

Why doesn't the telephone ring? Reform of educational standards in Russia

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Problem statement

Comparative education scholarship has established that neoliberal globalization has played a determinant role in shaping the agenda of education reform worldwide (Giddens 1990; Bennett and Howlett 1992; Ball 1998; Marginson 1999; Lindblad and Popkewitz 2004; Carter and O'Neil 1995; Lingard and Ozga 2007). While the general direction of national reform policies has been shaped by the global »travelling policies« (Lindblad and Popkewitz 2004), the latter have been significantly »affected, inflected and deflected« (Ball 1998, 127) by the prism of national values and traditional structures of meaning. The discursive interaction between the two has called forth significant ideological tensions, triggering unorthodox local responses and resulting in multiple, often contradictory, articulations of the global in the process of educational change (Fairclough 1992; Carter and O'Neil 1995; Ball 1998; Marginson 1999; Lingard and Ozga 2007).

Facilitated financially and conceptually by stakeholders in global education and driven by domestic political elites, the modernization reform of Russian education (1991–ongoing) is one controversial example of global neoliberal travelling policies in the sphere of education. The global neoliberal orthodoxy of a free market, scholastic excellence, standardization, and quality control has informed Russian educational policies since the early 1990s—driving the reform agenda and providing the backbone for the new ideology of education (Bray and Borevskaya 2001; Birzea 1994; Gounko and Smale 2007; Silova 2011; Bain 2011). Modelled on quality assurance in commercial industries, the concept of *standardization*

of education constituted the core of educational reform in Russia. However, despite generous state funding and extensive administrative restructuring, public attitudes and educational practices related to the standardization of education have proven largely resistant to change, prompting international and domestic observers to assess the reform as a »crisis« or a »failure« (World Bank 1999; OECD 1999; Collier 2011).

Using the case study of standardization reform in post-Soviet Russia, this article asks how global scripts are received, adopted, resisted, and internalized by regional policy-makers, university administrators, teachers, students, and parents in the process of policy reform. Which pre-existing cultural frames of reference, ideological preferences, and value judgments do local actors draw from in the process of de-coding novel educational concepts? How do indigenous social meanings affect educational change? Employing various linguistic, textual, and discourse analysis methods, I engage with contemporary public debate on educational standardization as a key and contested site at which socio-cultural meanings are secured in the sphere of education.

The source data for this article was collected via field, library, and internet research as part of the author's doctoral studies at the University of Oxford (2009–2013). Covering the period from 1991 to 2011, the corpus comprises five sets of data: 1) a comprehensive compilation of state law, official governments statements, and transcripts of parliamentary hearings in Russia's State Duma; 2) sociological data produced by polling agencies; 3) public statements, publications, and round-table discussions produced by professional pedagogical associations; 4) national and regional media coverage of educational issues; and 5) public discussions online, on the radio, and on TV.¹

1 The official statements and transcripts are publicly available on Russian government websites, such as mon.gov.ru, standart.edu.ru, archive.kremlin.ru and zakonoproekt2011.ru. Sociological and polling data includes research produced by such agencies as Russia's Independent Polling and Sociological Research Agency Levada-Center (levada.ru), Public Opinion Foundation (fom.ru), Electronic Monitor for the Development

I draw on these sources as discursive instances of wider social practices to identify the migration route of neoliberal ideas from global → official → public and to highlight points of tension between the novel and the local. I start by illustrating the way in which standardization reform was developed in convergence with policy recommendations made by foreign actors, rather than through consultations with domestic pedagogical communities. I proceed by analyzing the presentation of the new concepts in official government discourse, contrasting these concepts with nationally-based practices and preferences. Through a comparison of the interpretative schemes underlying neoliberal and local interpretations of educational standards, I uncover a number of lexico-semantic discrepancies built into the public reform narrative. Using a variety of discursive techniques, I demonstrate how these discrepancies have resulted in conceptual confusion in both the public and the policy-making domains, mobilizing public resistance and impeding the reform process. I deconstruct widespread resistance to reform by uncovering cultural metaphors underlying negative interpretations of *educational standards*. I then provide some cultural explanations for the perceived failure of standardization reform in Russia, and conclude with the findings' broader theoretical implications for the study of educational change.

of Education (kpmo.ru) and others. Professional pedagogical publications included such popular national outlets as *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta* (The Teachers' Gazette), *Pedsovet* (Pedagogical Council), *Pervoe Sentiabria* (September the First) *Zavuch Info* (Headmaster's Information Bulletin) and *Uchitelskii Portal* (Teachers' Portal). National media was represented by such outlets as *Echo Moskvy* (Moscow Echo radio broadcaster), *Pust' Govoria!* (Let Them talk!, national talk-show on Russian's Channel 1), as well as dozens of national newspapers, including *Argumenty i Fakti*, *Moscow News*, *Izvestia*, and *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*. Online public discussions are available on various platforms, including *Net Reforme Obrazovaniia!* (National movement No to Education Reform! netreforme.org), state-initiated open public discussions of the 2010 Law on Education (zakonoproekt2011.ru), various parent's portals (kid.ru, ya-roditel.ru, and ped-kopilka.ru) as well as official government websites (kremlin.ru, mon.gov.ru, ege.ru, council.gov.ru, and blog.da-medvedev.ru). All translations from the Russian by the author.

Background: The reform of educational standards in Russia

The notion of outcome-based standardization is relatively new to the educational architecture of modern Russia. Despite the iconic uniformity of governance, facilities, and academic programs, up until the early 1990s, the system of Russian education had been predominantly input-rather than outcome-based. In Soviet times, standards of teaching and learning were *de facto* ensured through unified curricula content and textbooks, standardized teacher training, strict timetables, and a strong culture of personal commitment among teachers and students (Alexander 2000). Up until the introduction of the concept of educational standards in the 1992 Law on Education, curriculum content was stipulated by two normative documents, the »basic educational plan« and the »suggested curriculum,« which served as a set of minimum requirements for each level. With curricular guides and teaching methods poorly defined, the classroom routine was left to the discretion of individual teachers and university instructors, and varied greatly across Russian schools and regions. Regional disparities created unequal educational opportunities for students from urban versus rural areas, leading to a growing educational divide and serving as an instrument of social stratification (Bibkov 2010). After persistent lobbying by international stakeholders, primarily the World Bank and the OECD, in the early 1990s the Russian government launched a comprehensive reform of educational standards² based on a framework for the standardization of decentralized educational systems³ (Smolin 2005b). The reform was meant to address the main chal-

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- 2 There is a distinction between the standards for general, professional, and higher education. While all levels of education are to a greater or lesser degree regulated by the state, general secondary education is considered the state's specific preserve, as defined by Russian legislation. Standards for professional education, in turn, are meant to serve as a basis for performance evaluation and state accreditation of educational institutions.
 - 3 Although in theory this set of policy tools is standardized, specific conceptualisations of the standards-based reform varies greatly across national contexts. Thus, in the Anglo-Saxon world the discussion on standardization is often confined to issues of basic numeracy and literacy and

allenges of improving academic performance, preserving uniformity of education across regions, and creating unified criteria for state accreditation and quality control. In keeping with international demands for defining educational standards in terms of specific measurable outcomes, the Russian government developed a standards-based reform package including such policy tools as curriculum specifications, institutional accountability structures, and a standardized measure of academic performance through the introduction of a nationwide Unified State Examination.

The 1992 Law on Education defined educational standards as a »set of nationally recognized requirements« stipulated by the state that determine a mandatory minimum for educational program content, the maximum workload to be assigned to students, and performance requirements to be met by graduates of educational institutions (Article 7). The newly introduced concept was promptly condemned for being underdeveloped on both the legislative⁴ and the conceptual level, as well as for continuing to be »defined as inputs to the learning process rather than as student outcomes« (World Bank 1999, 3) and »expressed only in terms of content covered (input) and hours on the timetable (process) for each subject, rarely in terms of student outcomes« (OECD 1999, 65–66). A 2005 self-assessment by the Russian Ministry of Education acknowledged that the decade-long development of educational stand-

measurable outcomes thereof, while in Asian countries, such as South Korea or Japan, it embraces creative thinking and independent learning.

4 »Curriculum« was legally defined as either »conditions for delivering educational programs« or »requirements for educational results.« In earlier versions, standards were defined as »the basis for the objective assessment of educational level and the qualification of graduates [...]« (the 1992 Law, Article 7), while in subsequent amendments (1995, 2009, 2011) they were defined as »a set of requirements for the implementation of basic educational programs [...] by state-accredited educational institutions.« »National standards,« »minimum educational content,« »minimum requirements« and »curriculum« were loosely defined and used inconsistently and interchangeably.

ards had failed to result in a policy document that »would satisfy all educational stakeholders« (Government of the Russian Federation 2005, 11).

Under heavy domestic and international criticism, Russia's Ministry of Education made an attempt to re-frame the concept of standards within domestic pedagogy paradigms. The revised concept was proclaimed the »first scientifically-based« and »principally new and unprecedented education endeavor« (ibid., 15). Echoing the rhetoric of international policy recommendations, the second generation of educational standards was said to have been, for the first time, »formulated in the language of outcomes« (ibid.). The new educational standards were positioned within a larger humanistic paradigm, in which a »standard« was not merely a unit of educational content but a »social contract« between an individual, the society, and the state, with learners' developmental needs proclaimed to be of supreme value. The new, *learner-centered* and *competency-based* paradigm of educational standards was explicitly construed as in opposition to the old *transmission of knowledge* paradigm:

In lieu of the existing standards that boil down to a minimum of information (knowledge), we are offering a standard based on different principles—principles of variability and redundancy of knowledge. [...] For the first time, the state standard mentions the school of critical thinking. (Government of the Russian Federation 2005, 20)

Presented as a new discovery, the school of creative pedagogy associated with the names of Russian developmental psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Daniil Elkonin was declared a »scientific base« for the new conception of educational standards and framed in terms of a revolutionary leap towards global progressive educational policies.

In 2010, a draft of the revised, third generation, standards for general education was published on the federal web portal standard.edu.ru, inviting open nationwide public discussion. Despite the continued rhetoric of »novelty,« the document defined educational standards in the same way as the 1992 law, namely, as a »set of state requirements.« The draft law divided the requirements into three groups: 1) requirements for learning

outcomes, 2) requirements for the structure of basic educational programs and 3) requirements for the implementation of those programs. In addition to specific curriculum content, »personal parameters« of student development were introduced for the first time. For instance, learners were now expected to acquire over four hundred specified »key skills,« including »love of their region and love of their motherland,« »respect of its people, its culture, and spiritual traditions,« »acceptance of traditional family values,« »advocacy of a healthy life style,« and the »ability to make conscious professional choices.« In addition, the revised standards divided the formerly compulsory minimum curriculum for general secondary school education into core and elective components, thus *de facto* introducing the principle of subject choice into Russian secondary schools. However, as far as official definitions are concerned, the notion of educational standards remained essentially the same from the 1992 law to the 2010 draft Law on Education. They continued to be defined in terms of unspecified »requirements,« either requirements »for the implementation« (*trebovania k realizatsii*) or »for the condition of the implementation« (*trebovania k usloviyam realizatsii*) of educational programmes. Amidst self-referential and circular definitions, the principle questions of what comprises the requirements, and which mechanisms and agencies would ensure the fulfilment of those requirements remained unanswered.

Reform controversy in public debate: confusion and resistance

The standardization reform caused unprecedented public outcry, and the word »standard« became the buzzword of a reform debate dominated by controversy, confusion, and resistance. Although in official rhetoric standards were conceptually richer than the more familiar »curriculum« (*programma*), the pervasive interpretation of *educational standards* in the public mind was a »fashionable« »Anglophone« synonym for curriculum. In public discourse, the term was commonly referred to as »an empty box,« (kid.ru, accessed October 10, 2012) »a fashion whim« (ibid.) and »just a label« (rol.ru, accessed October 10, 2012) that had been »artificially implanted« (ibid.) into the Russian system of education. Curricular

standards were criticized for either being void of essence (»redundant,« »empty,« »just a package,« »a pretty box that's empty inside«; rost.ru, accessed October 10, 2012) or for being too abstract and declarative (»resembles agitprop«), while the uniform nationwide standardized test came to epitomize a »three letter outrage« (Smolin 2005b, 41). Educational standardization was commonly perceived as a by-product of »bureaucratic games« played by an incognito pro-Western law-maker, as illustrated by the quotes below:

Could someone please tell me, what exactly was wrong with Soviet education and why it was necessary to trade it in for the American system? (kid.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

The new standard destroys the best of what was created within the Soviet and Russian system of education. (rol.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

The educational standard only exists in some bureaucrat's head. (*September the 1st* [newspaper], August 2007)

The debate often evoked suspicion of Western conspiracy and was framed in terms of »brain drain,« »dumbing of the nation,« and »destruction of Russian education«:

Don't the pedagogical elite understand that the so-called »standardization« of Russian education to meet global requirements only strives to facilitate brain drain to Europe and the USA? (uchportal.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

Sergei Lisovsky, an influential public figure and senator of the Russian Parliament's Federation Council, claimed that standardization reform amounted to the »total destruction of educational quality in Russia« (interview in the *Teachers' Gazette*, January 2006). Seen as a product of pernicious Western influence, standardization reform was widely perceived as a hindrance to the educational process: »burden for teachers,« »makes it impossible for teachers to work« (uchportal.ru, accessed October 10, 2012). Sarcastic headlines such as »The tale of woeful standards« routinely made national newspapers. Anti-reform Duma deputies called

educational standards »just an official letterhead« for the existing specifications of educational content (transcripts 2009). Russian pedagogical communities castigated standardization reform as »nothing but good old school curriculum formulated in exceptionally dry, vague, and generic terms« (Council 2010).

Along with this overwhelmingly negative perception, there was widespread confusion surrounding the interpretation of the term »standard.« Alexander Adamsky, rector of Eureka, a Russian educational policy institute, called the final version of the new educational standards »a peculiar Russian reading comprehension test« (interview on eureka.net.ru, February 2011). The term »standards« was commonly preceded by the modifier »so-called,« and its precise lexical meaning was problematized throughout the reform debate, from lay public discussions to policy-making debates in the Duma. The confusion revolved around two key questions: What does the term standards mean and whose requirements are these and for whom? A question posed by a regional school teacher on a popular pedagogical forum summed up the nature of public confusion about the term's definition: »Does »standards« mean minimum, maximum [of educational content] or something in between?« (pedsovet.org). The second problem was expressed as follows by prominent Russian politician and opposition leader Oleg Smolin:

Instead of a standard for the conditions of educational process guaranteed by the state (that is, a set of requirements that the school, parents, higher education institutions, or students can put forward *to* the state) we are presented with something different: »requirements for the conditions for the implementation of basic educational programs.« Whose requirements? For whom? It is clear from the context of the law that these are state requirements *for* the school, which is exactly the opposite of what the community expects. (transcripts 2005)

In summary, the overwhelming public attitude to educational standards remained one of perplexity and rejection. A metaphorical statement by Anatolii Gasparzhak, rector of the Moscow Higher School for Social and

Economic Sciences that made headlines in 2010 is representative of public sentiment: »The new educational standards resemble »the marble telephone from the Soviet-era fairy-tale Old Khottabych. It looks like a telephone, but it doesn't ring.«

In the following sections, I demystify the confusion surrounding the definition of the novel concept through a comprehensive textual analysis of the standardization reform debate, including an analysis of the lexical dynamics of the word »standard« and a grammatical/semantic analysis of official policy texts.

»Minimum, maximum or something in between?«—The lexical dynamics of »standard«

I begin with the analysis of lexical meanings of the term *standard* across semi-official spoken genres and official written genres, focusing on contextual »use-meanings« and discourse-specific semantic valences of the word within the debate on education reform (Lemke 1995). Using the search function within the data corpus, I identified instances of use of the word *standard(s)* and engaged the broader context of the debate, ranging from a sentence to a few paragraphs, to reconstruct the denotative meaning of the term. After marking and coding the lexical value of the word and the domain of use (public, policy-making or official) in each individual instance, I sorted the results by lexical meaning and by domain of use. The analysis revealed three fixed interpretations of the term *standard* in the context of the standardization debate in Russia:

1) *Standard* as a »principle of educational provision and governance« aimed at ensuring fair distribution of educational resources and unifying educational content, as in:

The New Generation Standard will provide a balance of academic fundamentality and the effective use of [educational] results for innovative development. (Minister of Education Andrei Fursenko, transcripts 2006)

As a general principle of educational management, this usage encompasses all levels of education, from primary school to higher and profes-

sional education, without distinguishing between them. Rooted in the ideology of neoliberal reform, as expressed in international policy recommendations, this usage is limited to official state discourse and is linked to ideas such as »the social contract,« »a balance between society and the state,« »public consensus,« and »agreed-upon requirements« (Concept for National Standards 2005), all of which serve to indicate a broader, abstract meaning as a »principle« or »element« of the system.

2) *Standards* as »minimum mandatory educational content,« including subject knowledge, practical skills, periods of study, and learning outcomes. These are set by the state and complied with by educational institutions. This usage is best illustrated by the following headlines in popular newspapers:

The state will only finance the standard education (pedsovet.org, accessed October 10, 2012) [»minimum educational content«].

Current educational standards are overloaded with scientific facts (zavuch.info, accessed October 10, 2012) [»specific content of school curriculum«].

The standard is being cut by 25% (novgaz.ru, accessed October 10, 2012) [»new regulations for periods of study, classroom hours, and teacher salary rates«].

A vivid illustration of this usage in the policy-making domain is the 2008 parliamentary session on educational standardization, which laid the groundwork for new educational content, periods of study, and learning outcomes, titled »content of the standard for general education« (*soderzhanie standartov obshchego obrazovaniia*). This usage is conceptually narrower than that of a *principle*. Thematically, it is limited to the discussion of general secondary education reform.

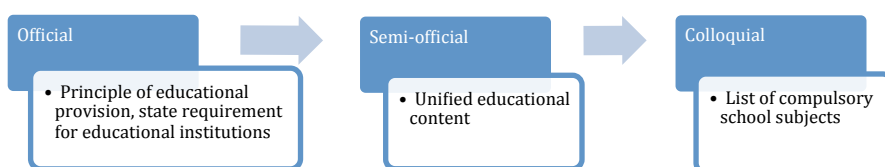
3) *Standards* as »a set of compulsory and free-of-charge scholastic subjects within the modernized educational content.« Appearing in collocations such as »minimum standards« and »mandatory standards,« this usage is exclusive to the context of redesigning secondary school curriculum. Illustrations from the public discourse include:

If the standard is allegedly oriented to the future why is computer science left off the list of compulsory subjects? (ped-kopilka.ru, accessed October 12, 2012)

I am pro-minimization of the standard. Too much is currently cramped into school disciplines, a critical revision is needed. Take, for example, the useless and worthless topic »phonetic analysis« in Russian class. (nechtportal.ru, accessed October 12, 2012)

This usage, widespread in public discourse, is semantically narrower than the second definition and is not conceptually connected to the broader meaning of *standard* advanced in official discourse: »a principle of educational provision.«

The analysis of the lexical dimension of the reform debate indicates a clear semantic specification that occurs as the term *standard(s)* migrates from higher (official) to lower (colloquial) registers. Specifically, its meaning narrows from the more abstract, formal »principle« to the semi-formal »educational content« and further to the colloquial »list of subjects.«



These lexical nuances provide a useful insight into the widespread confusion over the meaning of the term expressed in the question »Does »standard« suggest minimum, maximum, or something in between?« Indeed, in official discourse, educational standards refer to the »maximum,« in the sense of a fundamental principle of providing education, while in colloquial use it may be defined as »minimum« in the sense of a list of compulsory core school subjects. And in semi-official discourse it is, in fact, »something in between« in the meaning of unified educational

content. Thus, while terminology is shared, participants of the standardization debate draw on distinctly different lexical interpretations of *standard*.⁵

Whose requirements? For whom?—An analysis of policy texts

As mentioned in the opening section, since the introduction of the concept in the early 1900s, the notion of educational standards in official policy has been invariably accompanied by that of »requirements.« Standards and requirements have been contextually cross-referenced and inter-defined across policy statements. Thus, standards either »consist of« requirements (*v standarti vklucheni trebovaniia*) or »include« requirements (*standarti vkluchaiut v sebia trebovania*). The tendency to define standards in terms of requirements and vice versa was most clearly reflected in the 2010 Law on Education, which defined »standards and requirements« (*standarti i trebovania*) as a single term without providing individual definitions. While standards is a relatively novel idea in Russian educational discourse, requirements (*trebovaniia*) is a familiar concept that draws on the Soviet party-state notion of rigid institutional accountability and emphasizes the hegemonic role of the state in determining the form and the content of education. Such contextual amalgamation of two disparate

5 As is the case with naturally occurring language, lexical meanings are fluid and mutually penetrating, official usage trickles down into the colloquial domain and vice versa. In the context of Russian education reform, otherwise rather isolated written official discourse shows certain rhetorical adjustments to colloquial interpretations. For example, while initially educational standards were positioned as a »principally new« educational phenomenon, the framing of the third-generation standards (2005–2011) has incorporated popular colloquial usage: »From standards containing a detailed list of topics within each subject that is compulsory for each student, there will be a transition to a new standard [comprising] requirements for educational programs, results that children should demonstrate, and conditions that should be created in schools to achieve these results.« (Ministry of Education 2005, 49; emphasis mine). The conceptualization of *standard(s)* as a principle of governance, however, has been limited to the genre of education laws and written policy statements.

concepts has triggered legitimate public concerns over the nature of the proposed educational requirements: Whose requirements? For whom? I will demonstrate in this section how public confusion reflects a lack of conceptual clarity in the official discourse regarding the distinction between standards and requirements, as well as the precise roles and responsibilities of various educational stakeholders in ensuring educational quality.

To this end, I carry out a grammatical/semantic analysis of official standard-setting documents using systemic functional linguistics (SFL). SFL interprets meaningful grammatical features, including passive/active modes, present/absent agency, omissions, and synonymy in relation to their social meanings. Drawing on SFL, I used patterns of grammatical association between the two terms to reconstruct the social relations and identities underlying the notion of *standard-requirement*. Specifically, I performed an NVIVO-aided search of data corpus for *standard(s)*, and *requirements* as collocates. I then scrutinized each token for meaningful linguistic features within the broader context of sentence, paragraph, text and discourse formation, and further for significant patterns of use.

The analysis reveals that the default lexical template is a fixed collocation »federal state educational standards and requirements« (*federalnie gosudarstvennyie standarty i trebovaniia*). Grammatical/semantic analysis of the collocation suggests that standards and requirements are employed by the official discourse as *contextual synonyms*, i.e., words that are not synonymous with each other in semantics, but act effectively as synonyms in a certain institutionalized discourse formation. Linguistic evidence supporting this observation includes two main sets of arguments: semantic and syntactic. From the perspective of semantics, I identified a number of variants of the template collocation, within which a re-positioning of the main and the subordinate member did not affect the meaning of the phrase. Thus, throughout written policy discourse, the default template »federal state educational standards and requirements« spins off into a number of lexical combinations, including:

- educational standards and federal requirements (*obrazovatelnie standarti i federalnie trebovania*),
- requirements of federal standards (*trebovania federalnih standartov*),
- federal state educational standards based on federal state requirements (*federalnie gosudarstvennie obrazovatelnie standarti na osnove federalnih gosudarstvennih trebovaniy*).

Used as synonyms across official policy texts, all of these pairings refer semantically to the notion of *educational standards*. Contextual coupling of the two terms is so strong that the template collocation, as well as its variations, is used throughout policy discourse as a set phrase in the context of not only Russian but also international standards, as in »international standards and requirements.«

A similar phenomenon is manifested at the syntactic level. Within the said pattern, »standards« and »requirements« are commonly connected by either a comma or a conjunction, including »or,« »and,« and »as well as,« as in the following examples from the 2010 Law (emphasis mine):

State control over educational quality in organizations engaged in educational activities located within the territory of the Russian Federation [is put in force] in accordance with *federal state educational standards, federal state requirements* [...].

In the event that an educational organization is found to have violated the requirements of *the federal state educational standard or federal state requirements* [...].

[...] in accordance with *the federal state educational standard and federal state requirement*.

The new scheme provides continuity between supplementary professional programs and *federal state educational standards for professional education as well as the requirements of professional standards*.

Similarly, the term *requirements* is consistently positioned in brackets and functions as a clarification or definition:⁶

[...] identical or thematically similar educational programs within the same *federal state educational standard (federal state requirements)*.

Thus, lexically, grammatically, syntactically, and idiomatically, »standards« and »requirements« appear to be semantically merged in the official discourse, with the »requirement« component at the core of official definitions. Educational standards are effectively presented in the state discourse as *government-set requirements for educational institutions*.

In order to answer the second question—requirement for whom—the analysis proceeds to investigate the discursive texture of laws and official policy statements in terms of the allocation of agents in the proposed standard assurance paradigm. I found that the paradigm features three agencies: the state, the educational institution, and the learner. Their precise roles and responsibilities are not legislatively defined and are only loosely described in various official statements. The relationship between the agencies is typically framed as follows (emphasis is mine):

Educational standards [...] set by the *state* serve as a guarantor, or an indicator, of the [desired] level of national [educational] development, as well as of the degree of responsibility placed on the *learner*. Goals, standardized requirements, benchmarks, systems of

6 While requirement is presented as a contextual synonym for standard, the lexico-grammatical distribution of the two terms suggests that the role of the former is dominant. Normally, in terms of *linguistic government*, i.e., grammatical relationship between the word and its dependent, the words »standard« and »requirement« have different distribution patterns in the Russian language. For example, although both standards and requirements can be *met (sobliudat')* or *violated (narushat')*, these particular verbs are used predominantly in collocation with requirements and not with standards (Lebedeva 2003; Denisov 1983; Krasnykh 2001). Throughout official policy discourse, however, linguistic governance is consistently determined by the »requirement« component of the pair, suggesting its stronger semantic position within the collocation.

assessment and control are set at the state level. Norms and conditions guaranteeing the fulfillment of educational needs are established [at the level of the state]. *Educational institutions and teachers* are given an opportunity to participate in designing educational programs and curricula [*učebnie plani i programmi*] as well as in defining educational content, the sequence of courses, and methodologies. Thus, standards become the basis for the free organization of education. A national system of education with a predominantly regional (local) level of management is thus potentially established. (Draft Law 2010)

Despite the explicit emphasis on its role as guarantor and regulator, the state is virtually removed from the paradigm as an active agent. This is achieved through a number of techniques. As illustrated above, as the *logical* subject of a sentence, the state appears in the grammatical position of an *object* in passive constructions (»educational standards are set by the state« in accordance with state requirements, as opposed to »the state sets educational standards« in accordance with state requirements). Concurrently, »standards« consistently appear as the *subject* in place of a human or institutional agency: »standards set quality criteria« and »standards ensure educational quality.« Further de-personalization is achieved by replacing »standards« with »standard-setting procedures,« as in the following quote from the 2010 Law:

The *procedure* for designing and setting federal state educational standards is defined by the Government of the Russian Federation [in lieu of »federal state standards are defined«].

As a result, although thematically the government continues to be positioned as a regulating agent, syntactically it is hidden behind the standard-requirement hybrid. Through the technique of eliminating agency, educational standards are objectified and viewed as mechanisms for both guaranteeing and evaluating educational quality. Consequently, the constitutive role of government (setting standards and ensuring their nationwide implementation) is downplayed and its inspecting role (setting requirements and controlling the degree of compliance by educational

institutions) is highlighted, with official rhetoric shifting between quality assurance and quality control paradigms depending on the immediate context. On the one hand, standards are positioned as quality *assurance* mechanisms:

Quality of education in organizations involved in educational activities is ensured through the implementation of federal state educational standards and federal state requirements [...]. (Concept for National Standards 2005)

On the other hand, educational quality is also evaluated against the set standards:

Federal state educational standards and federal state requirements [...] are the basis for the objective assessment of educational quality [...]. (Concept for National Standards 2005)

As a result, by virtue of controlling educational quality at the input and at the output stage, standards are effectively positioned at the center of the quality assurance paradigm, while educational institutions are assigned an executive role in the implementation of standards.

Educational institutions, in turn, are hidden behind the non-agency of »educational programs.« Educational programs consistently appear in the position of the subject/active agent rather than educational institutions (emphasis is mine):

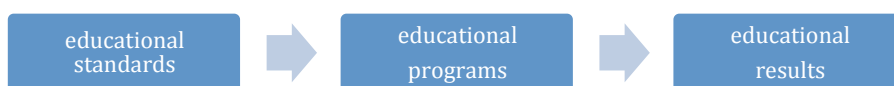
Basic educational programs [...] *are required to ensure* the attainment of learning results by students [...], in accordance with federal state educational standards. (Concept for National Standards 2005)

The final link in the standard assurance paradigm—the student—is also effectively stripped of agency. In lieu of human agency, »student preparedness,« »the attainments of learning results,« and »educational results« are found in active constructions (emphasis is mine):

State (final) attestation is a form of assessing the relevance of the level and quality of *student preparedness* against the requirements of

the federal state educational standard for learning results [...].
(Concept for National Standards 2005)

Thus, in allocating active positions to *processes* and *results*, the official standard assurance paradigm consistently masks institutional and human agents behind passive syntactical constructions. The emerging standard assurance paradigm appears to be completely without agents:



A common feature of a technocratic discourse (Lemke 1995, 63), lack of agency serves to obfuscate social actors and their responsibilities. As a measure of all things, educational standards are positioned at the hub of the standard assurance paradigm, with the government and the state virtually removed from the paradigm as quality assuring agents. At the same time, ambiguous policy language, marked by emissions, lexical inconsistencies, and conceptual substitutions of »educational standards« and »government-set requirements,« serves to implicitly reinstate the controlling role of government in educational matters.

Thus far, in tracing sources of public confusion over the definition of educational standards, I have established that the dialogue between the top and the bottom was hampered by the conceptual opacity of the official narrative and by hidden differences in the basic interpretation of the term. Having clarified lexical discrepancies, I now probe deeper into the conceptual dimension of the debate and demonstrate that various interpretations of the term *standard(s)*, coupled with different value judgments, stem from broader culture-specific interpretative frames. I argue that struggles between larger ideological frames of reference underlie lexical confusion and mixed government rhetoric within the reform debate.

The double standard of state control

In the public discourse, the notion of standards is interpreted in two distinct ideological manners, as the state's *obligation* and as state *requirements*. In the first interpretation, educational standards define the obligation of the state to provide quality education free-of-charge to all citizens. This concept draws from Soviet-era welfare state paradigms, in which the state serves as the principal agent of quality assurance.⁷ Education in this view is a public good and it is exclusively the responsibility of the state to distribute it fairly, uniformly, and free-of-charge. This interpretative frame references the state's »duty« (*dolĭ*), »obligation« (*obiazannost'*), and »moral responsibility« (*moralnaia otvetstvennost'*), as in the example below:

I consider the educational standard a *duty* (*obiazannost'*) of the government to provide quality education nationwide. This is the only function the standard should have. That said, our government, that is, the high ranking bureaucrats in power, will try to cheat their way out, as they always do. We need to keep a vigilant eye on the government so that it doesn't wriggle its way out of its *responsibilities* (*otvetstvennost'*) and we need to cut short its attempts to free itself of the responsibility it is absolutely obliged to fulfil. (A teacher, *Teachers' Gazette*, May 2007)

7 Outside of the educational domain, the word »standard« carries a number of culture-specific connotations in the Russian language. Associated with strict Soviet-era quality control of goods and services, it has long-standing positive connotations. Such collocations as »national standard« (*gosudarstvennii standart*) and »quality standard« (*standart kachestva*) continue to be used on product labels and exploited in marketing campaigns in contemporary Russia to denote excellence. Examples are the ongoing TV talent show Quality Standard (*Standart Kachestva*) and the internationally renowned vodka, Russian Standard (*Russkii Standart*). At the same time, similar to its use in the English language (Alexander 2008), »standardization« (*standartizatsiia*) and »standardized« (*standartizovannii*) carry predominantly negative connotations of de-personalisation and averaging-out.

»Standardization,« in turn, is interpreted as nationwide provision of education of the *highest* quality, with »standard« (adjective, *standartnii*) signifying both »unified« and »of utmost quality«:

Russia needs a unified educational standard compatible with the requirements of higher educational institutions, unified textbooks, and unified programs. In Soviet days, people educated on this basis were considered the most educated people in the world. (A parent, *Teachers' Gazette*, May 2007)

The »state obligation« frame of reference is marked by the idealization of the Soviet past and nostalgia for Soviet education as »the best education in the world.« While the overall interpretative frame is largely positive, it is often overshadowed by an appeal for vigilance over the actions of the government.

By far more predominant, however, is the negative interpretative frame of the standard as a mechanism of exercising state control over education. Here, the educational standard is interpreted as an *accountability requirement* put in place by the state to regulate educational institutions. In this framework, the new academic standard is referred to with terms such as »corrals,« »boxed-in,« »muzzles on academic freedom,« and »bureaucratic games.« It is seen as an unnecessary burden on teachers and a hindrance to the development of educational institutions:

Generally speaking, there is no need for an »educational standard.« It is only needed for the bureaucrat. The job of the bureaucrat is to determine whether I am »standard« or not. To be included into the list of the »standard« you are expected to bribe the law-maker. While in real life, the standard is absolutely useless. Rural schools don't meet a lot of standards, but they are still doing fine. Standard, in the end, is just a box into which the bureaucrat wants to squeeze the whole shebang. (A teacher, *Teachers' Gazette*, August 2006)

And who is going to live and work according to these standards—some incognito »professionals«? Aren't they no more than usurp-

ers who have appropriated a right to dictate [the rules] in areas where they are not more competent than others? (A commentator, *Teachers' Gazette*, October 2007)

Perceived as the invention of an anonymous bureaucrat, the concept of an educational standard is believed to have been utilized and legitimized by the state as a means of monopolizing the educational sector and exerting centralized control at the expense of educational quality. Standardization reform is further interpreted within this frame as equalizing educational opportunities and unifying educational content on the basis of the *lowest* acceptable quality. Such interpretations are underlined by a persistent metaphor of a prison or a livestock corral where the masterminds of the reform are portrayed as »prison guards,« »usurpers« or »herdsmen«:

Our efforts to oppose standardization reform are as ridiculous as asking a prison guard for relaxation of a confinement regime. The objective of the government is to dictate how to live our lives, what to teach our children, and so on. Merely by protesting against this particular document [the 2010 law on education] we, in principle, admit the right of the government to order us around. Therefore, if we are to protest, we should be protesting not so much against this particular law on educational standards but against the right of the state to standardize our lives. (pedsovet.org, accessed October 10, 2012)

In opposing the standardization reform, the public narrative commonly evokes negative associations with business and mass production:

Standardization allows for cheap mass production and the standard makes it possible to stick a Taiwanese-made notebook into a domestically produced electric socket. (An observer, ege.ru)

Conceptualized in terms of a manufacturing standard, standardization reform is seen as incompatible with the domain of Russian education. It is appraised in extremely negative and judgment-laden Russian terms: *uravnilovka* (averaging out, depersonalization), *vseh pod odnu grebenku* (one

size fits all, literally: to groom everyone with the same comb), *shtampovka* (assembly line or »cut and dry« production), *protsentomaniia* (manic race for percentage rates). »Standard« (adjective) is synonymized with »routine,« »stereotypical,« »mass-produced,« »impersonalized,« and »mediocre.« Standardized curriculum and testing are said to lead to »robotization of the student,« and »dumbing of the nation.« This frame of reference often evokes public suspicions of government conspiracy. It is feared that the hidden agenda of standardization reform is to raise »brainless robots,« the uniform product of an »educational McDonald's,« programmed to perform a limited set of industry-driven tasks.

While broadly corresponding with the idea of a »standard-requirement« advanced by official discourse, public perception is dramatically different from the official view as regards value orientations. While the official discourse promotes the newly introduced educational standard as a panacea to systemic issues of quality and equity, the public discourse portrays it as the *cause* of inequality and of the quality crisis. In popular perception, the new educational standard has triggered systemic setbacks detrimental to both educational institutions and individuals. Thus, by »obeying« and »succumbing to« the new standards, schools have »lagged behind« or »have fallen behind global progress«:

In Europe and the US, educational institutions are in a healthy competition with each other, while in Russia schools and universities, both private and public, are forced to obey standards sanctioned by the bureaucrats. I believe this is what's behind recent setbacks in terms of quality, equity, and technology. (A teacher, pedsovet.org)

Along the same line of reasoning, standardization reform is believed to have hampered the personal and professional development of individual students by imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to the learning process:

Having passed the standardized national test and fit into a certain »standard,« the student is left with a limited scope of educational opportunities. (A parent's comment, ege.ru)

In terms of evaluative framing, *standard* in the meaning of »state obligation towards« becomes, in the public narrative, an antonym for the meaning »state requirement for,« with the latter signifying a straightjacket for academic and civic freedoms. This interpretation serves as the backbone for the discourse of resistance to reform.

The conceptual conflict between these two reference frames is commonly actualized through the lexical clash of the borrowed term »standard« (*standart*) and the domestic »program« (*programma*), denoting traditional comprehensive curriculum. Contrary to the official framing, the idea of *standart* in the public mind does not complement but principally opposes the concept of *programma*. Public arguments by opponents of standardization reform are typically construed as follows:

We never had »standards,« we've had *programma* since the dawn of time. Now they've come up with all these bureaucratic games: the Anglophonic »standard« is now pronounced of higher rank than the Greek *programma*. But the new term does not carry any of the essence that was imbedded in the program. It makes it impossible for the teacher to work. (A teacher, *Teachers' Gazette*, April 2007)

As illustrated by the quote above, the »Anglophonic« *standart* is perceived as new and foreign, while the old, domestic (»from the dawn of time«) *programma* is seen as organic and authentic. Conceptually, the indigenous *programma* is moored within the positive »state obligation« frame, where it is associated with comprehensiveness, fundamentality, and provision of a high-quality education. The Anglophile *standart*, however, evokes the »state control« frame, where the term is associated with poor quality, superficiality, and excessive bureaucracy (»does not carry the [same] meaning,« »is merely a bureaucratic game,« »makes it impossible for the teacher to work«).

This heteroglossic opposition is not limited to public discourse, but is sustained in official discourse as well.⁸ In both public and official dis-

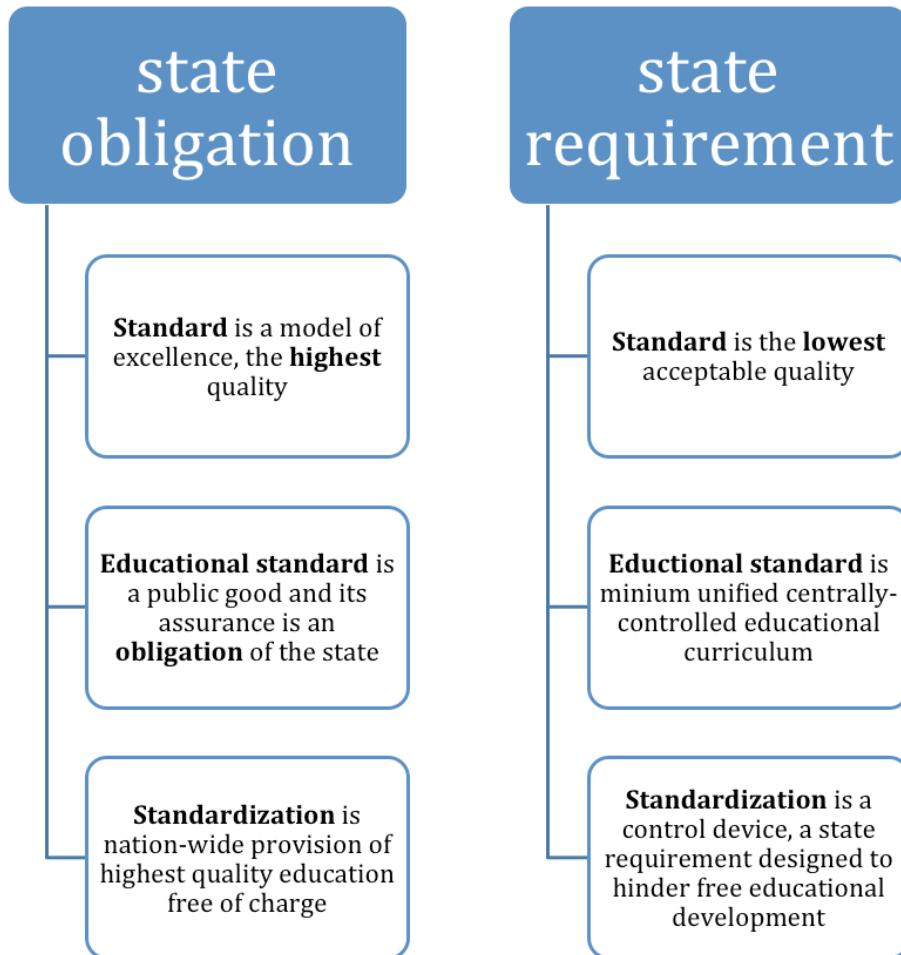
8 A common rhetorical strategy of official discourse is establishing a desired frame of reference by negating an undesirable one. Consider the

courses, the »new« standard is construed as stemming from the progressive Western educational model and in opposition with the »old« one. However, the value orientations are reversed. The official narrative construes the »new« standard as a guarantor of high quality and academic freedom and the »old and outdated« *programma* as a bureaucratic hindrance to educational development:

We insist that the standard does not serve as a »muzzle« on academic freedoms. On the contrary, it should provide opportunities for the realization of these freedoms. (Andrei Fursenko, Minister of Education, transcripts 2007)

Not everyone understands that the state educational standard is not the same as the school curriculum [*programma*] the domestic system is accustomed to. Curriculum covers everything that can possibly be taught; standards, however, cover the minimum that must be taught and that the school graduate is required to master. The idea of state educational standards was borrowed by the designers of the first Law on Education (1992), drawing from the experience of industrialized countries with de-centralized systems of education and [does] not [originate] from Russian history. Consequently, transitioning from unified curricula to standards does not mean limiting [as popular opinion presumes] but expanding academic freedoms. (Alexandr Shadrikov, Duma Deputy, transcripts 2002)

following example from a state-issued monograph (Ministry of Education 2005, 123): »Popular opinion holds that »standard« means »grey,« »stereotypical,« »undistinguished.« Some people think that educational standards are only needed for bureaucratic managers to facilitate control [over education], while for teachers, standards are no more than an obstacle to creative work. That is, of course, not true.« However, by appealing to popular sentiment in an attempt to neutralize resistance, the official narrative simultaneously reinforces popular interpretative frames.



Pedagogical standard: standard or non-standard?

Defined as a revolutionary breakthrough based on domestic traditions of developmental psychology, the new concept of educational standards emphasized individuality, creative independent thinking, and competency building:

The new standard is a training scheme within the framework of education for people capable, in various degrees, of independent creative work and creative activity. This principle was the point of departure for the designers. Innovative society requires an innovative person. Unfortunately, the previous system of education did not have this particular objective. Instead, it had the objective of mastering knowledge, skills, and competencies. Is this a good thing? It may be so indeed. But the innovation society needs a different kind of person. The new educational standard for general education is a scientifically-based call for the formation of competencies that are, to a greater or lesser degree, characteristic of a creative personality. The scientific school that lies at the basis of this standard is the school of Vygotsky and Leontyev and their followers Elkonin and Davydov. This is the school of thought that treats the idea of personal development as the cornerstone [of education]. Perhaps for the first time, the educational standard is based on fundamental science [...]. (Vitalii Rubtsov, director of the Psychology Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, cited in standart.edu.ru)

Aside from references to renowned Russian pedagogues, here and throughout the official discourse, the relationship between the idea of educational standards and indigenous pedagogical traditions remains undefined. Instead, the official discourse builds its rhetorical force on the divide between the progressive new and the Soviet old. In the quote above, this is achieved through invocation of the knowledge-skills-competencies triad (*znaniiia-umeniia-navykei*), an emblematic marker of Soviet pedagogy. The triad serves to evoke the »state machinery« frame within which the uniformity of educational instruction is seen as a

depersonalized mechanism for mass-producing »cogs« in a planned economy. The Soviet model is contrasted with the Vygotskian approach, presented as newly re-discovered and organically harmonious with the idea of the educational standard. The reference to this prominent Russian education theorist is employed to signal the rootedness of the reform in domestic pedagogy, with its emphasis on *vospitanie*⁹ and the development of the learner's creative potential. Overall, however, beneath claims of novelty and originality, the official narrative operates in a pedagogical vacuum.

Outside of the official discourse, the value poles are completely reversed. In pedagogical terms, the adjectival use of standard (*standartnii*) is associated with the cliché, the impersonalized, and the foreign one-size-fits-all approach, while non-standard (*nestandartnii*) stands for the original, individual, and creative. In a 2010 article in *The Teachers Gazette*, the renowned Moscow intellectual Ludmila Malenkova discusses this concept:

I have been dealing with moral education [*vospitanije*] all my life and I can not remain unemotional about the idea of *vospitanije* expressed in terms of »educational standards.« A lot of new words are coming into use these days: »technology,« »monitoring,« »service,« and »standard.« It's impossible to remain unemotional about

9 *Vospitanie* is a uniquely Russian concept (Halstead 2006; Muckle 2003). Various translations as »moral upbringing,« »personality development« or »character education,« it deals with the development of Russian values and attitudes in the process of academic learning. Halstead (2006, 424), for example, defines it as »a systematic attempt to mould the attitudes and comprehensive world view of children and to inculcate in them certain predetermined values and behaviour patterns [...].« Long (1984, 470) defines the goals of *vospitanie* as raising »honest, truthful human beings who are helpful to others and who must work hard in school to develop intellectual, aesthetic, and physical abilities—that is, to develop a comprehensive, harmonious personality.« What makes *vospitanie* a distinctly Russian concept is the organic fusion of elements that in other cultures are considered to be independent or even conflicting: factual knowledge, skill formation, personal morality, patriotism, and civic ethics (Alexander 2000).

all these changes. Vladimir Levi¹⁰ once wrote that there are no standard (*standartni*) children. Vladimir Monomach was fascinated by the great variety of people's faces, and especially by the fact that each face is unique. In one of his letters to me, Dmitry Likhachev¹¹ wrote: »Paradoxically, dissimilarity draws together, whilst similarity, sameness, and standard-ness leave us indifferent. It's possible to fall in love with an unpretty face but it's impossible to fall in love with a standard, mass-produced face.« What we are doing here [by introducing standards into the system of education] is trying to come up with a method of die-casting or stamping (*shtampovka*). How pedagogical is that? (*Teachers' Gazette*, September 2010)

In discussing the idea of educational standard, Malenkova invokes the notions of »technology,« »monitoring»¹², and »service« in a line of association that links *standart* to market economy production. These are dismissed by the author as contrary to the humanistic pedagogical paradigm of *vospitanie*. The latter is evoked with a reference to influential Russian thinkers Vladimir Levi and Dmitrii Likhachev, whose views on education are rooted in ideas of personal development through learners' natural curiosity and creative potential. The backbone of those ideas is the notion of »non-standard-ness« (*nestandartnost'*), understood as »one-ness« in the sense of the individual uniqueness of each human being. The »non-standard« (adj.) within this paradigm is interpreted as »one« or »one-of-a-kind,« while »non-standard-ness« is »one-ness,« or »equality within individuality.« These are opposed to the ideas of »same-ness,« »same as everyone« and »equally depersonalized«—all epitomized by the notion of »standard.«¹³ In contrasting the idea of »non-standard-

10 A renowned Russian writer and psychologist.

11 A distinguished Soviet scholar, known as the »guardian of national culture.«

12 *Monitoring* here is a term transliterated from English, a synonym for the Russian *nabludenie*.

13 The broader opposition of »same-ness« versus »one-ness« has a long-standing philosophical tradition in various modern cultures. It was de-

ness«/»one-ness« with those of »standard-ness«/»same-ness,« Malenkova interprets the latter within a pedagogical paradigm centered around knowledge, rationality, and outcome, in which the sole purpose of education is to transmit the ready-made socio-cultural heritage of adults to the younger generation. The metaphors of »die-casting« and »stamping« generate an image of the child as a *tabula rasa* onto which readily available sets of beliefs and morals are imprinted by the educator. These metaphors are strongly reminiscent of long-standing domestic concerns over pedagogical and moral violence. These were most vocally expressed by Leo Tolstoy (1989), who called the knowledge-centered paradigm a form of »moral despotism,« arguing that no learning can be achieved by putting the educator in a superior position and imposing a »standard« procedure on the process of education. When teaching is merely knowledge transmission and the educator is merely a manager, claimed Tolstoy, the outcome of the educational process is akin to die-casting (*sbtampovka*) or »a tendency of one man to make another just like himself« (1989). Instead, Tolstoy promulgated and popularized humanistic education based on the cultivation of a creative and artistic personality through active, conscious, and guided exposure to domestic culture by the humanist pedagogue.

scribed by the social philosopher Erich Fromm (Fromm 2000, 20–21) as follows: »In contemporary capitalistic society the meaning of equality has been transferred. By equality one refers to the equality of automatons; of men who have lost their individuality. Equality today means »sameness« rather than »oneness.« It is the sameness of abstractions, of the men who work in the same jobs, who have the same amusements, who read the same newspapers, who have the same feelings and the same ideas. Contemporary society preaches this idea of individualised equality, because it needs human atoms, each one the same, to make them function in a mass aggregation, smoothly, without friction: all obeying the same commands, yet everybody being convinced that he is following his own desires. [...] Just as modern mass production requires the standardisation of commodities, so the social process requires the standardisation of man, and this standardisation is called »equality.««

This overarching philosophical contest between standard and non-standard is reflected at the level of contemporary public discourse on education, albeit with a lesser degree of conceptual intricacy. Consider, for example, the following discussion of standardized testing by a parent of an undergraduate student (emphasis is mine):

Personally, I think we put too much emphasis on standards. Our higher education produces graduates with *standard* thinking who are only able to repeat what they've learned by *rote learning*. In that case, why would we want to have imperfect »*standard*« humans, wouldn't it be better to simply *replace them with robots with artificial intelligence*? You would think robots would be more efficient. What we really need to think about is not how to test children but how to *develop the gift of creativity in them*. This will allow them to become professionals with new, *non-standard thinking*. (ege.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

This interpretation of »non-standard« is based on the idea of cooperative problem-solving through creative (non-standard) tasks (*nestandartnie zadachi*), resulting in independent (non-standard) thinking (*nestandartnoie myshlenie*). The standard, in turn, is unequivocally associated with rote learning, »robotization,« and mechanicalness.

In both public and policy-making domains, the notion of educational standardization is reciprocally linked to concepts of pedagogy and culture,¹⁴ with the humanistic pedagogical model of education and *vospitanie* as the *foundation of culture*. In discussing the cultural suitability of the standardization reform, one Duma deputy states (emphasis is mine):

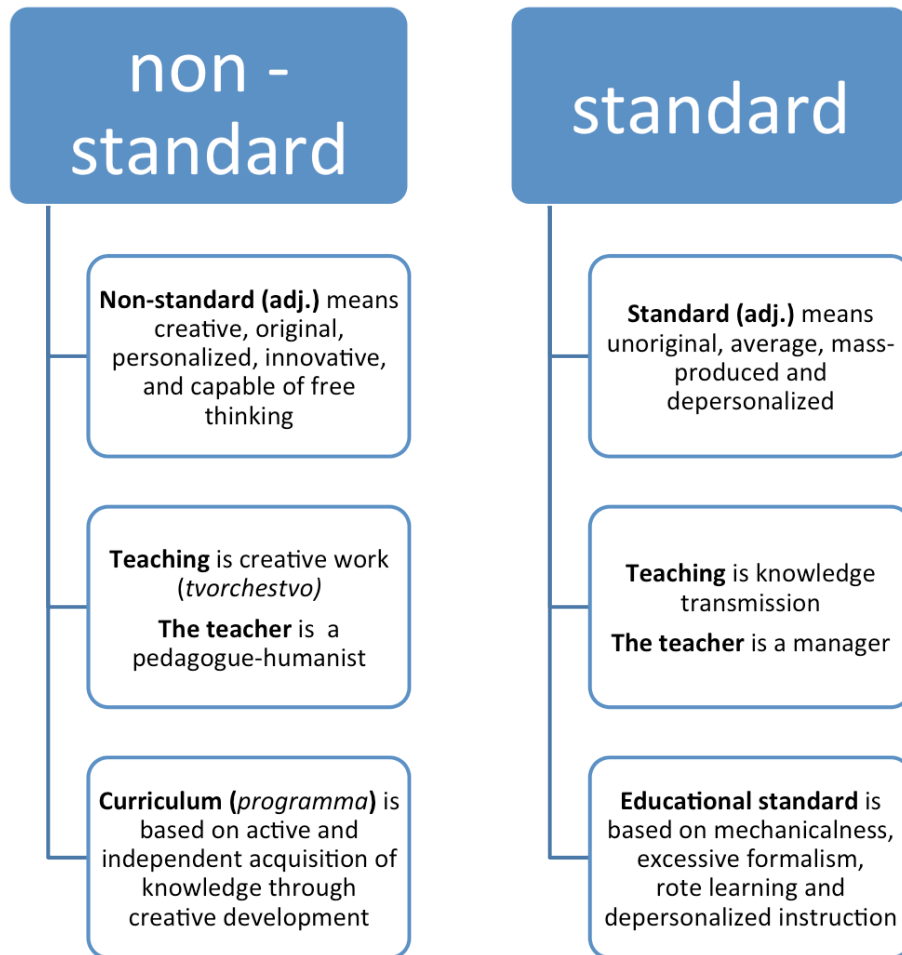
14 The close relationship between education and culture in Russia has a *legislative* foundation: the constitution of the Russian Federation stipulates that as a social welfare state, the state is obliged to provide conditions for the free development of a human being, including such aspects as cultural and spiritual development as well as freedom of self-expression through creative work and participation in cultural life.

What are we essentially actually talking about here? We must preserve a certain educational core in school, a core of knowledge and skills that allows us to *preserve our culture, develop our culture, think independently, be able to think and to learn, as well as be willing to learn*. That's all it [the educational standard] is. (transcripts 2002)

Along the same line of argument, a school teacher contends:

What exactly do the designers of the standardization reform expect of the Russian system of education? Standards are supposed to correlate with the *value system* which comes down to *one of two* options: nurture (*vospitat'*) a personality *or* breed one for the needs of the innovation economy. (ege.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

Thus, in its appeal to domestic pedagogical and cultural values, public discourse sees the idea of a »standard« as *a priori* incommensurate with the local value system in *any* of its various lexico-semantic variants, whether it is a new tool for managing educational provision, a state requirement for educational institutions or a novel pedagogical approach. In the words of one teacher participant of a pedagogical forum, »the mistake of the government as regards modernization reform lies in the fact that it is trying to formalize that which is principally non-formalizable in the public mind.« (standard.edu.ru)



Clashing interpretative frames and failed consensus

In addition to fuelling public resistance to reform, the clash of the opposing ideological frameworks identified above hampers the policy-making debate, even creating a polarizing effect among the proponents of standardization reform themselves. A debate during a plenary session of the State Duma involving two pro-reform policymakers illustrates this polarization:

Vladimir Shadrikov, one of the masterminds of the third-generation educational standards: As we know, »standard« is translated from English as »model,« or »master copy« that serves as an initial model for comparing similar objects. This is extremely important to remember. Some people tend to interpret »standard« as a template (*shablon*) or, a certain—so to speak—dogma. We based the idea of [educational] standards on a model to compare programs, textbooks, and other study materials. Therefore, standards are meant to provide unity of educational space through a comparison of suggested programs and textbooks, as well as other study materials.

Gennadii Yagodin, Duma Deputy: »Standard« is a bad word. Vladimir Dmitrievich here has tried to convince us that in English this word means something other than what it means in Russian. But the thing is, we live in Russia. We do NOT [emphasis in the original] want a standard student, or a standard pupil, or a standard teacher, or a standard engineer. The very word »standard« is very off-putting. (transcripts 2010)

In interpreting the concept of educational standards, Deputy Shadrikov draws on the interpretative schema presented in the official discourse of the reform, in which standard is positively framed as a useful tool of educational management. In his emotional response Deputy Yagodin draws on the popular interpretation of the same term, in which standard is perceived as incommensurate with domestic pedagogy. In discourse analytic terms, the two discourse formations share terminology, yet are not talking about the same thing (Lemke 1995, 38). As a result, the policy-making debate often finds itself deadlocked over wording and basic definitions. While public discourse is relatively homogenous in its oppositional orientation as well as in its argumentative structure, the policy-making discourse simultaneously carries conflicting—official and popular—frames. Straddling the boundaries between opposing interpretations, the official narrative is highly self-contradictory. Consider, for example, the following government statement (emphasis mine):

Do we need educational standards? Undoubtedly, we do. And not just in the system of higher education but in schools as well. Generally speaking, *standards force educational institutions to work in strict regimes* [**state requirement frame**]. Which *contradicts the very spirit of a university*, as universities have always been known for their *free thinking*; top-notch science is taught there, *non-standard approaches and opinions have always been welcome* [**creative pedagogy frame**]. *Restricting educational process by rigid regulations won't allow for proper, quality, teaching of the subjects [...]* [**state requirement and state obligation frames**]. This will *work to the detriment of high educational quality* [**state obligation frame**]. Standards are needed, first of all, *for the purpose of accreditation and carrying out checks on the functioning of educational institutions* [**state requirement frame**]. The standard sets the *minimum* that educational institutions *are required* to provide [**state requirement frame**]. (council.gov.ru, accessed October 10, 2012)

This narrative represents the whole range of interpretative frames embedded into the term *standards*. The »state obligation« frame here clashes with the »state requirement« frame and both come into conflict with the creative, »non-standard pedagogy« frame. While nominally proclaiming humanistic values, the official discourse legislatively reinforces the paradigm of authoritarian state control. The domestic pedagogical tradition, based on the idea of »non-standard-ness,« undermines the rhetoric of both. Figuratively speaking, while attempting to reconcile conflicting frames, the official rhetoric is bursting at the seams.

Discussion of findings: So why doesn't the telephone ring?

The analysis presented here has exposed several points of tension surrounding the concept of *educational standards* at the linguistic, metaphorical, and conceptual levels. I have demonstrated that synchronous use of the term *standard* is characterized by a vertical diffusion of meaning. While remaining within the field of educational content, it undergoes semantic narrowing as it trickles down from the formal into less formal domains of the reform debate. Whereas official discourse positions

educational standards as a broader principle of educational provision, public discourse interprets it as merely a minimum public school curriculum. Having explicated lexical ambiguities, I deconstructed conceptual frameworks within which particular meanings of *standard* are instantiated. I have shown how the term *standard* is evaluated as »good« or »bad,« »suitable« or »unfortunate,« etc., depending on the conceptual frame evoked. I identified the two overarching conflicting interpretative frames: »state obligation« versus »state requirement.« One frame is associated with authoritarian pedagogy, the state monopoly over education, uniformity of educational inputs, and standardized »assembly line« production, while the other is rooted in the welfare-state model of free and universal provision of high-quality education based on the domestic pedagogical tradition of *vospitanie* and experimental, learner-centered, humanistic, individually-tailored educational designs. I also uncovered a number of tensions in the interpretation of the idea of standards within the pedagogical domain, including the oppositions »curriculum versus *programma*« and »standard versus non-standard.« Within these oppositions, one member stands for the »humane,« »fundamental,« »individually unique,« »creative,« »qualitative,« and »liberating« side, while the other represents qualities such as »superficial,« »restricting,« »stereotypical,« »mediocre,« »mechanistic,« »mass-produced,« and »lacking individuality.« While they share these initial points of reference, the values in the public and the official discourses are reversed. Official discourse construes the progressive idea of educational standards in opposition to the »grey uniformity« of Soviet-era schooling, while public discourse castigates the standardization reform as a one-size-fits-all solution. Their seemingly shared language conceals significantly different interpretative schemes underlying official and public visions of the reform. Straddling contradicting frames of reference, the official discourse exhibits a considerable degree of inconsistency in its representation of educational standards. Through a de-personalization of agents within the framework for ensuring standards, the official narrative diffuses responsibility for the implementation of educational standards and asserts the state's controlling and inspecting role as regards educational provision. Despite

repeated government attempts to reconcile the interpretative frames within a single narrative, self-contradictory official rhetoric appears to bounce off domestic pedagogical frames.

The findings presented in this article suggest two broader implications for the perceived stagnation and failure of education reform in Russian. First, reflecting broader issues of institutional anomie and crisis of identity, official government discourse appears to have failed to serve its mediating function as regards policy interpretation and cultural translation of new educational values. From a sociological point of view, moral cognitive restructuring within society is an extremely complex and slow-moving process that takes place largely independent of global policy interventions prescribed by foreign actors (McDaniel 1996; Kliucharev and Muckle 2005; Shalin 2012). As a politically imposed discourse, neoliberalism in Russia requires a substantial degree of alignment with cultural norms and patterns of thought. Embodying both imperatives of the neoliberal market and contingencies of the socialist past, educational standardization reform in Russia has clearly prompted a major renegotiation of educational values within Russian society. Instead of negotiating apparent ideological tensions between models of the neoliberal and the welfare state, the highly technocratic official discourse struggles to retain a semblance of ideological unity through mechanical juxtaposition of conflicting values and substitution of traditional educational values for radical neoliberal values. The meanings of key reform concepts are refracted or flipped depending on the policy context and competing discourses are »stitched together« (Taylor 1997, 9) in a »manipulated consensus« (Silova 2002, 1). Keeping in mind the centrality of governmental agency in interpreting and modifying »borrowed« discursive meanings, the continuing effect of »neoliberal stagnation« (Magun 2010, 16) in Russia's education reform originates at the level of the conception of reform, prior to its implementation.

Second, official detachment from traditional cultural configurations generated a legitimate protest against the radical reversal of traditional values in particular, and the excesses of modernity in general. The neoliberal ethics of standardization continues to fuel public resistance

and official and public conceptualizations are dramatically opposed. Stalled by the intractability of conceptual categories, the reform discourse has been characterized by an extreme polarization of opinions with little room for middle ground between pro-reformers and the »old guard« (Holmes, Read, and Voskresenskaya 1995; Kiselev 2003). In the case of standardization reform, the neoliberal notion of standardization as a set of educational principles ensuring fair educational opportunities has been re-conceptualized in the Russian culture code as a reductionist one-size-fits-all prescription that straightjackets the local pedagogical tradition. What has been presented by the government as a progressive tool for maximizing human personality through competition, curricular choice, and standardized assessment was interpreted in the public mind as a complete displacement of personality. The notions of diversity and uniqueness through quality standards have been perceived in terms of sameness and averageness. The concept of quality assurance through nationwide educational standards has been conceived in terms of total authoritarian state control.

A lack of shared vision as well as ambiguity and confusion among reform agents are often indicative of a symbolic contest over broader social meanings in the process of re-negotiating educational values (Ball 1994; Fullan 1993; Hargreaves and Fullan 2009). In other words, the masterminds and the grassroots agents of reform are not talking about the same thing, hindering interaction between different reform agents and hampering the reform process. From this perspective, this study speaks to broader, culturally-sensitive, contemporary sociological research on Russian modernization (Iliin et al. 1996; Kon 1996; Khrushcheva 2000; McDaniel 1996; Dinello 1998; Wyman 2007) that highlights an unbridgeable ideological divide between neoliberal and traditional Russian worldviews; in the process of education reform »reformers are standing *against* [cultural] reality rather than building on it« (Iliin et al. 1996, 319).

The culture factor: broader theoretical implications

The study presented here highlights the cultural variable as a crucial factor in a process of social reform. While the acts of foreign advisors, legislators, and top national policy-makers are central to formulating educational policy meanings, the interpretations of the official or legislative language are made by grassroots-level agents; including teachers, parents, students and educational managers. Based on a decontextualized neoliberal blueprint, global travelling policies undergo processes of cultural policy *interpretation* by grassroots stakeholders, producing local conceptualizations that may be radically different from the intended ones. Within the national educational discourse, context-specific interpretations made by these stakeholders feed back into policy formulation and vice versa. This study illustrates how policy reality is made up not only of »authored« texts with clear-cut meanings intended by policy-makers, but also of »constructed« texts, i.e. »possible variants and even incommensurable meanings made by grassroots educational players« (Yanow 2000, 9). The study feeds into emerging international social policy research that has been increasingly recognizing policy reality as being primarily a socially interpreted process (Yanow 2000; Ball 1994; Trowler 2003; Fullan 2009; Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). Using standardization reform in Russia as one case study, this article suggests that that persistent intractability of key educational issues may be rooted in conflicts over symbolic meanings made by interpretative communities in a particular policy space and thus calling for further conceptualization of the cultural dimensions of educational change.

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