

## The impact of the west on post-Soviet Russian education: change and resistance to change

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper we draw on Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development in order to examine western influences upon Russian education. We argue that while some have embraced western ideas about education and schooling, reflecting both the influence of specific educational theorizing and that of broader globalizing trends, many teachers have continued to rely on traditional practices and values and have shown resistance to these changes. We examine some of the perceived educational gains and deficits that have accrued since the end of the Soviet period and conclude by considering tensions that are unlikely to be resolved in the immediate future.

**Keywords:** Russia | education | Urie Bronfenbrenner | human development

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

When witnessing events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, that have profound social, economic and political effects, it is not easy to make sense of what is happening. In this paper we will focus on some of the ways in which the Russian education system has changed and is continuing to change since the early 1990s. Some have argued that forces associated with the 'west' (apparently defined, at least implicitly, as the United States), including advertising, consumerism, liberalism, individualism and autonomy appear to be making rapid inroads into a formerly conservative and collectivist society. There is evidence to show that this process is happening in Russian schools, as western ideas about education seem to have superseded 'outmoded' Soviet ideas. Our aim is to show that this position is too simplistic, and fails to take account of the heterogeneous nature of Soviet, Russian, and American society in general and of schools in particular. Before discussing the changes that have occurred in Russian schooling, we will introduce our theoretical perspective, as it is this perspective that has helped us to make sense of the nature of these changes.

## Theoretical overview

Education is intimately connected with intervention; teachers intervene in the thought processes of the students they teach, trying to persuade them to think differently about some aspect of reality than they did before. In a world in which contact between cultures seems the rule rather than the exception, it is thus perhaps not surprising that some scholars assume that apparently successful educational methods in one culture should be applied in another culture, an interventionist strategy across cultures. Others, however, argue that approaches that are successful in one culture are unlikely to be successful in another culture, given that each has different histories, values, beliefs, and practices. These competing views, universalistic and particularistic, are linked to some basic differences of opinion about the nature of human beings and the relations between humans and the cultures in which they are raised.

In the fields of education and psychology these differences are exemplified at the theoretical level by Piaget and Vygotsky. Although Piaget clearly recognized that the social world, including culture, has a major impact on children's development, he was primarily interested in what it is that we as humans have in common, the 'epistemic' individual. He was thus less concerned with the fact that in some cultures, given particular sets of circumstances, children might move through the stages of cognitive development faster than those growing up in other cultures than with the fact that all children and adolescents, given appropriate circumstances, will go through the same stages of development in the same order. By contrast, although Vygotsky wrote about the stages of development of mathematical thinking or clearly distinct periods of childhood and adolescence, his focus was far more on the ways in which different cultures, thanks to their differing historical circumstances, are linked to different ways of thinking and behaving.

Although it may be tempting to understand these views of human development as simply reflecting different theoretical positions, they are in fact related to different paradigms (Tudge & Hogan, 2005). As Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated, a paradigm refers to 'the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways' (p. 105). This position was first put forward by Pepper in the early 1940s. Pepper (1942) argued that, within the field of human development, there are four fundamentally distinct worldviews, which he labelled mechanism, organicism, contextualism, and formism. He described each worldview as having a distinctive stance on the nature of reality, on how that reality (or realities) can be known, and as having its own appropriate methodological stance. Each worldview also has its own root metaphor—that of the machine for mechanism, the living organism for organicism, the historical event for contextualism, and similarity in the case of formism. Deriving from Pepper's initial discussion of different paradigms, a number of scholars (Overton & Reese, 1973; Overton, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Winegar, 1997; Goldhaber, 2000; Kuczynski & Daly, 2003) have discussed the ontological, epistemological, and methodological consequences of taking seriously these different paradigms, focusing primarily on mechanism, organicism, and contextualism. The two most relevant to this paper are mechanism and contextualism.

The mechanist worldview is essentially the neo-positivist position that dominates psychology in the United States. The neo-positivist mechanist ontology involves the position that reality is not directly knowable, but that methods are available that can allow us to 'disprove' incorrect views of reality, by subjecting different claims to careful and critical examination. The relevant epistemological and methodological positions are that careful experimental control is necessary to ensure that we can make appropriate (and generalizable) claims about reality. Not surprisingly, the dominant methods are quantitative, although some use of qualitative methods is encouraged as a way of generating new hypotheses to be tested (the tests themselves are almost always quantitative) and allowing some consideration of meaning for individual subjects of the research.

By contrast, the contextualist paradigm takes a dialectical position on the nature of reality, arguing that instead of clear cause-effect relationships development arises as an emergent property of the interrelations between properties of the developing organism and the context in which the organism develops. The context, for contextualists, includes both the local setting (such as the home or school) and the broader cultural and historical contexts which help give meaning to what occurs within those local settings. Not surprisingly, when comparing this dialectical paradigm with mechanism, one should expect differing views on the nature of reality in different groups, and methodological approaches that neither attempt to create a clear separation of researcher and the participants in research, nor value careful controls as ways to establish clear causal relationships.

We are going to describe one of the major contextualist theories, that of Urie Bronfenbrenner. It is interesting, given the focus of our paper, to note that Bronfenbrenner was born in Russia but lived in the US since early childhood. As is the case with all contextualist theories, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory requires that simultaneous attention be paid to characteristics of individuals, the interactions those individuals have with their surrounding environment, and the broader context (both temporal and spatial) that helps to give meaning to those interactions. It should be clear at the outset, therefore, that contextualist theories do not give priority to the context, but focus on the interactions of individual and context.

Although Bronfenbrenner's theory was viewed for many years simply as one relating the impact of context on human development, this has never been his position (Tudge, *et al.*, 1997). In the decades since the publication of *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979), Bronfenbrenner progressively refined the theory and what he termed the 'PPCT model' as a way of instantiating the theory in research. This model requires one to consider the interrelations among four key concepts: Process, the Person, Context, and Time (PPCT). Of these the first, or 'proximal processes', plays the key role in development, for proximal processes are the 'primary mechanisms producing human development' (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 994). Proximal processes are the core of his theory and constitute the interactions 'between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 6). It is these proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner repeatedly described as being the 'engines of development' (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620), because they constitute the types of everyday activities and interactions in which developing individuals engage repeatedly and in gradually more complex ways, often with more competent members of their social group. It is through these types of activities and interactions that

individuals come to make sense of their world, understand their place in it, and, as we will describe below, change their world.

As Bronfenbrenner made increasingly explicit in his later writings, perhaps responding to the fact that he continued to be cited as a theorist of context, proximal processes are key to the theory, but their nature varies according to aspects of the individual and to the context (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). At the individual level, Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the relevance of biological and genetic factors (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), but devoted more attention to the personal characteristics that individuals bring with them into any social situation. He divided these characteristics into three types, which he termed demand, resource, and force characteristics. Demand characteristics are those of age, gender, physical appearance, etc., whereas resource characteristics are such things as past experiences, skills, and intelligence. However, Bronfenbrenner focused more on force characteristics; these have to do with differences of temperament, motivation, persistence, and the like. According to Bronfenbrenner, two children may have equal resource characteristics, but their developmental trajectories will be quite different if one is motivated to succeed and persists in tasks and the other is not motivated and does not persist.

Thus Bronfenbrenner provided a clear sense of individuals' roles in altering proximal processes, from the relatively passive (changing the environment simply by being in it, to the extent that others react differently to individuals based on their age, gender, skin colour, and so on), to the more active (the ways in which individuals change their environments are linked to the types of physical, mental, and emotional resources they have available to them), to the most active (the extent to which individuals change the environment is linked to their motivation to do so, persistence, and so on).

Proximal processes are also profoundly influenced by the contexts ('systems') in which they occur. The two key systems for Bronfenbrenner are the microsystem and macrosystem. (The other two systems, mesosystem and exosystem, are less relevant to our argument and will not be discussed here.) The microsystem is important because proximal processes occur within microsystems, the settings within which individuals can have face-to-face interactions with others as they engage in the various types of activities made available within those settings. For most individuals, home is one such microsystem, as is childcare or school for many children and adolescents, and the workplace is another such system for adults who work outside the home.

The macrosystem is the other key system in this ecological model. Bronfenbrenner defined the macrosystem as a context encompassing any group ('culture, subculture, or other extended social structure') whose members share value or belief systems, 'resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange' (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25). By this definition, different societies constitute different macrosystems but so too do different groups (socio-economic, regional, ethnic, racial) within society. This notion of a number of macrosystems within any society precludes societal homogeneity, making it difficult to accept that an entire society can be individualistic or collectivistic, or that all parents or all teachers in any society are equally interested in fostering autonomy or conformity.

The macrosystem is critically important because microsystems, where proximal processes (the everyday practices and interactions) occur, are profoundly influenced by the macrosystem within which they are situated. A group's values, beliefs and resources influence the types of settings that are made available to the young of the group, the way the young are treated, the nature of interactions, and so on. But note that the group's values, etc., only exert an influence; they do not determine settings, treatments, interactions, because proximal processes are as much determined by the individuals involved as by the context.

The final element of the PPCT model is time. Although the theory has consistently been concerned with human development (time therefore has to be a key factor) this became increasingly explicit in the last decade of Bronfenbrenner's life. From 1995 onwards T was added to what had until then been a PPC model, and Bronfenbrenner specified that an individual's proximal processes varied by aspects of the individual, the spatial context, and the temporal context, or 'the continuities and changes occurring in the environment over time, through the life course, and during the historical period in which the person has lived' (Bronfenbrenner, [2001] 2005, pp. 3–15). Bronfenbrenner drew on Elder's (1974, 1996) research to show how specific historical events could have varying effects depending on the ages of the individuals experiencing them. This idea, dealing with the impact of historical events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union or a particular country experiencing a period of economic growth or entering a deep recession, is clearly relevant to this paper.

We have devoted so much attention to Bronfenbrenner's theory because, as with any good theory, it can help us to understand development. Typically, reading a sentence like this, one might think of developing individuals, but in this case the theory can help us to make sense of the development of a society, particularly one such as Russia that has been undergoing rapid change over the past two decades.

### **Western influences upon Russian schooling and society**

It is impossible to consider schooling in contemporary Russia without considering what Bronfenbrenner termed macro-time. The immense changes that have taken place in that society since the early 1990s have had profound effects, as Bronfenbrenner would have predicted. A regular visitor to the major Russian cities in the mid-1990s could not fail to observe the rapidly increasing presence of western influences and iconography, perhaps reminiscent of the time of Peter the Great and the first major attempt to 'westernize' Russia. As the shops transmogrified from enterprises that almost sought to exclude potential customers, to become seductive purveyors of goods that had not hitherto been accessible to the majority of the people, the salience of western consumerism, from luxury cars to fast food, was heightened by a rapid and sustained embrace of advertising and marketing.

In the schools, a new-found infatuation with the west could similarly be observed. As the traditional school uniform was gradually phased out, youngsters sought to express their new found freedoms by wearing sweatshirts emblazoned with US sporting teams or iconic western products. On their feet, those profiting from economic transformation sported western training shoes, many costing more than their teachers would earn in a month.

Changes at the level of macro-time do not filter down to all microsystems at the same rate or with the same effects, mostly because old cultural patterns of activities (proximal processes) continue to exert an influence, particularly as the individuals involved (teachers, when thinking about schooling) for the most part stayed the same. Thus, despite this outward embrace of US culture, in the schools, teaching and learning continued very much as it had done throughout Soviet times. Students presented as hard-working, disciplined, compliant, and exhibited high educational standards. Despite the intense social, economic and ideological changes within wider society, there appeared to have been little impact upon everyday school practices (Alexander, 2000; Hufton & Elliott, 2000) and the majority of schools appeared essentially to be identifiable in the terms described by earlier writers (e.g. Bereday *et al.*, 1960; Grant, 1972). Rather than being disrupted by the social turbulence of the early 1990s, it appeared that schools were acting as a set of microsystems in which long-term continuity and stability of educational practice offered a degree of respite from external pressures at the macrosystem level.

However, the appropriation of physical symbols such as dress and material possessions served as only the advance party for the more pervasive influence of western ideas and practices. Despite a long history of high educational standards, largely superior to those in many Anglo-US contexts, it was not long before Russian schools and universities were playing host to teachers, academics and assorted education consultants from the US and Western Europe, all eagerly promulgating their theories and practices in respect of educational reform. In addition to small-scale partnerships, western-inspired reforms were also advocated by major international bodies such as the World Bank, the Soros Foundation, the British Council, the Carnegie Foundation and the United States International Agency (Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2003). Such initiatives, often presented by international aid agencies as value-free, technical approaches applicable to any context, in actuality reflect a particular political world-view in which democratic pedagogy, learner-centredness, and individual autonomy are seen as necessary prerequisites for full participation in a capitalist society (Tabulawa, 2003).

So what happens when one set of values and beliefs, related to a given macrosystem, is imported into another? As we pointed out earlier, the macrosystem influences the microsystem because group-wide values and beliefs are put into practice by individuals engaged in proximal processes. By the same token, as one should expect from a contextualist theory (i.e., one that does not deal in unidirectional flows), what occurs on an everyday basis within microsystems also influences the macrosystem. One should therefore not expect that the import of a new set of educational values and beliefs from the west would have any unidirectional or direct impact on what occurs in schools. Moreover, although it is undoubtedly the case that the prevailing ideology in the United States stresses autonomy and individualism (Hofstede, 1991, 2001) and Soviet ideology clearly stressed collectivism (Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Realo & Allik, 1999) societies, as noted above, are not homogeneous. As scholars have increasingly come to recognize, values more commonly associated with collectivism are to be found in US society, related both to social class and ethnicity (Strauss, 2000; Gjerde, 2004). Even when children are of preschool age, many American parents are as likely to stress group values as those of the individual (Tobin *et al.*, 1989). And while American school ideology might well stress the importance of encouraging individualism and autonomy, the experiences of many children and adolescents might be far more suggestive of the opposite. Similarly, in the former Soviet Union the individual rewards for

those associated with the *nomenklatura* [political elite], such as their more agreeable living conditions, access to goods and services that were next to impossible for ordinary Soviet citizens to receive, and relatively free ability to travel abroad, hardly fit well with an ideology of collectivism. In schools, too, although competition between groups was part of the collective ideal, there were also individual rewards for those who excelled scholastically, artistically, or in the world of sport.

Nonetheless, despite the lack of such clear-cut distinctions in practice, we will illustrate in the pages that follow a major difference between Soviet and western educational theory—the relative emphasis placed upon democratic classroom practice. We highlight ideas popular in the west that emphasize the role of personal agency and autonomy, the meeting of individual needs and the concomitant decline in emphasis upon subordinating one's own desires to the needs of the broader collective. How will such a set of values and beliefs fare when transplanted into a society in which the prevailing proximal processes are in accord with a different set of values and beliefs, those emphasizing far more individual conformity to the needs and wishes of the group?

Often in education, the success or failure of particular theories in impacting upon teacher practice is determined by the current zeitgeist that provides a context where it accords with other social and intellectual forces. Thus, for example, the immense popularity of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) is, in part, attributable to the beliefs of many teachers that the standards movement, with its emphasis upon basic academic skills, has resulted in a neglect of the education of the whole person (Moseley *et al.*, 2005). Often, the adoption of theory is as much a consequence as a cause of changing social and educational circumstances and, for this reason, it seems likely that the embrace of western educational theory by Russian reformers may reflect more pervasive and global influences in which individualism, detachment from traditional ties and settings, and an emphasis upon personal choice and individual agency are key components of 'late modernity' or 'postmodern' society (Giddens, 1991; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

It is a truism that classroom learning cannot be maximized where there is disorder, indiscipline, and student behaviour that runs counter to the needs of the class group. To this end, Russian classrooms have historically been reported as typically being orderly and disciplined (Bronfenbrenner, 1967; Muckle, 1990; Alexander, 2000; O'Brien, 2000; Elliott *et al.*, 2005). Such a pattern, despite more recent concerns that we shall list below, appears to have persisted into the new millennium. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (OECD, 2003), for example, the views and performance of more than a quarter of a million students in 41 countries were examined, together with the perspectives of their teachers and principals. Russian informants were among those least likely to report that lessons were disrupted by noise and disorder, or that students were slow to become engaged in their lessons.

Since the end of the Soviet period, there has been much debate about the nature of teacher–student relations and the appropriateness of western democratic conceptions for Russian classrooms. One of the central canons of US values has been the importance of personal freedom and individualism, although the practice in American schools does not always accord with this prevailing ideology. Nonetheless, this has been represented in educational theorizing and

practice by approaches that emphasize individual agency, choice, meeting individual student interests and preferences, and prioritizing student self-regulation over the exercise of adult authority (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Such ideas would appear alien in respect of Russian traditions that long pre-date the Soviet period and also that are largely at odds with socialization practices handed down from the Soviet period. From the age of three, most children were involved in group activities where, from within a supportive and caring environment (Markowitz, 2000), they were taught to cooperate, recognize and respect the interests of the group, and defer to the authority of adults (Tudge, 1991). In school, from the age of seven, Soviet children were taught clear codes of moral behaviour and respect for adult authority. However, in a way very different to that of the US, Soviet teachers also sought ultimately to develop children's capacity for self-regulation. Here, peer influences were crucial, as gradually a degree of behavioural regulation was transferred from the class teacher to the class group, and finally to the individual. Displaying a nice portrayal of the links between culture-wide values, the fostering of specific proximal processes, and a change in individual characteristics, a manual written for teachers and youth group leaders stated:

The children not only try to do everything as well as possible themselves, but also take an evaluative attitude towards those who are undermining the achievement of the row. If similar measures arousing the spirit of competition in the children are systematically applied by experienced teachers in the primary classes, then gradually the children themselves begin to monitor the behavior of their comrades and remind those of them who forget about the rules set by the teacher, not to forget what needs to be done and what should not be done. The teacher soon has helpers. (Novikova, 1959, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1970, p. 55)

Bronfenbrenner (2005) notes that not only did peers support behaviour consistent with the values of adult society, they were also encouraged to take personal initiative and responsibility for developing and retaining such behaviour in others. Thus, while pursuing the adult agenda, the process provided students with a sense of agency and control. Having employed monitors to help emphasize desirable standards of conduct, the teacher then encouraged children to provide their own self-evaluations with the aim of outlining areas for improvement. The teacher's ultimate aim was student self-regulation of behaviour, a goal that, superficially, might appear to be in concert with that of western theory. However, any freedom of choice and opportunity to operate in ways counter to the teacher's intention was largely illusory.

For many western educationists, such a picture might represent an Orwellian nightmare of oppression and mind control that runs counter to the major precepts of US motivation theory, where student engagement is seen to be increased by the presence of authenticity (i.e. activities have meaning for students' everyday experience and future goals), challenge, choice over content and learning approaches, and relate to student skills interests and abilities. Where such factors operate there is believed to be more likelihood of intrinsic motivation, a less passive orientation, increased feelings of control, and a greater sense of personal accomplishment (Yair, 2000; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001).

While few would argue with the perceived value of the constructs listed above, the practicalities involved in creating effective educational contexts, underpinned by democratic principles, are sometimes understated. Indeed, not only are there dangers in assuming that individualism and self-determination will operate unproblematically in non-western classrooms, but there is often also insufficient recognition that there exist inherent difficulties in western contexts also. In his study of primary education in five countries, for example, Alexander (2000) describes the tensions that were evident in schools in Michigan where organizational complexity and an associated ideology of democratic pedagogy resulted in greater levels of student distraction, restlessness and challenge to teacher authority. As a result, monitoring, rather than instruction, formed a significant proportion of teacher–student interaction. Across the five countries studied, Alexander (2000) noted the sharpest contrasts between the Russian and the US lessons:

In the one context the substantive messages about the nature of knowledge, teaching and learning and about behavioural norms and expectations were unambiguous yet also—bar the occasional brief reminder—tacit; in the other context they were the subject of frequent reminders by the teacher and often intense encounters ranging from negotiation to confrontation. (p. 318)

Such difficulties result from pedagogic practices that reflect very different underlying value systems:

In an authoritarian teaching culture routines will not be negotiated or contested because teachers simply will not permit this to happen, while in a teaching culture that espouses democratic values routines not only will be negotiated and contested but by definition must be. The combination of complex classroom organisation, unpredictable lesson structure and avowedly democratic pedagogy, such as we found in Michigan, is a sure-fire recipe if not for conflict then certainly for the constant testing of regulatory boundaries. (Alexander, 2000, pp. 385–386)

While it is no doubt possible to create a democratic, collaborative classroom with high levels of self-regulation and discipline, the reality is such that it is often difficult for teachers, particularly those working in highly demanding socially disadvantaged contexts, to provide such environments and maintain high standards of student engagement and academic striving. In situations where motivation is not high, an ‘implicit bargain’ may be struck in which teachers and students come to an unspoken agreement that few heavy academic demands will be made in return for an acceptable level of compliance. Sedlak *et al.* (1986) argue that in such circumstances the result can be a diversion from an academic focus, informal banter, forms of pedagogy that, while meeting student preference, are lacking in rigour, and teacher–student negotiation about what should be taught, the standards that should be expected, and the nature of work assignments. What can be easily overlooked, therefore, is that increasing student academic freedoms, in a context where there are unclear understandings about adult authority, is likely to place great demands upon young people's capacity for self-discipline and self-regulation.

It is thus important to reiterate that not only are societies heterogeneous and that there are likely to be discrepancies between any society's ideology and the values and beliefs of any given macrosystem within that society, but also that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence

between the values and beliefs of the macrosystem on the one hand and proximal processes on the other; values are not always put into practice, as one should expect from a contextualist theory that emphasizes that proximal processes (what happens on a regular basis in classrooms, for example) vary not only by the broader context but by the particular motivations, needs, demands, and so on of the individuals themselves. Rather than positing any unidirectional flow, Bronfenbrenner's theory is dialectical.

### **The need for change?**

While visitors to Russian schools have largely praised their high standards of achievement and behaviour (Canning *et al.*, 1999; Alexander, 2000; Hufton & Elliott, 2000), it would be as misleading to provide an idealized picture of the earlier Soviet classroom in which all students were hard-working, highly motivated and shared the state's ideals and values as it would be to argue that all US schools, teachers, and students accept unconditionally that society's dominant ideology. While lauding the high academic and behavioural standards of the Soviet period, western commentators (e.g. Muckle, 1990; Westbrook, 1994) criticized the strong ideological component that minimized debate and controversy and often undermined students' individuality. Despite attesting to the high standards in mathematics, sciences and general level of erudition, Eklof (2005) raises concerns that Soviet students were less skilled in applying their knowledge. Polyzoi and Dneprov (2003) talk of authoritarian and inflexible teaching methods. Froumin (2005) refers to students in Soviet schools who were alienated by the emphasis upon control and conformity and whose behaviour was perceived by the authorities as 'disadaptation'. Markowitz (2000) is critical of the student passivity that resulted, whereby less motivated students tended to withdraw rather than disrupt. Others (e.g. Glowka, 1995) have countered this perspective by noting that Russia has a long tradition of authoritarianism (and therefore students might be more accepting of it), and Schweisfurth (2000) cites favourable adult reports of Soviet schooling. However, in an age when independence of thought and the need to adapt to high challenging times are seemingly universally emphasized (Giddens, 1991), such criticisms were widely recognized as meaningful by Russian progressives and by the end of the Soviet period many Russian educators had come to believe that the time for change had arrived.

Responding to calls for more democratic and individualistic emphases, the *1992 Law of Education in the Russian Federation* thus sought to increase opportunities for personal self-determination, democratic relations and 'humanization' (i.e. responding to students as unique individuals with differing goals and potentials). However, as one might expect from the simple importation of values without any corresponding means of changing proximal processes, teachers were largely unaware as to how to put these ideas into practice, particularly as their professional skills and knowledge were closely bound to long-established methods (Elliott *et al.*, 2005). Some paid lip-service (Eklof & Seregny, 2005) while others actively resisted calls to change believing that traditional methods were necessary for addressing Russia's difficulties (Belkanov, 2000; Mitter, 2003; Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2003). Given these uncertainties, it was not surprising that tensions soon emerged.

### **The positive and negative effects of change**

The individual's own developmental life course is seen as embedded in and powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives. (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 641)

In Bronfenbrenner's theory, culture-wide values and beliefs are always undergoing change, simply by virtue of each new generation bringing their own perspectives, needs, drives, and interests to bear. In times of major historical shifts, as occurred with the break-up of the Soviet Union, this process of change is more rapidly seen.

It is possible to see the effects of the rapid and widespread changes that have taken place in the lives of everyone—young children, adolescents and their parents. Often, opinion is divided as to whether change has proven desirable. As part of the Cultural Ecology of Young Children project (see, e.g., Tudge *et al.*, 2000; Tudge, 2006), parents of children who had just entered school in a small city south of Moscow were interviewed about what was happening in their children's lives. The following two segments, both from single mothers (although from different social class groups) show clearly the range both of feelings about the changes and about the extent of changes that these women and their young children were experiencing. One woman, who worked as a cleaner and made barely enough to get by on, was not at all happy with the changes:

I don't trust our government. I think they are highly incompetent...I am disappointed in the State; I had never dreamed my life would be so hard. So I tell [my son] all the time that he should learn and learn. I still hope things will turn for the better.

She also had this comment to make about her son's teacher: 'Their relationships are just wonderful. She is attentive and strict. She makes them work a lot, and the children learn well'. She noted, in fact, that her son's '...teacher is stricter than mine had been. His teacher uses play at the lessons, but the children stay quiet. They have freedom at break'. The teacher herself pointed out: 'When I was at school our teachers were more authoritarian than we are now'. However, she went on to say:

At the age of 6–7 years democracy as such is not that important. The little ones are learning to be disciplined. If a child is not taught how to listen to the teacher and how to work, he will have a hard time learning later on. No talent will help. During the first two years at school the child is taught to be interested and attentive.

Such a perspective reflects findings from a parental survey undertaken by Froumin and colleagues in 1995 (see Froumin, 2005, p. 134) in which 45% of respondents regarded humanization as harmful, seeing strictness and high demands as the most desirable qualities in teachers. Similarly, parental desire to have their children study in experimental educational programmes fell from more than 70% in 1991 to 35% in 1996.

On the other hand, a middle-class mother, who at the time was making more than four times more money than the cleaner mentioned above, paid for her daughter to go to a new private school, and expressed her delight at the changes that had occurred in recent years:

This school allows the parents a choice of programmes for their child. ... While with the usual kind of programme the teacher explains to the pupil all he needs to know, here the way to teach is to pose a problem before the child, and to do it in such a way that the child arrives at the solution himself or with the help of the teacher. The child goes all the way himself; he is not led by the hand.

The child's teacher also expressed her enthusiasm about the changes that had taken place: 'School has changed over the recent years, much changed, as a matter of fact. New programmes appeared...programmes of "developmental teaching" [i.e., teaching that is adapted to the pace of the child] as well as new methods of teaching'.

Debate has concerned not only the appropriateness of western pedagogic models and notions of teacher authority but also the desirability of differing cultural emphases upon the ultimate purpose of education. Many Russian commentators have expressed worry about the rise of materialism and, as a consequence, a perceived challenge to the esteem in which education has long been held. Growing instrumentalism has resulted in greater emphasis upon education as a means to an economic end rather than, as was found in the mid-1990s, a continuing belief in the power of education as a means to develop the cultured individual (Hufton *et al.*, 2002; Elliott *et al.*, 2005). Thus, during the period of the first author's investigations in St. Petersburg in the second half of the 1990s, it appeared that social changes had resulted in a relatively minor impact upon the behaviour and orientations of school students, although in the universities, recognition that some disciplines were key to economic well-being was being reflected by changing enrolment patterns (Rutkevich, 2000).

Young people in the 1990s were moving from a socio-economic context where differences in people's life standards had, for many generations, been relatively minimal—the old Soviet joke being that under capitalism, wealth was unevenly distributed, whereas under socialism, poverty was evenly distributed. Now, they were being confronted by increasingly wealthy individuals operating in a context where practical 'nous' appeared to be more important than analytical abilities (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 2001).

Students in schools and colleges became increasingly cognizant of their teachers' poor salaries, and the even worse position of many university academics. Observing their teachers' straitened circumstances, and believing that school curricula were failing to prepare young people for the new economic pressures that would mark their passage into adulthood (Iartsev, 2000), it was hardly surprising that teachers were gradually seen as less worthy of respect than had been the case hitherto (Bocharova & Lerner, 2000). White (2001) describes an encounter with a woman who tearfully recounted a conversation between her son and his teacher-father: 'You have two degrees, yet you come to me begging for cigarettes' (p. 11).

Recognizing that higher levels of scholarship did not appear to be reflected by an improved material position (Nikandrov, 1995; Zubok, 1999) increasing numbers of students came to consider that their schools were ill-preparing them for the new economic pressures that would mark their passage into adulthood (Iartsev, 2000).

A combination of western influences and the loss of adult influence appear to have resulted in the development of powerful, increasingly autonomous, youth subcultures (Sergeev, 1999). As Bronfenbrenner (1967) noted some four decades ago, where the peer group is highly autonomous, as is a feature of western but not of the former Soviet society, it is more likely that it will exert an influence that is oppositional to prevailing adult values. He noted that under the Soviets, the role of the peer group was not left mainly to chance, as it was in the US, but was the result of 'explicit policy and practice' (p. 206). The first author's work (Elliott *et al.*, 1999; 2001; Hufton *et al.*, 2002) suggested that peer influences in St. Petersburg were still operating in the 1990s in ways that supported teachers' messages. Ten years after the end of the Soviet period, there is growing concern that negative peer influence, similar to what we found in our studies in England, is increasing.

Alongside the growth in materialism, globalizing influences have led to a questioning of traditional ideals and values and a corresponding social and moral vacuum (Lisovskii, 1999). Shorn of the old ideals of country and collective, and dismissing the views of their elders as an irrelevance, increasing student anxiety and alienation has been ascribed to the loss of long-standing cultural and historical values (Karpukhin, 2000). Such tensions are reflected by intergenerational differences in terms of self-expression that are particularly substantial for countries formerly in the Soviet bloc (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Given the vacuum that resulted from the weakening of state and societal mechanisms of social regulation, young Russians' value systems have been seen as increasingly gleaned from intellectually undemanding mass culture (Zvonovskii & Lutseva, 2004). Erasov (1994) laments:

...the desanctification of attitudes toward the world and society, the decline of the ideal, exalted, romantic aspect of life, have been accompanied by its banalification, rendering it more bourgeois and susceptible to the laws of the market, converting it into a commodity. The old symbols and imagery, which expressed lofty and oftentimes unattainable ideals are being turned into products of mass spiritual assimilation—but an assimilation that is illusory, limited to audio-visual familiarity. Ideals are being turned into products of mass spiritual consumption rather than assimilation. (p. 217)

The breakdown of traditional values and codes of behaviour, together with the challenging economic climate, have resulted in widespread expression of fears about the erosion of young people's morality (Ol'shanskii *et al.*, 2000) with reports of a greatly increased incidence of drug use, violence and criminality. According to a recent World Health Organization report (Krug *et al.*, 2002), youth gangs are particularly strong in the Russian Federation, and youth homicide rates increased by 150% between 1985–1994 to 18.0 per 100,000, the seventh highest rate of the 75 countries surveyed. In a further comparative study of 35 countries (Pickett *et al.*, 2005) Russia was third highest in respect of boys' self-reports of the prevalence of physical fighting.

Bronfenbrenner's theory helps us to understand how educational reform and restructuring cannot exist in a vacuum from wider social change. Society-wide values and beliefs do not change simply with a change of regime or dominant ideology, and educational practices that are viewed (perhaps over-optimistically) as successful in one society cannot be easily imported into another society without creating tensions and unexpected side-effects. Growing emphases upon competitiveness and individualism were reflected in the Russian education system by a plethora

of structural reforms, which have resulted in the development of socially divisive educational hierarchies and inequalities (Konstantinovskii & Khokhlushkina, 2000). The arrival of the market resulted in an inevitable mushrooming of selective schooling whereby the most able (or affluent) students and the most skilled teachers gravitated to well-resourced, specialist schools (Cherednichenko, 2000). In turn, economic incentives have led teachers to invest most energy in those with most academic promise. However, where there are winners, there must be losers, and many students appear increasingly alienated (Andriushina, 2000), particularly those for whom learning is a struggle and who find themselves in unfashionable schools. Interestingly, Froumin (2005) argues that the introduction of more democratic teacher–student relationships played out more effectively in the elite schools. The result of these divisive developments has been an increasing trend towards social exclusion that mirrors that more traditionally found in western society and the concomitant problems of increasing school drop-out rates (Grigorenko, 1998; Cherednichenko, 2000).

### **Looking to the future: striking a balance between resistance and accommodation**

In times of dramatic social changes, it is particularly true that adolescents are the last children of the old system and the first adults of the new (Van Hoorn *et al.*, 2000, p. 4).

As we noted above, Bronfenbrenner highlighted the fact that historical events are likely to result in different developmental trajectories for those of different ages. Students appear to have generally embraced the ‘modernizing’ influences emanating from the west. Teachers, many of whom seemed initially to have found western pedagogic theory and practice beguiling, tied in as they are with a democratizing agenda, have now seemingly retreated and are widely perceived to be resistant to change. This should not come as any great surprise; the longer individuals engage in particular activities the more they come to be viewed as natural (hence the power of proximal processes). Having taken democratization and humanization training courses, many teachers return to their schools speaking the new language but quickly revert to their former modes of practice (Froumin, 2005). Interestingly, unlike many western reforms, the primary initiative for educational reform came from teachers whose focus, swept along by ‘public euphoria over democracy’ (Froumin, 2005, p. 131) was more upon student–teacher relations than school governance, as was the case in many western states (Froumin, *op. cit.*).

Within the field of sociology, there has been considerable debate as to whether rapid value change, rather than that of social attitudes, is possible. Influenced by American cultural anthropology, many sociologists view individual value orientations as deriving from early socialization processes and, as such, as being deeply embedded within the individual personality structure (Klages, 2005). Klages (*op. cit.*), however, argues that rapid value change can be understood if considered as an aspect of rapid structural change occurring on an individual level, with the shift towards the ‘individualistic’ (which he believes to be a phenomenon of all highly developed nations) operating as a functional consequence of societal modernization (*cf. also*, Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's theory, however, allows us to take a more subtle approach. What occurs at the level of everyday interactions (teacher practices, student–teacher and student–student interactions, etc.) is influenced both by what the individuals concerned bring to the situation and

by the context, where context includes both the nature of the particular school classroom (microsystem), the specific macrosystem in which the school is situated (depending on social class, ethnicity, or region), and what is occurring in the society at large (overarching macrosystem). It is highly unlikely that changes at the level of macrosystem, particularly those as far-reaching as those experienced in Russia, can be translated speedily into changes in practices, especially those that have developed over many years. It is even more difficult to imagine that ideas about education that have developed in cultures with very different basic values can be easily imported. Teachers, who have participated in particular proximal processes for many years, should be expected to be more resistant to these types of change than are their students, particularly those who have the individual characteristics (resource and force characteristics) to take advantage of what the new system has to offer. On the other hand, any dialectical theory carries within it the notion that changes do not simply occur because of changes at the level of culture or society but in part because of the experiences of new generations; as today's Russian students grow up they will necessarily influence their culture's values and beliefs. Thus, calls for the return of the legacy of the Soviet school to ameliorate what is perceived to be excessive individualism resulting from the democratization of schooling (Likhachev, 1995) appear unrealistic. What will be particularly interesting to observe over the next few generations are the ways by which traditional Russian values and practices are reconciled with the seemingly inexorable drive towards 'modernization'.

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