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Risks in the Education System in the District Centers of Russian Regions

Abstract

The article analyzes the risks faced by educational institutions in Russian regions. The study reveals the state of education in the regions of the Russian Federation and changes that have taken place in the educational processes according to adopted innovations. The features of the educational process in educational institutions of Russian cities are shown. The empirical basis of the study includes in-depth interviews conducted in ten Russian regions with headmasters and teachers of district schools, teachers of additional education, representatives of cultural and recreational institutions, and representatives of district administrations. Teachers' attitude towards the risks that arise in the education system has been analyzed.

Keywords: Schools, Educational Process, Teaching, Optimization Processes, Upbringing.

Introduction

Currently, Russian education is characterized by the process of unification, where the essence of education is transformed under the influence of the introduction of innovations. Such innovations include the Unified State Examination (USE) and the State Final Assessment (SFA), two-level higher education, etc. As a result, the role of the educator in the education system has changed. The reformed education system has brought certain risks to the cultural and cognitive development of young people and the reproduction of human potential.

U. Beck was one of the first to point out that modern society is a risk society. According to the scholar's writings, social institutions and society as a whole need to constantly assess their actions to minimize risks. "When we talk about risks, we are arguing about something that does not exist, but that could happen if we do not immediately shift the wheel in the opposite direction" (Beck: 2001). According to Beck, risks are the probability of critical events that imply possible disasters. C. Perrow also studied the category of risk and introduced the concept of a normal accident (Yanitskii: 2002; Perrow: 1984). Analyzing the processes taking place in modern society, A.

Giddens (1990) noted that today, the world is a world of "institutionalized risk environments". N. Luhmann pointed out that the behavior of the members of modern risk society does not fit into the rational-irrational scheme (Luhmann: 1993; Lupton: 1999).

Yu. Rosa (1998) in his writings points out that risk is an event that contains a threat to something valuable for a person, including their life, and the consequences of this event are uncertain. M. Douglas and A. Wildavsky emphasize the uncertainty of risks in their works. The scholars note that successful overcoming of some difficulties is not a guarantee that new risks will not turn out to be even more destructive (Douglas, Wildavsky: 1982). According to Douglas (1992), the concept of risk is the key idea of modernity.

Yu.A. Zubok (2007) notes that "risk manifests itself in two ways: as a characteristic of the living conditions of social subjects in the state of transition from a situation of uncertainty to a situation of certainty (or vice versa) — it is an environmental risk; and as activity in these conditions, when a reasonable choice appears in assessing the probability of achieving the expected result — it is an activity risk". To reduce the level of risks, it is necessary to self-regulate

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environmental risks through mutual interests and trust.

In the education system, Yu.A. Zubok and V.I. Chuprov consider "the traditional inequality of social start of young people between rural and urban areas" to be one of the risks. According to the researchers, "the risk of being left without education or receiving low-quality knowledge is many times higher among the villagers than among the city residents; among the residents of small towns and urban-type settlements rather than those living in large cities; among the representatives of impoverished families rather than those from well-to-do families" (Zubok, Chuprov: 2008).

A group of researchers A.V. Mozgovaya, E.V. Shlykova, and A.E. Kurochkina (2011) define risk as "the potential possibility of causing damage (harm) to an object or subject, due to both the presence of the source of adverse impact and vulnerability (insufficient protection) of an object or subject, real or subjectively perceived". Sociologists suggest that consumers of risk are characterized by adaptation to it, which can be both forced and involuntary, in turn, affecting "its adequacy, constructiveness, and efficiency" (Mozgovaya: 2001; Mozgovaya et al.: 2011).

According to S.A. Kravchenko (2013), risk is "the emergence of a situation with uncertainty based on the dichotomy of reality and possibility: both the probability of objectively adverse consequences for social actors (individual or collective) and the probability of gaining benefits, based on which the choice of possible action alternatives is made".

L.S. Shilova (2008) considered risks in the field of health and pointed out that "risk is the flip side of any social action, it is especially visible in the sphere of health". Currently, the transformation of the education system leads to increased uncertainty, which, in turn, is a factor of environmental risks.

The objective of this article is to study the problems in the education system in the district centers of Russian regions. What are the risks of education reforms in district centers? Have there been changes in educational processes according to the adopted innovations? What are the risks in the education system in district centers of Russian regions?.

Methods

We conducted the study in ten regions of the Russian Federation. The empirical basis for the study was in-depth interviews conducted by us.

Respondents were selected using the following methods:

- random sampling (district schools, technical universities).

- Non-random sampling: "snowball" method (institutions of additional education).

Geography of Field Research

The following regions of the Russian Federation were chosen to reveal the integrity of the picture: Arkhangelsk, Astrakhan, Ivanovo, Kaluga, Kursk, Nizhny Novgorod, Oryol, Pskov, Smolensk, and Karelia.

The choice of the study's geography is explained by the desire to compare the situation in the Central Federal District (Kaluga, Kursk, Oryol, Smolensk) with the North-West (Arkhangelsk, Pskov, Karelia), the Volga (Nizhny Novgorod), and the South (Astrakhan). The study is also based on comparing industrial regions (Arkhangelsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Kaluga, Ivanovo, Karelia) with agricultural regions (Astrakhan, Orel, Pskov).

The regions also differ in terms of their socio-economic situation: the most economically developed subjects of the Russian Federation are in Kaluga and the least economically developed are in Ivanovo. Another reason for selecting these regions was their geographical location concerning the borders of the Russian Federation with other countries. The border regions include the Arkhangelsk, Kursk, Pskov, and Smolensk regions and the Republic of Crimea.

According to the data collected using Internet resources and in-depth interviews with regional authorities, in each region (in most cases), two district centers were selected for the study. As a rule, one district was chosen from the most prosperous and one low-resource district. Thus, in the Arkhangelsk Region, the research was carried out in Severodvinsk and Kholmogory, in the Astrakhan Region — in Kharabal and Liman, in the Ivanovo Region — in Ples and Shuya, in the Kaluga Region — in Obninsk, in the Kursk Region in — Rylysk and Sudzhuy, in the Nizhny Novgorod Region — in Bogorodsk and Arzamas, in the Pskov Region — in Pechory and Palkino, in the Smolensk Region — in Demidovo and Krasninsk, in the Republic of Karelia — in Suoyarvi and Kostomushki. In-depth interviews were conducted in each district center with headmasters and teachers of schools and institutions of additional education, representatives of district administrations, the staff of museums, libraries, and houses of culture, and residents.

Social and Professional Groups

Since the subject of the research is teaching and the social activity of teachers, in-depth interviews were conducted with headmasters and teachers of district schools.

During informal interviews, which were conducted in the form of a free conversation, only general direction and qualifying questions were asked. As a rule, such directions included the following: a story about work, attitudes towards the process of the district and school optimization, opinions about the modernization of the education system, etc. Based on the results of the pilot interviews, it was revealed that a significant number of students were engaged in additional education, which made it necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with representatives of additional education institutions. Thus, the interviewing of teachers from art schools and colleges, employees of music schools, and teachers of art institutions and institutions with research focus was conducted. The method of collecting information was both random sampling, based on searching for information on Internet resources, and the "snowball" method (teachers and parents told what institutions of additional education students attended).

It was also revealed in the initial phase of the field research that in addition to the staff of additional education institutions, workers from cultural and recreational institutions were also active in engaging children in extracurricular activities. As a result, the following cultural figures were selected as another professional group: employees of museums, libraries, and cultural centers. The interview was aimed at identifying the existing institution-based clubs and cultural events, public interest in their activities, and attitudes towards the work of the staff of these institutions. To reveal the most objective picture of civic views of the representatives of the selected professional groups, residents and representatives of district administrations were also selected as respondents (especially when their children lived and studied in the district center).

Data Analysis

Due to the complementary nature of the data, the collected information was extensive and varied. Meanwhile, the diversity and scope of the information base allowed us to cross-check these materials.

A unified logic was used to analyze all the listed information; the obtained materials were interpreted according to the conceptual apparatus and theoretical and methodological basis of the research. The obtained materials revealed that teachers and cultural activists attached great importance to the possibility of creative action following their views, world outlook, and value orientations generated by internal needs. Thus, the study aimed to identify the role of mindsets, attitudes, and positions of the respondents in an objective reality, in this case, the education system.

Results

One of the main risks has been that teachers spend most of their working time filling in various reports. Thus, they gradually lose the opportunity to pay more attention to their subject and students. Besides, teachers are now forced to deal with electronic reports, which include electronic journals, for example. At the same time, for retired and pre-retired teachers, electronic record-keeping may be difficult. Teachers of the older generation are trained to keep an electronic diary, a journal, etc., but they do not always succeed and have to find ways to solve the problem. As our research has shown, this problem is dealt with differently in different schools. Some headmasters delegate all these journals to a separate employee, others hire a qualified employee to train teachers in new technologies. School headmasters try to retain the qualification of their teachers.

During the study, it was extremely rare to find schools without modern technological conditions for schoolchildren's education. As a rule, almost all classrooms were equipped with computers, interactive whiteboards, and the Internet starting from primary schools. However, there is a risk of insufficient funding of educational institutions in the districts. Elderly teachers are trained to work in virtual space: *"We have 87% of students studying in a very modern environment: electronic journals, diaries, etc."* (from the interview with a school headmaster, the Nizhny Novgorod Region).

Although many schools have not had time to receive complete sets of equipment, a start has been made. To continue equipping the schools with all the necessary equipment, school headmasters try to find funds in any way they can. In one district center, for example, a "Board of Trustees" has been set up, i.e. the district administration has involved various organizations in funding the school facilities. As a result, over six years, enough money was raised to save one of the schools; it was repaired and equipped with everything necessary. The work of the "Board of Trustees" expanded over time: *"There is one organization that provides trips to Nizhny Novgorod for schoolchildren during the holidays: to the circus, theatres, exhibitions, and museums. Initially, the trustees invested money only for school repairs, but then they started doing much more, and this was already the trustees' initiative"* (from the interview with a head of the district administration, the Nizhny Novgorod Region).

There are other examples of fundraising: some schools have work brigades that grow vegetables, *"to make food cheaper. But they grow more than they need, so we go to a fair in Nizhny Novgorod and sell it. And we get a bit of money for the school"* (from the interview with a headmaster).

Besides, the staff of educational institutions often take care of the buildings and their surroundings on their own, with dedication, enthusiasm, and absolutely for free. In one school, the headmaster equipped the recreational halls according to his design: he installed elegant benches in them and placed board games (football, hockey, draughts, and chess). The children there did not chase each other around for no reason — there was simply no need to do so. Such schools are becoming prestigious in the city.

The risk of eliminating the function of educating children has also been found. However, according to the collected data, teachers in some areas continued to be involved in bringing up schoolchildren, with educational processes being maintained even in the branches of universities in the districts. Most likely, this is due to established traditions in education, which continue to be maintained in districts by school headmasters and teachers.

Here are examples of school headmasters' responses from different districts, regardless of economic well-being:

- *"The main thing in bringing up a child is school. We have mentors who work with difficult teenagers";*
- *"We are not able to stop educating, we have many activities, we try to keep children busy";*
- *"We try to reach out to difficult children in any way we can; we have to hold on to each child. When there is a desperate situation, we invite parents and talk to them".*

Another risk in the education system is the introduction of the USE and SFA. The study showed that the perception of the USE and SFA among teachers, students, and their parents was rather negative. The respondents noted that knowledge assessment in the form of tests is biased; for example, it is possible to study well during the whole period of study and still get a score not much higher than that of a student who has low achievements. As a result, there is a possibility that this will affect the self-esteem of the student who has been doing well. Besides, there are students in schools who are not able to pass the unified exam due to their features or mental disabilities. *"We have a student who passed all 11 grades normally, but he won't be able to take the USE. We haven't lost him as a person after all! He takes part in a lot of school activities, he has a lot of friends, and it turns out that his USE score determines everything — that's not right (from the interview with a teacher, the Pskov Region, Pechory).*

Aside from the above-mentioned risks, there are practically no higher education institutions or their branches in the small towns where the research was conducted. As the solution to

educational issues in small towns is in the sphere of regional responsibility, the local authorities cannot always support branches of state universities. In those district centers where there were specialized secondary schools and branches of higher education institutions, many of them have been closed down. Moreover, if a small town has technical schools or colleges, then, as the experts pointed out, there is a lack of additional specialties and branches of universities. At the same time, even having the opportunity to get an education in their hometown, young people still tend to go to the regional center or any other major city. In megacities, there are more opportunities to work and earn money, there are more various circles and sections for children, and there are hospitals within walking distance, not in the neighboring village or even in the regional center, etc. (Aksenova: 2020).

Another risk that the regions of the Russian Federation have to face is the lack of diverse recreational activities and the poorly developed cultural and recreational sphere for young people. Unlike big cities and regional centers, small towns have no such diversity of cultural life. Certainly, district centers have preserved houses of culture, libraries, and institutions of additional education, but as a rule, they are all kept alive by their enthusiastic staff. In all the surveyed districts, serious work on additional education of schoolchildren was carried out, which included creative, musical, and sports classes, and this education was carried out both based on general educational institutions and in special institutions: *"My school has a creativity house, they have many clubs and sports sections there. There are two excellent sports halls which are open seven days a week. I have children's sports and youth school of the district based there"* (from the interview with a school headmaster, the Arkhangelsk Region). The variety of directions for such education seems limitless: *"The school has chess, checkers, tennis, dance, vocal groups, and a theatre organized by our teacher. She graduated from a college of culture and organizes activities for parents and children"* (from the interview with a school headmaster, the Republic of Crimea). Thus, the work of clubs and sections is based on the initiative and enthusiasm of school headmasters and teachers: *"We run different clubs, and they're all free"* (from the interview with a school headmaster, the Ivanovo Region). As a rule, teachers try to involve children in one or another kind of activity. Their attention is particularly focused on educating "difficult" children and students from socially disadvantaged families: *"We send all the children from socially disadvantaged families to the clubs, by all sorts of persuasions, and 50% of all schoolchildren are there for sure"* (from the interview with a school headmaster, the Smolensk Region); *"30-40% of our students participate in school-based clubs,*

but many also go to the pioneer house, music school, and sports complex" (from the interview with the vice-principal of a school, the Kaluga Region).

The staff of cultural and recreational establishments and institutions of additional education are enthusiastic and active in attracting both adults and children to their events. As a result, children are constantly involved in the cultural and recreational life of the city, which affects the formation of the students' outlook and civic position. Additional education contributes to the education of children and young people and provides opportunities to express oneself in different areas of social activity.

As a rule, teachers try to involve children in various activities. Their attention is especially focused on the education of "difficult" children from socially disadvantaged families:

- *"We send all the children from socially disadvantaged families to the clubs, by all sorts of persuasions, and 50% of all schoolchildren are there for sure"* (from the interview with the school headmaster, Smolensk Region, Palkino).
- *"We come to the kindergarten, if we see that the child is talented, we persuade the parents to take them to us for training"* (from the interview with an art school teacher, Smolensk Region, Demidovo).
- *"30-40% of our students participate in school-based clubs, but many also go to the pioneer house, music school, and sports complex"* (from the interview with the school headmaster, Oryol).

Mainly, additional education teachers work to divert young people from aimlessly spending time on the streets, to raise the cultural level of the local community, and to encourage participation in sports and healthy lifestyles. These goals apply to everyone, whether the child is gifted, from a socially disadvantaged family, or has a disability: *"We used to have a boy who has a record in the police, we try to attract such children to us in the first place, now he is the regional champion in freestyle wrestling and he attracted his younger brother to join us"* (from the interview with a teacher from an art school in the Smolensk Region, Krasny).

At the same time, art schools and houses of culture in the majority of small towns are falling into decay, as the material and technical bases are worn out. *"For 10 years already, we have been without a house of culture, which we are trying to include in various programs. It was in the district, now it is in the city; again we have to take it to the district to enter some programs to be able to restore it... These schools are in decline, and the material and technical base is almost 100%*

worn out; the pianos are very expensive instruments, and they need to be changed, and there is no money, almost no money has been granted for this over the past 20 years. Now you understand — we need to keep it up, if we collapse, everything will collapse, the houses of culture will collapse" (from the interview with a teacher of a children's art school, the Kursk Region, Rylsk).

"The difficulty is that we are not comfortable indoors for already 15 years. People often ask us where we practice, because we perform and sing well. But we had to survive, so I spend more time on individual lessons, I sing with everyone, and I practice with everyone who has a free minute. I study with anyone who can when we get together in groups of 3 to 5 people. I just want to sing and learn" (from the interview with the head of a cultural center, the Pskov Region, Pechory).

At the same time, there are positive examples; in some areas, it is still possible to make do with small losses, to seek sponsorships, to raise the salaries of teachers, and to provide outreach activities for students:

"This year we have made significant progress with salaries for cultural workers and will continue to do so so that people would not leave this sphere and it would be attractive for young people" (from the interview with a representative of the administration, the Kursk Region, Sudzha);

"We approached the heads of enterprises and factories to send the children's ensemble "Zadorinka" to Prague, and they responded" (from the interview with a representative of the administration, the Pskov Region, Pechory).

Thus, in the process of interaction between school and additional education, cultural and recreational space is formed, which contributes to the formation of young people's cultural life (Emanova, Khomutnikova: 2018).

The optimization processes contribute to the risk of reducing the number of students in district centers, or rather the elimination of villages as a socio-cultural phenomenon and the migration of the youth (Levchenko: 2015). The study found a decrease in the number of general education institutions due to the decrease in the population. The information that young people get from the Internet has a significant impact. Due to the information broadcasted on the Internet, the formation of a global attitude to living in comfort in big cities and megacities is observed. As a result, there is an outflow of the youth from small towns to regional centers.

T.N. Zaslavskaya and L.L. Rybakovsky (1978) note that migration includes, on the one hand, psychological readiness to move and, on the other hand, the actual movement of people. S.V. Ryazantsev believes that migration refers to a temporary phenomenon. Thus, the scholar regards migration not as a permanent move but as a periodic return to one's permanent place of

residence (Ryazantsev: 2007). V.I. Perevedentsev (2000) notes that migration is any movement of people in a broad sense and population movement due to a change of residence in a narrow sense.

As the study has shown, there are stable directions of youth migration: young people from nearby villages and rural areas come to small towns, and young people from small towns try to move to the regional center, capital, or a nearby large city.

As a result, the best graduates, who are also children of prosperous families and who want to leave to pursue their studies in more developed regional centers, most often study in large regional centers. Universities in regional centers are mainly attended by those from districts who studied well and whose parents can afford it financially. Those who failed in their studies, mostly children from socially disadvantaged families, remain in the districts to live and continue their studies.

Besides, our research showed that there is a growing idea among parents to protect children's rights at school. According to some parents, teachers treat children too harshly, although it is manifested in most cases by the fact that teachers continue to bring up students. Often, parental pressure leads to a change in teachers' actions, i.e. they start to exclude the nurturing function.

"I used to work in a school, I couldn't stand it. Children started to behave terribly; if you reprimand them, parents will come and you will stay guilty" (focus group with representatives of the administration, Suoyarvi, the Republic of Karelia).

Besides, the teacher is no longer a unique source of knowledge due to students' use of the Internet. The risk is that children and teenagers are under the illusion that they can find the information they need on their own.

Since computer games and video bloggers are so popular, children find it harder to force themselves to read classic literature, because reading requires hard work and concentration. However, reading helps to develop creative thinking that facilitates non-trivial problem-solving. The material presented by video bloggers, on the other hand, provides all the necessary material, which ultimately leads to a minimization of the development of imagination and creativity in students.

Discussion

Our study has shown that the transformation process of the education system is characterized by certain risks, which can be minimized through the proactive work of headmasters and teachers of educational institutions. In general, the picture is the following: modernization of the education system is observed in all surveyed districts.

Additional education is in demand among modern youth. The young generation of the surveyed small towns actively participate in additional groups and sports sections, perform in neighboring regions and states, and some of them continue their studies in the creative sphere. Risks in the education system lead to the fact that teachers start to provide only educational services in schools, without bringing up students. The reason is that school teachers are no longer prepared to go against established trends in education.

There is a shortage or absence of vocational and higher education institutions in small towns. Regional centers provide many more opportunities related to educational and professional strategies. Therefore, young people need to be able to receive proper education or to improve their education at the local level.

The results of the study can be used in future research and training activities in the sociology of education.

The results of this work provide an insight into the state of education in the district centers of Russian regions. They can be used for further sociological research in this area. The results can also be used by local authorities in planning interaction with educational, cultural, and recreational institutions.

Conclusion

As the study has shown, transmitted innovations are accepted and adapted by the headmasters and teachers of educational institutions. As a rule, schools are characterized by three main plots: innovations are forced to be supported by the teaching community, for example, optimization process at the district level implies reducing the number of educational institutions or joining a low-resource district to a larger one; other innovations are adapted by headmasters and teachers because they are not approved by society, such as changes in the teaching process and minimization of nurturing function; certain innovations are willingly accepted and fully supported by society, mainly including technical equipment for schools.

There has been serious work in the districts in out-of-school education institutions for children, which includes art, music, and sports facilities. As a rule, art schools have an average of 200 students. Teachers in additional education are mainly active in raising the cultural level of their students and trying to encourage their interest in sports and healthy lifestyles.

The best graduates, who are also children of prosperous families from regional capitals, tend to leave to pursue their studies in more developed regional centers. This is probably good for the socio-economic and educational situation of the latter but radically depletes the former.

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