



Non-Formal Education of Children in Russia: the Legacy of the Soviet Union and Future in the New Information Environment

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of research on the status of non-formal education in modern Russia. The data used is from federal statistics and from the results of two surveys conducted in 2013 (2,000 parents of children aged 5-18, with the average age of 12, in 100 schools, and 5,000 parents of children aged 2 to 19 years, with an average age of 9.9 years, in 1000 public and private non-formal educational organizations). Estimates are presented on children's involvement in informal education programs, the characteristics of providers and programs (content and duration), time requirements, and parental expectations in terms of results of children's participation in non-formal education.

We also present the results of an analysis of current possibilities of informal education of Russian children using Internet resources.

We arrived at the conclusion that non-formal education in modern Russia is based on the infrastructure and pedagogical practices of the Soviet period, but is transforming in response to changes in social and technological practices. In Russia, there is a high level of availability of the Internet and gadgets for children, however, the volume of educational resources offered (MOOCs, video tutorials, smartphone and tablet applications, etc.) and the extent of their use is not yet significant.

In situation when new channels and sources of information appear and sharp increase of the ability to get access to any segments of information the school is losing the monopoly in development of knowledge, skills and behavioral models.

It is necessary to provide way out from the boundaries of formal education. Non-formal and informal education is a sphere where governmental and non-governmental sources are invested at the moment.

International studies of the last 40 years give evidence that support of all forms of education after school have critical importance for the psychological and social development of children, for their educational achievements. The specificity of the non-formal education of children, that is displayed in the voluntary character and the liberty of choosing an educational program and the place where to perform it.

The Soviet system of non-formal education was established in 1918. There was no analogous system elsewhere in the world with such a level of state funding. Its particular characteristics, and even virtues, were:

- connection to the pertinent objectives of a specific stage of the country's development: industrial growth ("young tradesmen"), the development of aviation and astronautics ("young pilots", "young astronauts"), etc.
- a system of involving children from disadvantaged families (through local community clubs).

In 1992, after "perestroika," the system of extra-school education was transformed into the system of "additional education." In the late 20th - early 21st century, the system was on the periphery of the government's attention, which led to a reduction in the network of organizations, the deterioration of facilities, and the loss of qualified personnel. However, a large portion of the network and public funding managed to survive.



According to statistics non-formal education programs currently involve 7,890,112 children aged 5 to 18 years (57% of the total number of Russian children in that age group).

The survey results paint the following picture of children's involvement in non-formal education programs in Russia:

- Total - 62%
- outside of schools - 37.8%
- based at schools - 45.5%
- A portion of the children attended both school-based programs and programs outside of schools.

The Russian education development strategy would increase involvement in non-formal education to 75% of children aged 5-18 by 2020.

The system of non-formal education has a diversity of providers but the range of offerings decreases along with city size. In rural areas, children are involved mostly in school-based non-formal education programs.

The system is primarily comprised of specialized educational institutions in cities and villages (centers, "palaces", and houses of child creativity). Their total number is more than 6,000. The content and results of the programs are not regulated by any sort of rigid standards, although the organizations themselves are included in a system of bureaucratic control. The duration of these programs is usually from one to three years. A number of the programs are pretty archaic when it comes to content and methods of working with children; at the same time, there are rather modern programs – on computer programming, robotics, and animation.

The non-governmental non-formal education sector arose during the post-Soviet period. A certain segment of this sector is "in the shadows": they provide development and leisure activities for children, but do not hold a license to conduct educational activities. According to the survey, programs in this sector involve more than 7% of children. In recent years, several large private centers of developmental education and entertainment (edutainment), offering science experiments and master classes for children, have started up in Moscow. A specific sector of short non-formal education and edutainment programs for families of the creative class in Moscow's new urban spaces (creative clusters in gentrified areas) have also appeared. Non-formal education programs implemented by cultural organizations (museums, exhibition centers, planetariums, etc.) occupy a distinct place on the market – 17.6% of survey respondents had participated in such programs.

The network of "community clubs," which was rather developed in Soviet times, has decreased markedly, but continues to operate (7% of children, according to the survey, are involved.) Non-formal education programs are also offered by professional education organizations (universities and colleges), but not at a significant level (3.5% participation).

Most children (54%) are only involved in one type of program at a time, but 28% are involved in two, and 16% are involved in three types of programs at the same time. According to the survey, the average child spends 6.8 hours a week in non-formal education programs.

The average age at which to begin visiting non-formal services is 6 years. Preschoolers and school children are studying at the non-formal services, the pupils of primary and basic level of general school prevailing; the proportion of senior pupils is lower.

According to the survey, the most sought-after classes are for sports (almost 50% of respondents). 45% of children are enrolled in creative programs (painting, music, dance), and more than a quarter study foreign languages. Less common are additional courses on school subjects (advanced study), at 14.5%, and handicrafts activities, tourism, research, and programming (4-6%).

There is a connection between the content of programs and the income of parents participating in the survey. Among the more affluent parents was a larger share of those whose children study foreign languages and take additional (or more advanced) courses on topics covered in the school curriculum.



With the current state of government funding, a portion of the programs is not free. Moreover, families bear the costs of paying for sports equipment, instruments, and costumes. According to the survey data, non-formal education programs outside of schools are completely free for 34% of families, whereas school-based non-formal programs are free for 70% of families.

Deciding on whether to participate in non-formal education programs and which particular program to choose is completely up to the families. 26.4% of parents indicated that their children chose the programs themselves. 17% of parents said they made the choices for their children. In the remaining cases, the choice was made together.

As far as the goals of non-formal education, most respondents afford precedence to "health promotion and physical development" (53%), and "the realization of interests and entertainment of the child" (46.7%). Learning school subjects (compensating for deficits in the school curriculum, or for advanced study) is considered the main goal by 24% of respondents. 27% of parents indicated that the most important thing for them was "so that there was less time that the child was unsupervised."

Today Russian children have the rather favorable technical opportunity to use the educational resources of the Internet. According to our survey, about 60% of Russian children have personal use of a phone with Internet access, 80% have a desktop computer (half of those share access with other family members), 55% have a laptop computer (30% of those share access with other family members), and a third have a tablet computer. 90% of children that have a computer have access to the Internet. The average age of those going online in Russia is 10 years, and this continues to decrease. According to a study of the Russian Foundation for Internet Development, 89% of adolescents aged 12-17 use the Internet every day, and 9% use it 1-2 times a week. 49% of respondents use the Internet to find education information. At the same time, there are significant inter-regional differences in terms of proliferation of electronic devices and the speed of Internet connection.

It should be noted that although Russia today is marked by an increase in the number of children who speak English, the proportion of those willing to actively use English language informal education resources remains negligible.

However, thanks to projects and programs at the federal level, over the last 15 years the Russian segment of the Internet has a large number of high-quality Russian language resources (digital libraries, collections of digital and informational educational resources – e.g., fcior.edu.ru and school-collection.edu.ru) with educational and developmental content for school children. With the increase of informal media, information services are becoming more diverse and of a multimedia character.

In the Soviet Union there was a large-scale (and pioneering for its time) practice of leading universities organizing correspondence schools for children, which enabled the institutions to identify talented students and prepare them for higher education (Moscow State University and others). Today, a number of Russian universities use distance education portals to recruit and support future students (Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics, and Informatics, Tomsk State University, Higher School of Economics, etc.).

The first examples of online tutoring platforms (e.g., dist-tutor.info, with an audience of 35,000 in 2013) have also appeared. International networking projects for children of various ages are also becoming more common in Russia. Examples of such projects, which allow students to develop research skills on projects by cooperation with teachers and students in Russia and other countries, include the international site for student science projects "Global School Laboratory" (globallab.org/ru) and the global education network iEARN (iearn-russia.org/index_r.htm).

As is known, in recent years the practice of video lectures is actively developing. The number of Russian subscribers to the popular Khan Academy channel on Youtube is 8,867 (by comparison, there are 1,682,807 subscribers to the Academy's English language channel). The segment of Russian video lesson portals is developing quickly as of late (interneturok.ru, www.iShkola.ru, videouroki.net, and the



"Best Video Lectures" group on the social network site VKontakte – www.vk.com), but so far is not significant in scale when compared to the rest of the world.

Social networks that are popular among Russian children and adolescents also provide informal education opportunities. In Russia, these networks are used regularly by 59.6 % of children (Kaspersky Labs, 2013). Our analysis found a number of existing online communities focused on practices that increase social capital ("beauty lessons", "cooking lessons") and on developing individual skills (drawing, playing a musical instrument). The total audience of such communities is about 2 million users on the most popular network, VKontakte (www.vk.com, which has an average audience of 24.9 million people).

Nearly half of Russian children use smart phones, tablets and game consoles; about a third of the children are using them for applications of an educational or creative nature. Parent's trust in the developmental potential of these applications equaled that of their trust in television (Digital Parenting Russia, 2012).

Non-formal education in modern Russia relies heavily on the infrastructure and pedagogical practices of the Soviet period, but has gradually transformed in response to the changing social and technological order. Due to high level of availability to Russian children of computers and the Internet, the sphere of informal education has significant prospects in the Web space. This potential is currently underdeveloped, but the dynamics of change are encouraging.