

---

# Time For Change

BY MARINA STULOVA AND TRANSLATED BY ANDREI STULOV

**W**hen I first sent my 6-year-old to Grade 1 in a Canadian school I was, of course, worried that he might have trouble adapting to this new environment. Despite my fears he made the adjustment quite fast. Not everything went smoothly at the beginning, mainly because of the language barrier, but this obstacle was soon overcome. And frankly speaking it scared me a bit. I was prepared to help him deal with stresses, tiredness and all those things that usually accompany the life of "Grade-Oners" in the Soviet Union. But my son has gone on studying without any special signs of trauma. After that, I came to the conclusion that life in Canada is easy only in Grade 1. So I asked another Soviet child who had just started Grade 5 at the same public school, how she liked it.

"It's fun," she told me. "Even the math classes. Back at home we always have to memorize rules but here it's a game."

This schoolgirl unexpectedly touched on one of the sore spots of the Soviet school system. This matter is constantly being discussed by parents, who complain about how tired their children always are. It is often pointed out by pediatricians who note the increase of psychiatric disorders among Soviet schoolchildren. Teachers agree on that as well.

For ten years Soviet children study math; for six years, physics; for five, chemistry. They learn, by heart, thousands of rules which will probably be of little use to them in the future.

In the 1960s, the number of required disciplines at a Soviet school was fourteen. Now it's as many as twenty-two.

The striving towards "systematic knowledge" in "fundamental sciences" is, unfortunately, so strong that it does not leave any spare time for such important subjects as ethics and esthetics, literature, music and fitness.

Young people, who are generally considered the most energetic and mobile section of the population, have up till now been unable to participate actively in the educational process. They are assigned the role of "passive objects" whose only function is to assimilate and reproduce knowledge. Textbooks and teaching methods alike are primarily geared toward rote-learning. In this way the children are discouraged from studying independently, educating themselves and developing self-reliance.

The uniformity of our schools has always been considered the main achievement of the Soviet school system, that is, the uniformity of curriculum, teaching methods, and the necessity to follow this curriculum in each school and by each student without

exception. This was considered to be the implementation of the idea of social justice for all and equal opportunity for all citizens.

But, is it realistic to put all these principles into practice? Would all fifty-seven million Soviet students be able to equally absorb all this knowledge? This is a very disputable question which is under serious discussion in the Soviet Union. I believe that, until now, we have probably failed to reach this goal because all students are not equally gifted and everyone advances according to their own abilities and natural talents.

Let us see how this looks in practice. If the child is a disciplined student, s/he will spend the whole day learning — half the day in classes and the second half doing homework. If we take into consideration that the majority of Soviet women spend the entire day working, this means that Soviet children also spend the second part of the day in school doing their homework in groups under the supervision of teachers. Besides this, many Soviet children also attend specialized music, arts, and sports schools, which means they are left with little or no time to enjoy leisure at rest or play. Pediatricians are alarmed by this situation, noting that children are increasingly sick, weak, and that some have developed listlessness.

Of course, we have another category of children who just do not want, or are not able, to learn at the same speed. In order to avoid punishment at school and at home, these children are forced to develop a system of tricks. Imagine how harmful this emotional stress and fear of disclosure is to the development of individuality and the personality of a child.

The fact is that the mass character and the labour orientation of present day schooling undermines the classical grammar school principle of the study of the fundamentals of human knowledge. All attempts to perfect schooling, and expert debates pertaining to this matter, are confined to the disclosure of the flaws of the training program and to the quantitative redistribution of the hours allotted to the teaching of each discipline. Math teachers indicate the importance of time for mathematics, literature teachers, time for literature, etc. The system of public education finds itself short of public education experts — those who could rise above official discussions in order to solve the problem of what to teach and how.

Among the two major functions of schools are: to give children knowledge, and to form their characters. During the last several decades, the first function has taken enormous priority over the second. The classroom lesson in Soviet schools has become

almost the major method of bringing up and educating children, which is completely wrong. There is always enough time to update your knowledge but it is quite dangerous to be late with a child's upbringing. The basics of individuality and personality should be ingrained before nine years of age. If you do something wrong in this regard during this period, it is much more difficult to correct it later.

Over the past 40 years, the Soviet system of schooling has evidenced purely cosmetic changes. Following the separate education of boys and girls, co-education was reintroduced. Eleven year schools yielded place to ten year ones. But for some reason nobody noticed the sheer misguidance of the very structure of Soviet secondary training centres. During the last few years, Soviet education has been facing a serious problem — the discrepancy between the quality of education itself and the present day requirements of society. A program of reforms of secondary schooling introduced five years ago has not yielded tangible results.

So why is the Soviet school reform "stalled," according to Mikhail Gorbachev. First of all, the reform program has become outdated. It was drafted before *perestroika* and consists mainly of empty declarations and slogans. Secondly, the very system of education management needs dramatic reform. Soviet schools are managed by five separate bureaucratic bodies. Even when one of these bodies has a good idea, after it travels through the remaining bodies, the idea is almost unrecognizable. Each body should be forced to justify its existence.

For the last twenty years, the state budget for education has been consistently reduced — from 11% in 1970 to 8% in 1986. Under these conditions, it

has been very difficult to modernize technical equipment and to update the quality of education. Special funds will be allotted to Soviet schools in the beginning of the 1990s to remedy this situation.

The problems of Canadian schools look very different. At first glance everything seems perfect. I had a very good impression on my first visit to York Street Public School in Ottawa where my son is now studying. The school may look uninviting on the outside, but that feeling leaves you as soon as you enter the building. Kids without uniforms wearing casual, bright clothes, are able to transform your first impressions of the school. I remember one of the arguments given by the supporters of the uniform system in Soviet schools was that it avoided the visual appearance of financial inequality among different families. In the York Street School you can find students from 26 nationalities, many from Africa, Asia and Latin America. There are no millionaires among them and the financial conditions of these families vary widely, but it is impossible to notice this difference in the clothing of the children. I think the casual and bright clothes help the psychological atmosphere.

No doubt this is not the only factor capable of making an impact on the psychological climate in the school. The main thing is the warm relationships between

students and teachers, which the teachers initiate themselves. I noticed more than once how the teachers meet their students at the threshold of the classroom with welcoming smiles and a handshake. I also noticed how communicative, smiling and merry the principal of the school is.

I read in a Canadian newspaper that discipline in Canadian schools should be increased. I asked James Williamson, the principal of the York Street school, if the easygoing relations between students and teachers is the reason for this. If a student is the equal of the teacher, it is impossible to implement any kind of punishment.

"Our teachers do not have an arsenal of discipline measures for punishment at their disposal," Mr. Williamson said. "We are sure that the discipline measures should be based on the authority of the teachers. But if the child really misbehaves, we can, after consulting with his parents, expel him or her from school for one to three days."

I consider the fact that the basic upbringing of a child is based on close parent-teacher cooperation an advantage of the Canadian school system. As a rule, the teacher has contact with parents on a daily basis. Besides this, twice during the school year the school provides special days for parent-teacher interviews.

The relationship between the local government and the school board is quite different from what we have in the Soviet Union. In the USSR, the public has no input into discussions of school budgets and curriculums. Until recently, the school budget was the prerogative of the bureaucratic bodies of local departments, which are part of the Ministry of Education. While every Soviet school has its own parents' committee, this group can be active only in very narrow fields such as buying



gifts, or organizing class excursions and school parties. Formally, the chair of the parents' committee could take part in the meetings of the official school board, but has no vote on any decision.

Parent-teacher relations need improving as well. Even though in the primary grades parent-teacher relations are comparatively close because the parents visit the schools every day, in the secondary level parents learn of their children's progress only through report cards. There are no individual parent-teacher meetings, only two or three general class meetings for parents throughout the year.

**T**he Soviet Teachers' Congress, which was held at the end of last year, has discussed new concepts for general secondary education. The old bureaucratic practice of excluding the public from managing school affairs was named as the main obstacle to the reform. To put an end to this, school councils are being set up throughout the country. Their members — teachers, students, parents and the public — will be elected by direct secret voting at a regional school conference, the supreme organ of school self-government. The councils will have substantial rights. They will be in charge of the school budget, decide on the length of the school week — five or six days (until now there has only been a six-day week), choose the school's area of specialization and deal with many other issues.

In contrast to the independence of Canadian school systems, the process of decentralization of Soviet school management is just at the beginning. While having the same democratic approach in mind, I still feel there may be some drawbacks to too much democracy. The ideal situation would be when the intentions of the teacher and the aspirations of the students coincide. But how often do we see that very able and talented youngsters are not good students because they lack persistence and purposefulness in achieving of knowledge? It is not fitting for the school to wait until this wish awakens in them because the school must not only give them knowledge, but must also aid in their upbringing so that they will be able to fulfill their duties and become responsible.

I had many discussions with Canadian teachers and parents. I understood that the

main difference between public and private school in Canada is not in complicated programs, but in the standards for requirements and discipline. The end result is that you need to spend a good deal of money so your child will learn how to study.

**A**s for the Canadian school programs, there exists the danger that some provincial or regional directorate of education might misinterpret goals and tasks in a way that would inhibit the children from achieving the knowledge appropriate for their age. Such a situation could arise from many different causes — theoretical or financial — but the children will not be on an equal basis in comparison to others. After reading in Canadian newspapers about the lack of funding in some provinces, the low education level of graduating students, and the large number of illiterates in the country, I feel my fears are well founded.

Soviet school reform is now moving in a more humanitarian direction. The new flexible system will enable each student to freely choose a program or specialization s/he likes and to take examinations in all or some subjects without attending classes. The school will help those who are lagging behind and provide every opportunity for those who are making good progress to continue. The very essence of the educational process will be changed. The students will have more independence and the teacher will no longer be a lecturer, but a helper and advisor. S/he will not receive instructions from above and will have a free hand in conducting class lessons.

The authors of the new concept know that it will be very difficult to make all teachers see its advantages. There are two kinds of teachers today — the innovators, and the dogmatic teachers who are indifferent to children and school problems and prefer to remain only lecturers.

The majority of Soviet teachers (72% according to a sociological poll) want the schools to change; they are on the side of *perestroika*. But, unfortunately, half of them do not know what to do and how to do it. That is why it is important today to train new personnel for schools and to retrain the present teachers. The teacher training institutes must also change fundamentally. But it is difficult for them to

manage this on such a large scale — in the Soviet Union there are 5 million teachers. Clubs for the creative approach towards pedagogy have recently formed in response to this problem. An association for pedagogic researchers and a union of creative teachers have also been created.

"The destiny of *perestroika* depends on school reform," Yuri Rogovsky, an official at the State Committee of the USSR for Public Education, told Canadian administrators of the Ontario public education system who visited the USSR. And this is not an overstatement. The world is moving towards intellectual rivalry and the main value becomes human resources. There is a need for a new level, not only in education, but in the preparedness of young people. The future fate of the country will depend on their education, their outlook and their ability to be adaptable to quick changes.

**I**n spite of a well-developed educational system and generous financing, Canadian scientists, businessmen and members of government increasingly express their dissatisfaction with the quality and the educational level of graduates. Is Canada ready to contend with the competition and to flourish in the 21st century as it previously flourished? This question worries many people. According to statistics, 24% of the population are practically illiterate. Keeping in mind the impetuous development of international integration, North America will have a hard time keeping its economic leadership. Even more now than in previous times, problems of education and scientific research are in the fore.

Eighty-five per cent of the people working in industry will still be in the workforce in the 21st century. Will they be able to keep up to date with scientific and technical progress or will they need major retraining? What kind of programs should be developed, how much additional financing will be necessary? For the time being these questions remain unanswered, but the future of the country depends upon their timely solution.

*Marina Stulova works for Mezhdunarodnye Knigi. She is also a musician and teacher currently living in Ottawa.*