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THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER
AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse the socio-cultural phenomenon of the Russian language arts teacher using the comparative historical method. The authors define the main formation and development stages of a Russian literature teacher as a unique cultural and historical phenomenon: pre-revolutionary school, the Soviet-era, and the modern stage of literary education. It is established that the first discoveries in Russian teaching methods were largely based on foreign experience, which was taken into account by Buslaev in particular.

The special role of a language arts teacher in coping with learning objectives is defined. These, according to national tradition, include tasks connected with personality development and the upbringing a patriotic citizen. A comparison of domestic and foreign schools reveals the lack of a systematic literature course in foreign general education schools. Such schools only devote a few academic hours to reading and discussion or to the study of certain works of literature during senior years (in mother tongue education or elective courses). We look into the question of movement competitions (competitions of professional excellence) as a modern technology of presenting personal teaching experience. We list the requirements for teacher qualifications as reflected in the Occupational Standard for Teachers (2013), which actualizes the issues of teacher training strategies under the conditions of tri-level higher teacher education in Russia. Particular focus is given to the teacher's development process as a manager of student research activity. We note the peculiarities of the image of the modern teacher of Russian language arts.

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Keywords: The language arts teacher, socio-cultural phenomenon, comparative historical method, professional competences, and competitions of pedagogical excellence.



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1. Introduction

In the scientific and pedagogical community, recent years have been a time of on-going discussions about reading and teaching literature in schools in the modern information society, as well as teacher training strategies in higher education institutions in the context of implementing the Occupational Standard for Teachers. These questions were subjects of debate at numerous forums, including academic conferences held by the Russian Academy of Education and Moscow State University of Education.

The topical problems of literary education in schools are regularly covered by the Russian media, which allows us to consider them a powerful social mechanism in influencing the minds of the community and teachers (Lazarev, 2015).

Analysis of modern foreign research papers on education shows a heightened interest in problems that also appeal to Russian teachers: reading, reading comprehension, emotional impact of works of fiction (Beers, & Probst, 2013; Murphy, 2013; Teaching Literature, 2017; Werner, 2017; Wojnowski, 2015), the role of the teacher (Erdem, 2015). Most of the research papers point out the importance of looking for new approaches (“different approaches”) to studying a literary text in school that correspond with the modern information environment (Anders, 2013; Haas, 1997).

2. Research Questions

Analysis of the condition of Russian and foreign literary school education allows us to raise a question on the special role of a language arts teacher in accomplishing learning tasks, personal development, and upbringing of students, as well as updating the positive experience of language arts teachers of the past whose “methodical ideas did not lose their value and can still be implemented both in literary education in modern schools and training of language arts teachers” (Chertov, 2013; Lazarev, 2015).

3. Purpose of the Study

Analysis of the socio-cultural phenomenon of a Russian language arts teacher in historical context.

4. Research Methods

When approaching research on the language arts teacher phenomenon, it is necessary to consider the accomplishments of the comparative historical method, which is the method applied to single out the similarities and differences in historical phenomena by means of comparing various historical stages of development (the diachronic approach) or different existing phenomena (the synchronic approach). This method can serve as a basis for findings on certain tendencies and patterns in the development of national literary education and pedagogical science, as well as on peculiarities of the Russian methodological experience.

5. Findings

The most important events in the history of Russian education are connected with the formation (under the single subject "Russian language with Old Church Slavic and language arts") and development of a single subject, which now has its own content, defined objectives, and teaching methods. In pre-revolutionary schools, this subject was called "Russian language arts", but its name was changed to "literature" at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is a story of selfless service, a creative search, and exciting discoveries made by outstanding Russian language arts teachers, scientists, school teachers, and professors. These people are usually referred to as philologists or literary artists. There is a certain reason for it. Many of those who taught literature were encouraging the personal growth and creativity of their students, at the same time they were also researchers, critics, enlighteners, and scientific expositors. Along with teaching, they were also engaged in creative writing, publishing their works of fiction, translations, cooperating with serial publications that shared their work experience, and participating in discussions, including those on the issues of literary education.

The Russian language arts teacher is a unique phenomenon, portrayed in numerous works of fiction, memoirs, biographical sketches, and monographs. These are multi-talented people that are interesting interlocutors, unrecognized during their lifetime and often lonely. Nevertheless, they still experienced happy moments during the course of their creative and professional lives, and also had the opportunity to witness the progress of their students. Dramatic and sometimes even tragic life stories became a part of Russian history and its intelligentsia. They were remarkable examples of selfless dedication to their work and the service of science, education, and upbringing.

The history of Russian language arts teachers is directly coupled with the history of the Russian intelligentsia. The roots of the Russian intelligentsia as a cultural and historical phenomenon date back to the second half of the nineteenth century (Russkaja intelligencija, 2000). However, the birth of the term "language arts teacher" can also be attributed to the same time period. By the middle of the nineteenth century, some outstanding language arts teachers had already come into the spotlight. These were mainly university professors working in boarding schools, lyceums, grammar schools, and universities (for example, Koshanskiy, Merzlyakov, Zinovjev, and others). In the middle of the nineteenth century, the grammar school course of the Russian language and language arts became a main school subject. Programmes in general academic schools were extended by the works of the Russian authors of that time. At the same time, the first works covering the issues of literary education in schools were being published (textbooks by Stoyunin, Vodovozov, Ostrogorskiy, Nezelyonov, Filonov, and others).

The first discoveries of national teaching methods were largely connected with foreign experience. Buslaev, author of the first serious work on "Teaching the Native Language" (unique in its own right), based his research on the experience of the German school system (1844) (Buslaev, 1992). This phenomenon was mentioned by philologist Uspenskiy in his work on the history of the Russian intelligentsia. He wrote that "the Russian intelligentsia and European intellectualism have common roots: they date back to the same source, and the Russian intelligentsia emerges as a result of European cultural transplantation. Nevertheless, Russia managed to create something considerably different from European culture" (Uspenskiy, 1999; Teaching Literature, 2017).

Many famous language arts teachers were spoken of by their students with sincere kindness. Reading these memoirs prompts us to make an analogy with the unhappy thoughts of poet Kyuchelbeker in “Destiny of the Russian Poets”. Thus, Professor Merzlyakov would speak about the “disfavours of having an academic status” in Russia. He was struggling to earn a living and died in poverty. Smirnovskiy, whose textbooks were used to teach the Russian language and language arts in grammar schools at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, now referred to as a successful teacher, spent the last two years of his life in his room crying of desperation, loneliness, and helplessness. A young teacher from Kiev, Sudovschikov, passed away, exiled to the Kostroma Governorate; he was the author of a textbook on the history of Russian language arts. The lives of many other outstanding language arts teachers ended under tragic circumstances. For example, the founder of one of the most famous private grammar schools in Moscow, Alfyorov, along with his wife, were executed in 1919 by Bolsheviks on the charge of an anti-revolutionary plot. Belorussov, author of textbooks on theory and practice of language arts, who lived in post-revolutionary times, miraculously escaped execution and was murdered by his own neighbours (this terrible story is described in the novel “Solntse Myortvykh” (The Sun of the Dead), by Shmelyov. A talented literary scholar and teacher, Fisher, left Soviet Russia after the revolution and was executed in a concentration camp during the World War II. During the Soviet era, many language arts teachers had to go through repressions, years of loneliness, and oblivion. Author of well-known textbooks, Zolotaryov, was reported to the authorities and arrested. He died in Stalin's Gulag (exonerated posthumously). A teacher from Altai, Toporov, the teacher of astronaut Titov's father, was also arrested on a false charge (released and exonerated in 1958).

Language arts teachers were always known as trailblazers and pioneers. They were the first to develop teaching programmes for general academic schools: “The Programme of the Russian Language and Language Arts” for military educational establishments was written by Galakhov and Buslaev (1852) (Galahov, & Buslaev, 1852). Extracurricular activities are strongly connected with the names of language arts teachers: school theatres, literary evenings and discussions, magazines, and competitions. New technologies were mastered by language arts teachers as well. At the end of the nineteenth century, they were practising “reading with dissolving pictures”. The first typology of teachers also belongs to a young Buslaev, a language arts teacher. In his book, titled “On Teaching the Native Language”, he wrote:

- about scholastic teachers, faithfully following the methods of old rhetoric;
- about teacher-philosophers, captivated by the newest aesthetic theories, ahead of their time, that were not rooted in science;
- teacher-historians, referring to facts, and educating their students about Greek tragedies, Dante, Shakespeare (in the form of a short summary or bad translation into Russian);
- on teacher-practitioners, who devoted a lot of time to essays;
- and on teachers-systematists (more of an ideal type, rather than an existing one) (Buslaev, 1992).

The fundamental work of Buslaev opened the way to the creative acquisition of foreign experience and the formation of a unique concept of literature and language learning in school. The implementation of the synchronic approach allows us to claim that there is no systematic course of literature in a general academic school abroad. Such schools only devote a few academic hours to reading and discussion or to the study of certain works of literature during senior years (in mother tongue education or elective

courses). The course mainly includes studying literature in the native language, extracts from translations of works of fiction, and a thorough analysis of the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comparison of the Russian and foreign school enables us to discuss the unique system of Russian literary education and unique methodological experience.

In the Soviet era, it was common to divide the teachers into two groups: subject teachers (who were believed to simply teach the academic discipline to the students, which was seen as a negative characteristic) and educators (who played an active part in extracurricular activities and performed the role of a formative teacher). In the second half of the twentieth century, the so-called teacher-innovator movement emerged, which united professional subject teachers and talented educators. It should be said that language arts teachers did not play an active role in that movement. The experience of Ilin was less popular than the more widespread and propagandised experience of mathematics teacher Shatalov. This outstanding language arts teacher was still a conservator, in a good sense, even with all of his surprising innovations and discoveries. He did not go further than teachers at the beginning of the twentieth century who were actively experimenting, using the “projects method”, “the method of life and art comparison”, “literary courts”, and so on. Of course, he was not such a big innovator as one of the bravest experimenters of Russian methodology, Rybnikova, author of the countlessly reprinted book “Sketches of Literary Reading Methods” (1941), which is still used by teachers today.

The image of the language arts teacher was deeply rooted in the history of Russian literature, and, later, cinematography. The edifying tone of fictional works by the authors of the nineteenth century was, in a way, a continuation of the old Russian literature and the literature of the Russian Enlightenment (edifying tone, pathos of the works by Lomonosov, protagonist monologues and the image of Keteykin in the comedy, “The Minor”, by Fonvizin). The topic of the selfless service of the enlightenment is highlighted in the novel, “Nov”, by I. S. Turgenev, where the main character chooses a step-by-step transformation of life and decides to take part in the foundation of public schools.

The conflict with reality was deeply experienced by language arts teachers in particular, who were referring to fictional works of world and Russian literature, both in class and in a personal reading experience that also portrayed the ugly sides of life and put forth eternal questions. This is the conflict that the main character of A. P. Chekhov’s “Language art teacher” faces. His image was portrayed both with sympathy and irony. “Dear God. Where am I? I am surrounded by vulgarity. Boring, insignificant people, jars of sour cream and milk, cockroaches, stupid women... There is nothing scarier, more insulting and dreadful than vulgarity. I need to leave here no later than today, or I will go mad!”

The following is a list of the most famous Soviet films, where the main characters are teachers of the Russian language and literature: “Spring on Zarechnaya Street” (Vesna na Zarechnoy ulitse) (1956, directed by Khutsiev, Mironer); “I Loved You” (Ya vas Lyubil) (1967, directed by Frez); “We'll Live Till Monday” (Dozhiviyom do Ponedelnika) (1968, directed by Rostotskiy); “The Key That Should Not Be Handed On” (Klyuch bez prava peredachy) (1976, directed by Asanova); “Big School-Break” (Bolshaya peremena) (1972–1973, directed by Korneev); “The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!” (Ironiya sudby, ili S lyogkim parom!) (1975, directed by Ryazanov); “Could one imagine...” (Vam i ne snilos...) (1980, directed by Frez).

The modern language arts teacher is still one of the brightest persons in the school system. They are researchers (there are many PhDs among secondary schoolteachers), poets, critics, journalists

(published in magazines and with their own collection of works), founders of school clubs, studios, magazines, heads of student scientific-research activity, and the most active participants of teaching excellence competitions.

It should be pointed out that a bigger part of the “Teacher of the Year” finalists were language art teachers who typically presented lessons of Russian literature, but not about the Russian language, to the jury. These lessons allow teachers to show their creative potential to the fullest, as well as to reveal their personality and unique teaching approach. Classic Russian literature became a great partner for contestants. The winners of the “Teacher of the Year” award were usually language arts teachers (primarily male). Alexander Sutormin (Tula Oblast, 1990), Oleg Paramonov (Bryansk, 1993), Mikhail Nyankovskiy (Yaroslavl, 1994), Vladimir Morar and Yevgeniy Slavgorodskiy (Kaliningrad, 2000 and 2004), Andrei Uspenskiy (Cherepovets, 2006), Vita Kirichenko (Moscow, 2012), and Alexander Shagalov (Armavir, 2016).

The “Occupational Standard for Teachers” of 2013, endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, assumes teachers have a sufficient number of professional, cultural, and communicative competencies that condition their efficient activity. The literary text, which teachers work with mostly in class, provided maximum opportunities to master their competencies and to develop the research, cultural, and communicative skills of students.

The system of education in a pedagogical university is fully focused on the formation of the teacher-researcher. It is focused on acquiring scientific work methodology, development of school research skills, and organisation of research and experimentation activity. Scientific research in higher education institutions, being professionally directed, becomes an effective tool for developing individual abilities in future teachers of language arts and increasing their creative potential for solving topical issues of pedagogical science and practice.

The analysis of student research projects on literature, the results of which were presented by Muscovite students at scientific research conferences for school students, showed that in this work, as well as in literary discussions in the pre-revolutionary schools, it is very important, according to Pirogov, “to choose the subject that will not master the student, but the one that the student will master,” (Pirogov, 1887). Thus, the following projects, for example, were connected with the sociology and psychology of reading, peculiarities of interpretation of classical works of fiction by a modern reader, comparative analysis of literary texts, and characters and their interpretation:

- The novel by Turgenev “Fathers and Sons” in the perception of modern “fathers” and “sons”.
- Four points of view on the plot and characters of “Eugene Onegin”, by Pushkin.
- Cinderella and Assol.
- Reflection of biblical commandments in official historical sources.
- My illustrations to the fictional works of Lindgren.
- Namesakes in Russian works of fiction.

Leading the scientific research of students is strong motivation for the realisation of a language arts teacher’s personal scientific research projects. As for the students, this project work is their first experience in acquiring new forms of communication, searching for and analysing information, public speaking, having an opportunity to increment meaning and generate new meanings, realisation of their interests, needs, abilities, and preparation in choosing a future profession and continuing their education

in a university (this analysis was carried out under the implementation of project № 27.9224.2017/BCH of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, titled “Preparing students for scientific research activities under the conditions of the development and establishment of education standards”).

Recently, the school system has been joined by a new generation of language arts teachers. Having received profound professional training in classic and pedagogical universities, these young people made their contribution to teaching literature in the form of new teaching approaches. They are actively engaged in research activities (many of them continue their postgraduate education) and successfully participate in literary competitions and teacher excellence competitions. Thus, among the finalists of the “Teacher of the Year 2016” competition, representing 85 Russian regions, there were twenty-six language teachers (eight of them under 30), including the winner of the competition. Each of them was interesting not only as a language arts teacher, but also as a multi-talented person, for example philologist-researchers Andrei Barashev and Mikhail Meshkov, designer Irina Kameneva, singer Ekaterina Kryukova, and poet Leonid Bondar (who tragically died a few months after the competition). The new generation of language arts teachers not only understands the problems of school literary education as set by the information era, but is ready to search for new solutions to these problems, to the preservation and development of the slow reading tradition, and understanding of the conceptual and emotional content of Russian and foreign classical fictional works and the best works of modern authors.

The results of the study were presented by the authors at several international academic conferences: “Scientific Methodological Heritage and Modern Literary Education” (XXIII Readings from Golubovskiy), Moscow 2015; “National Reading Support and Development Programme: Problems and Prospects”, Moscow, 2016; “Modern Literary Teaching Methodology: Development Strategies” (XXIV Readings from Golubovskiy), Moscow 2016; “Literary Education in Perspective: from School Lessons to Real Life in Culture” (XXV Readings from Golubovskiy), Moscow 2017, and others.

6. Conclusion

The last decade has been a time of new tendencies in the educational environment, an active reference to the experience of the past, and attempts to revive the traditions of the best national general academic schools (lyceums, grammar schools, and military schools).

Further study of the socio-cultural phenomenon of the Russian language arts teacher has clear prospects connected with the generalisation of the individual teaching experience; portrayal of a young teacher’s image; and development and implementation of scientific and research projects (including those with the participation of philology students): “The Image of the Language Arts Teacher in the 19th – 21st Centuries”, “The Work of Language Arts Teachers in the Time of the Great Patriotic War”, “The Daily Life of a Russian Language Arts Teacher”, “The Language Arts Teacher in Professional Competitions”, and more.

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