Russia's History, Culture, and the Thrust Toward High-Stakes Testing

Reflections on a Recent Visit

David S. Mitchell

Standardized testing poses an escalating problem for Russia because, as a consequence of its new free market economy, the state no longer supports free education and the cost of schooling students is prohibitive. The editors of The Pedagogical Journal of Bashkortostan University, *Ufa, Russia, recently reprinted "Assessment without High-Stakes Testing: Protecting Childhood and the Purpose of School" from the Research Bulletin (Volume XIII, #2, pp. 21–30). Ufa, located west of Moscow in the Republic of Bashkortostan and just east of the Ural Mountains, has its own Waldorf school. Founded as a fortress on the orders of Ivan IV in 1574, the city originally bore the name of the hill upon which it stood, Tura-Tau. Locals nicknamed the city Ufa, meaning "small" in Turkic, and the name stuck. In 1802, Ufa became the principal city of Bashkiria with more than six major universities.*[1] *David Mitchell met with the editors and interested academics in Moscow this past summer.*

To understand the problems of education resulting in high-stakes testing in Russia, we must try to penetrate the Russian psyche and its deep connection to the land. Russia is a diverse country composed of many varied folk groups, including Slavs, Tartars, Muslims, Armenians, Norsemen, and Azerbaijanis. Russia is a unique state, influenced by both European and Asian cultures. With what we may call an inherent inferiority complex as a nation, Russia has long felt a need to find respect in the world. Peter the Great copied Versailles in St. Petersburg and decreed that every Russian shave his beard in order to appear more European. Catherine the Great assembled the great art collection in the Hermitage in order to impress the world. Still, today, the longsuffering Russian soul pines for prestige and recognition.

A humble, warm people who feel a deep love for their Mother Russia and her rolling plains and dramatic skies, the Russians have traditionally placed their political fortunes in the hands of powerful and aggressive leaders. Josef Stalin bragged in the 1950s that he was able to terrorize one out of every ten citizens.[2] The numbers of the intelligentsia executed in Russia in the 20th century, robbing the country and the world of brilliance in literature, drama, music, and dance, is astonishing. And the government still uses fear to control its people—in the past two years, more than thirty Russian journalists critical of the government have met an untimely, often cruel death, victims of apparent assassination.

Dramatic sky at sunset over dachas on the Volga River

In the past, the Czars and Russian Orthodox Church amassed extravagant fortunes at the expense of the common population, who we picture as struggling to exist on little more than crusts of stale black bread. The failed experiment of communism sought to remedy and balance these inequities, only to follow the same path of repression and cruelty. Members of the Communist Party and the political elite prospered while the people suffered the deprivation of failed social and agricultural experimentation.

The country was unprepared for the advent of *perestroika* and the consequent entry into a free-

market economy. The "common wealth" was distributed to everyone in stock receipts. Not knowing what to do with these pieces of paper, private citizens sold them cheaply to enterprising individuals for hard cash, giving rise to a new generation of oligarchs while, at the same time, the new government kept no reserves to make social services available. Basic elements of society, such as real estate, education, and health care, became commodities that people could not afford. The value of the ruble collapsed, common people lost their newly acquired money, and the country's economy went into a tailspin. Strong leadership was needed to regain control of the country's vast natural resources and stabilize its fledgling economy. Vladimir Putin, former head of the KGB, assumed that role.

During my recent visit to Russia, I asked three locals how their new government and elected legislature were doing. They all replied similarly: "The politicians meet in the legislature in order to see how they can make things even more difficult for the people!"

The expansive Russian countryside is rich in nature wisdom from the North. Matrushka dolls, an ancient fertility symbol, are found everywhere, as are stories of pagan rituals and atavistic festivals in the birch forests. These vast forests stretch endlessly, as do the broad steppes, and the sky is a panorama of dramatic changes. Simple dachas—summer homes or retreats—line the Volga River with richly carved wooden window frames, doors, and eaves. Most have not seen paint for at least forty years and are near collapse. They serve as a metaphor for life in general. The structure of Russia needs repair and care. The countryside is a picture of abject poverty. I met several people who were foraging in the forest for mushrooms and berries in order to survive. Many of the elderly receive only meager social services and beg on the streets for subsistence.

Matrushka nesting dolls

I heard stories of soldiers begging a meal because the government could not afford to pay them or feed them sufficiently.

Symbolic carvings on dacha

Detail of design

On the other hand, St. Petersburg and Moscow are thriving and impressive cities, bustling with restoration and new construction. Moscow, a huge city with population of over 12.6 million residents,[3] suffers from congested, pothole-riddled roads and too much traffic. Delays are painfully long. Food in Moscow, currently the world's most expensive city, is a third more costly than in the United States; a modest hotel charges between $700 and $2,400 per night for a room. Marquee stores from Paris, Geneva, London, and New York line Arbat Street (the premier shopping avenue) and fill GUM, the massive department store next to Red Square. If you have money you can purchase anything, and most Muscovites

GUM Department Store at Red Square

Moscow as seen from University Hill

Trevskaya Prospekt in Moscow

appear to have ample resources, unlike their country cousins. There is a wide gap between the poor and the rich.

The Russian people have suffered for centuries. Possessing rich soul qualities—a love for poetry, music, and literature—they have reservoirs of devotion. How will the transformation of these qualities manifest in the future? An example of their devotional emergence from communist control can be seen in the symbolism of their new national flag. I asked a university professor about the meaning of the flag's three colored stripes. He replied: "The white stripe is for the purity of the spiritual world, the blue stripe is for the majesty of the Russian sky, and the red stripe is for the blood of Christ."

Russia's free market economy formed toward the end of the 1980s during the transition between Michael Gorbachev's *perestroika* and Boris Yeltsin's reforms during a time of great hope and change. Change was also called for in the Russian education system, which lacked innovation and creativity and was strongly ideological, bureaucratic, and technocratic. For a while the slumbering devotional life awoke and the values embedded within Waldorf education were recognized.

The first Russian Waldorf schools were founded in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ryasan, Shukovsky, Yaroslav, and Samara. An interest in a free and humane education grew until about thirty Waldorf schools (five in Moscow) and many assorted Waldorf kindergartens were peppered across the country.[4]

During this time the schools multiplied and found success. In 2006 the central government invited schools and individual teachers to present their curriculum ideas in a nationwide contest.

The largest Waldorf school in Moscow, called "School 1060," won a prize in this educational competition of one million rubles (about $30,000) as a "School of the Future." This school has more than 300 students in eleven grades.[5]

An initial period of optimism and expansion of Waldorf education in Russia gave way to a period of serious challenges and some contraction. The challenges faced by the Waldorf schools in Russia included these: the struggle against changing government regulations based on mandated curricula; economic instability and rental costs; escalating tuition costs, from $50 per month to $800 per month (the high end well beyond the means of an average Russian family); and inadequate teacher salaries ($200–$700/month).[6] As elsewhere in the world, the government sought to control education by mandating standardized testing because it believed that student learning could be accurately measured, albeit at the expense of individualization.

During the 1990s, as the economy collapsed and expenses skyrocketed, the Waldorf schools entered a fight for survival. School 1060 had to decide if it wanted, like most independent schools in Russia, to become a private school with high tuition rates or become a state school. The school

Waldorf school in St. Petersburg

decided in 1996 to register itself as a state school and accept 40% financial assistance.

Initially, the newly empowered Orthodox Church had supported Waldorf education, but this ceased when church officials realized that the schools promoted independent thinking. For a while, the Church reversed its initial support and viciously attacked the concept of Waldorf education, but these attacks seem now to have abated.

Most likely, the Waldorf schools will have renewed opportunities in the future when they work more actively at the local level rather than at the national level. In order to be recognized, state Waldorf schools now have to pass an inspection to gain their license and be registered. To gain a license a school must have premises that accord with state regulations; it must also be regularly inspected and show that its teachers are competent. For registration it must prove for three age groups that its pupils are at the same educational level as comparable children in state schools.[7] Strangely, overall Russian standards have yet to be set, so registration depends heavily on the local authorities of the eighty-nine Russian regions.

I observed, everywhere, constant change and revision. People can never be too sure that any policy will last very long. Everything in Russia appears to be in flux and in need of repair, and the common people continue to suffer and wait for future improvements. If the yoke of standardized testing could be removed, then future populations could be counted upon to bring the imagination and clarity needed to solve many of Russia's problems.

Endnotes

1. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ufa.
2. See Owen Matthews, *Stalin's Children*, New York: Walker and Company, 2009.
3. http://academic.missouriwestern.edu/ascher/russia/people.htm.
4. http://www.waldorfschule.info/upload/pdf/schulliste.pdf.
5. See http://www.freunde-waldorf.de/en/info/publikation/newsletter/2008-fj/ developmenttables/.
6. See Sergej Lowjagin's article at http://www.freunde-waldorf.de/en/info/publikation/newsletter/2007-he/russia-1/.
7. Ibid.
8. All photographs by Anniken and David Mitchell.

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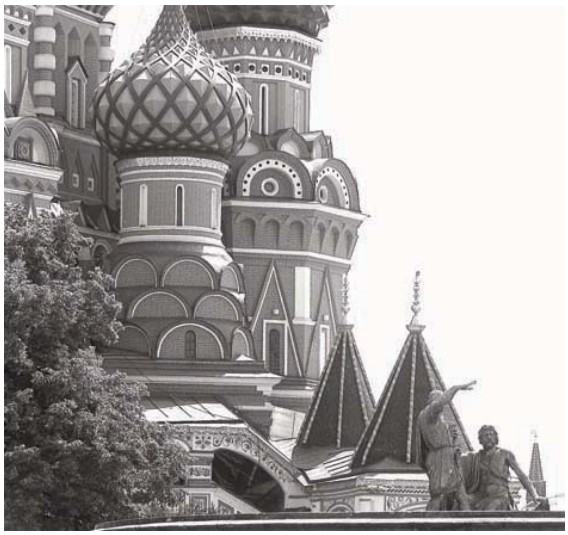

Details, St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square, Moscow