSR considered themselves to be engineers. A comparable figure for Germany

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<sup>16</sup> This made curriculum design a simple exercise by comparison to an OECD country where a curriculum had to prepare a student in a wide latitude of skills across multiple sectors to be applied in jobs across widely distributed employers (Heyneman, 1997c).

<sup>17</sup> Statistics were kept by Goskumstat and were not shared with the Ministry of Education. This included statistics on education finance and expenditures. No educational manager in the USSR could track his budget or re-allocate a budget outside of rigidly enforced expenditure categories. Efficiency gains were impossible without available statistics on costs. Universities and university programs were a state secret. This shocked and frustrated me. On one occasion I was waiting for a meeting in the lobby of the Ministry of Education in Moscow. The room was full of souvenirs left by visiting education delegations from other countries. On the shelf was a book given to the Ministry of Education by the Chinese Ministry of Education. It contained a list of all universities in China, a list of the programs, departments and addresses where someone might inquire for more information. It was in Chinese, Russian and English. I stole the book and later that evening took it with me to the home of the minister of education where I had been invited for dinner. Before dinner I asked for a minute of his time alone. I gave him the book which I had taken from the Ministry and said: see “China has it.” A month later, back in Washington, a package was delivered to me from the Russian embassy. It was a book in Russian and English listing every university in the country. There was a handwritten message to me written by the minister: To Steve Heyneman: Thanks. Signed by the Minister of Education, Russian Federation.

<sup>18</sup> A typical secondary school in an OECD country would have a more extensive library than the typical university in the USSR.

<sup>19</sup> I once asked a Minister of Education about the profession of his son. I was told that he was an historian. Modern history, I inquired? Oh no! I was told, he specializes in the origins of man (what OECD universities label as Physical Anthropology). It was then explained that there was no prestige in modern history because it was assumed to be based on ideology not science.

<sup>20</sup> One disgusted rector showed me a priceless ancient Russian text where a censor has placed his stamp right over the main page, essentially ruining the document. It was shown to me as an example of the intellectual brutality of the government.

<sup>21</sup> A typical vocational or technical school might offer over 300 ‘specializations’; one in Germany would offer about 16.

was about 20% and for the U.S., about 8%. Also, engineering goals were to train how to make a product correctly whereas the goals of an engineering curriculum in OECD universities was to train how to make a product correctly within the constraints of price and environmental standards.

- The lack of progress in advancing the working classes in higher education. It turns out that the portion of university students from working class backgrounds was no higher in the USSR than in OECD countries. University students from professional backgrounds were over represented by 2.4 times in 1939 and by 2.1 times in 1970. University students with proletarian backgrounds were over-represented by 10% after quotas had taken effect, but by 1964 they were underrepresented by 35%.<sup>22</sup>

One significant problem which was overlooked in this early work, was that of education corruption. I first noticed the gap a few years later when stories of bribery for university admissions began to circulate. Eventually education corruption and the consequent damage to a nation's social cohesion became all consuming and a primary focus (Heyneman, 2002/3; 2004a; 2004b; 2007; 2009; 2010; 2011; Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliva, 2008; Heyneman, Lesko and Bastedo, 2007; Heyneman and Skinner, 2014; Silova, Johnson and Heyneman, 2007).

### III. Personal Position

From 1991 to 1998 I was division chief in charge of Education, Health and Social Protection in the Technical Department of the Europe and Central Asia Region of the World Bank. The region was divided into two categories of functions: lending and policy. There were three country departments in charge of lending and each with an education, health and social protection division. The function of my department and my division was to do the analytic work needed for lending operations to take place. We had no authority to sign lending agreements, that was done within the three country departments. But lending could not occur without a consensus between the country department and the technical department on the purposes and design of an operation. Once agreement was reached an operation needed then to be cleared by the regional Chief Economist and the regional Vice President.

Many ask whether *there was there any clear or common vision at the Bank's senior management on how to deal with Russia? Was there any difference between programs and*

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<sup>22</sup> Comparisons of the portion of working class or professional students among a student population are notoriously difficult because occupations have different prestige in different countries and occupational prestige changes over time. University students from professional backgrounds were 3.1 times over-represented in the U.S. in 1927 and 2.5 times over-represented in 1957. In France, university students from professional backgrounds were over-represented by 2.8 times in 1950 and by 2.4 times in 1965. In the UK students from professional backgrounds were 2.6 times over-represented in 1961 and by 2.4 times in 1979. In Japan students from professional backgrounds were over-represented 2.4 times in 1953 and 1.8 times in 1968. In Hungary they were over-represented by 3.1 times in 1961 and by 3.2 times in 1964. (Anderson, 1983, Table 6.1).

*loan projects for Russian and other former Soviet Republics?* If the question of a 'common vision' applies only to education, then the answer is no. There was no clear vision among the Bank senior management. They did not care about education. They had too many other more serious concerns. This was true of most countries in the region, including Russia. Education was last on their list of priorities. Sector strategy in education was developed from papers referred to in this note and gradually over time with sector work associated with a few loans. But the lending for education never amounted to much in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Region. At one time there were more loans for education in a single country (Brazil) than for the 26 countries of ECA.<sup>23</sup>

If the question applies to issues other than education, then the answer is yes. Russia was deeply important, so important in fact that at one stage requests for action were received by the regional Vice President directly from the White House. If the question concerns the nature of the vision, then it is time dependent. The Chief Economist at the beginning of the transition was trained by Milton Friedman. His relationship with the Russian Minister of Finance was close. The GDP was in rapid decline (Heyneman, 1994, p. 11). The population was elderly, and pensions had collapsed. Rates of poverty were rapidly climbing. Nuclear power plants were in danger of leakage. Coal mines were bankrupt. Even gold and petroleum mining were unprofitable. Above the arctic circle they were opened in conjunction with the establishment of artificial cities instead (as in OECD countries) of flying workers in and out from residences further south. Agricultural land and industry were privatized. Collective farms were abandoned. Traditional trade relationships had broken down. Cotton from Uzbekistan could no longer be imported to the mills located in Ukraine; the price of petroleum from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan began to reflect a world price, hence suddenly expensive to all others. The strategy was to break the Soviet traditions quickly (privatization of property and industry, free up labor markets, protect the environment, save pensions through privatization etc.). Nevertheless over time and when corruption scandals over the monopolization of property vouchers become common, strategy changed, became more nuanced, and more reflective.

I left the Bank in 1998 to take a position as vice president for International Affairs in a consulting firm and lost touch with the day-to-day operations in Russia. In Between 1993 and 1995 I worked in Russia about 6 -7 times/year. I led a team of educators and economists, which had been offered to the Bank for free since the ECA region had insufficient internal resources to sponsor education sector work. I had to beg for assistance. Assistance was received from France, Finland, Britain, and the Netherlands. Assistance was 'in kind', so the experts from those countries were paid by those countries.

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<sup>23</sup> At one point the chief economist for the ECA region announced that a (secret) proposal had been made to the Asian Development Bank. He said the ADB should handle education and the World Bank would handle Social Protection. This proposal received a 'spirited rejection' from myself and the operational division chiefs in charge of education in the ECA region.

Their assistance was not fungible so I could not hire experts from countries other than the country which offered the assistance.

I am sometimes asked whether the education work of the Bank was coordinated with other organizations, whether experts other than World Bank staff participated in the Bank's field work on education in the Russian Federation, and whether the final reports represented the views of other organizations and non-Bank education experts. I tried to consult with every organization working on education in Russia at that time. This included: The European Training Foundation, the European Union, UNESCO, ILO, UNICEF, OSI and many bilateral agencies – British, Finnish, French, German, Swedish, Dutch, Canadian and American. But my team took full control over the content of the work and the report.

With respect to education work on the Russian Federation, we had experts from outside of the Bank from Ukraine, Finland, Russia, France, Britain, and the Netherlands. The Bank staff who were working on Russian education came from the U.S. (me), France and Korea. From the beginning I insisted on two things: (I.) that we would make no recommendation whose principle had been established within one country alone; all ideas had to have precedent in multiple (OECD) country contexts. In addition, (II.) we would make no recommendation which was not approved by all us. I am proud to say that we adhered to these two principles.

Our report recommended loans to improve primary and secondary education, textbooks, examinations and higher education. There were ideas for eight education projects. I then left the department and had no opportunity to work on the development of lending. Sometimes I am asked what were the Bank's main accomplishments in the area of Russian education. I can respond to this question only about the analytic work. I cannot answer this question with respect to World Bank education loans. The analytic work which I directed helped familiarize senior Russian educators and administrators on the ingredients which would align their operations with those of the wider world outside of the former Soviet Union. This wider world is NOT just the West. The recommendations which we made helped Russia make the transition from the unsustainable structures established under the USSR to those of every other modern country.

Were there Russian educators and policy makers who were especially instrumental in terms of disseminating and adapting ideas stimulated by the World Bank analytic work? I do not know if it is fair to suggest that the following people were responsible for disseminating and adopting ideas of World Bank expert teams, what I can say is that we had superb dialogue with them. I would moreover consider them to be among the most thoughtful educators I have met in my experience in working in more than 65 countries. They would include: Vladimir Shadrikov, Victor Firsov, Victor Bolotov, Isk Frumin, and many many others.



Today some ask whether the Bank's management forced local partners to follow a standard 'menu' of policy options also suggested for other developing countries. This is an interesting question since I was first to use the term 'menu' to describe the bank's education policy in that era (Heyneman, 1995b). To be sure it was a time of feverish ideology because of the Chief Economist in the region and his long-standing connection with George Psacharopoulos the proponent of the 'education policy menu' based on a narrow interpretation of economic rate of return models. Personally I and Ralph Harbison, the Education Operations Division chief for Eastern and Central Europe, fought against the standard ideology.<sup>24</sup> When I was replaced it was likely that the ideology was without as strong an opponent, and in the lending phase Russian education may have suffered from the effects of this menu (Heyneman, 2005; 2012).

It may be important to also mention that I was fired from the World Bank because of my objections to its education policy menu. I went on to do many enjoyable things as the Vice President for a consulting firm<sup>25</sup> and between 2000 and 2015 as a tenured professor at the number one ranked graduate school of education in the United States. In the interim the Bank changed its views and no longer follows the short policy menu. I lost the battle but won the war. I am proud of what I did and have no regrets.

Some ask whether the policies suggested by the World Bank in the 1990's can be characterized as 'neo-liberal'. In terms of the recommendations in the Russia Education Report, the answer is no. I would argue that the recommendations were based on what was typical among OECD countries, and which any nation must consider to participate in a market economy based on the principles of open labor markets. All the nations needed a wide divergence of approved textbooks; all needed standardized examinations to guide entry into their universities; all need to free-up higher education institutions from the 21 sector ministries under which they had previously been controlled. In terms of what happened after the Russia Education Report was published I will leave it to others to decide. There may be no method to prove this, but I suspect that the strengths of the current Russian education system were more heavily influenced by the recommendations in the Russia Education Report than by the few lending operations which came later.

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<sup>24</sup> With respect to one proposed policy paper which used economic rates of return to limit lending to the education sector except primary education, there was a general revolt of education division chiefs. Of 26 division chiefs responsible for education, 20 signed the protest memorandum on February 2, 1995 asking that the paper not be sent to the Board. Two others agreed with the memorandum in principle but did not wish to sign, one objected to the memorandum, and three others could not be reached (Heyneman, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> My two main clients were the Education Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey and the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in London.

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