Knowledge for the elites, competencies for the masses: political theatre of educational reforms in the Russian Federation

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Knowledge for the elites, competencies for the masses: political theatre of educational reforms in the Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT
International organisations facilitated the spread of competency-based reforms around the world. Accepting at face value correlations between students’ performance on international assessments, such as PISA, and nations’ economic development, reformers in different countries began to adopt competency-based standards to improve the quality of education. Hybridising competency discourses circulated by international organisations, Russian reformers introduced new school standards that created a bifurcation of the educational system along the lines of socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. This bifurcation is evident in the standards’ focus on providing in-depth disciplinary knowledge to students from privileged backgrounds and competencies ‘to adapt to the world’ to students from underserved groups. The significance of this analysis lies in demonstrating how appropriations and hybridisations of competency discourses in the Russian Federation work to produce elites that govern and workers who accept low positions in social hierarchies of the neoliberal world order.

A global neoliberal imaginary that discursively links educational change with economic development has facilitated the spread of competency-based reforms around the world (Anderson-Levitt 2017; Rizvi and Lingard 2009). Circulating tenets of human capital theory in parallel with their policy advocacy work, international organisations have urged states to adopt competency-based educational approaches to ensure competitiveness of national economies (Spreen 2004; Spring 2015a). As a tool of global neoliberal governance (Grek 2009, 2013), the OECD’s international assessment PISA has cemented this focus on competencies by using league tables to compare the performance of students from different countries and by making causal claims about students’ competency development and nations’ potential for economic advancement (Gorur 2016; Takayama 2008; Spring 2015b). Introduction of competency-based approaches in some cases resulted in curricular convergence (Nordin and Sundberg 2016). In others, it led to the emergence of competing interpretations of what constitutes competencies and how they can be assessed (Pepper 2011). In Spain, the introduction of new models
allowed teachers to design integrated curricula (Tiana, Moya, and Luengo 2011), while in Poland competency-based approaches afforded educators opportunities to explore new ways of helping students construct knowledge (Dąbrowski and Wiśniewski 2011).

Yet the pursuit of competency-based education has obscured the processes of bifurcation of educational systems along the lines of privilege and advantage within national and subnational spaces. For example, Takayama (2013) examined how the introduction of competency-based curriculum in Japan facilitated the spread of unequal structures in which students from underserved backgrounds became short-changed by new educational approaches. Drawing on the analysis of vocational education in Australia, Wheelahan (2012) argued that competency-based approaches preclude the development of theoretical knowledge among those whose education becomes focused on job training. According to Wheelahan (2012), this bifurcation leads to divergent outcomes among different social groups because advanced tracks provide access to theoretical knowledge where students not only gain deeper insights into social structures, but also develop tools of critique and action to demand change in those structures.

Drawing on the findings from a multi-sited ethnography of educational reforms in the Russian Federation, I trace how globally-circulated competency discourses entered the space of Russian policy-making and became the foundation for the new school standards. My analysis shows that Russian reformers produced a hybridisation of competencies that justified the creation of a bifurcated system – a significant departure from the equity-oriented system of education inherited from the Soviet past. A knowledge paradigm was made available to students from privileged backgrounds to produce elites to govern, whereas a competency paradigm was offered to the rest of students to obscure socialisation that would turn them into spectators of intensifying social inequality. This move not only justified limited educational provisions for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but also perpetuated the status quo of the unjust neoliberal state.

In what follows, I describe how Marcuse’s (1964) and Lyotard’s (1984) writing on knowledge in postmodern societies as well as Debord’s (1994, 1998) explication of political spectacle shed light on competency-driven transformations in education. Then I present the methodological approaches used in this study as well as analytical strategies applied to the data analysis. The presentation of findings proceeds along three steps. First, I situate the transformations documented in this paper in the global flow of competency-based educational reforms and in the particulars of the Russian educational context. Next, I demonstrate how Russian policy actors appropriated competency-based discourses in the production of new school standards and how those appropriations aligned with a nationally circulated philosophy of a systems-based activity approach developed by Georgiy Shchedrovitsky. Finally, I show how the design of a bifurcated school system emerged from the fusion between competency discourses and Shchedrovitsky’s vision for elite rule.

**Theoretical framework**

This paper draws on Marcuse’s (1964) and Lyotard’s (1984) theories of knowledge in postmodern societies and Debord’s (1994) theory of spectacle in order to analyse how the dichotomy between knowledge and competencies serves to justify social inequalities and produce acquiescent subjects prepared to accept low positions in unequal
systems. Focusing on technological advances in postmodern societies, Marcuse (1964) argued that advanced industrial states engage in producing one-dimensional subjects who accept technocratic social structures and participate in maintaining the existing social order. According to Marcuse (1964), this is accomplished by the use of reduced concepts that foreclose the possibility of attaining understandings of social systems and structures. Basic knowledge that does not attend to the analysis of social processes, relationships, or structures precludes the emergence of critical theoretical understandings (Marcuse 1964). As a result, one-dimensional subjects participate in the reproduction of the existing social order partly because of their limited understanding of historical processes that would allow them to see humans as active agents engaged in transforming the world around them. Instead, through educational systems, entertainment outlets, and depoliticisation of public discourses, these subjects are trained to shun critique in order to adapt to the world as an unchanging structure.

Building on these observations, Lyotard (1984) argued that the commodification of knowledge occurs in parallel with the intensifying struggle to control knowledge as a form of power. In postmodern societies, distinctions emerge in this struggle between those who know for investment and those who know for survival (Lyotard 1984, 6). Redefining social bonds as language games, Lyotard noted how elites obscure this bifurcation and protect their positions in social hierarchies by presenting knowledge as outdated. Lyotard’s theory sheds additional light on globally-circulated distinctions between knowledge as an obsolete form insufficient for the ongoing economic transformations and competency as the form that will produce actors able to participate in the global knowledge economy. His writing shows how these distinctions arise concurrently with the rise of a technocratic class that prescribes the parameters of human becoming and eliminates dissent towards its ideas through ‘the exercise of terror [which] says: “Adapt your aspirations to our ends – or else”’ (Lyotard 1984, 64).

Debord (1994), on the other hand, described new social bonds as a form of spectacle that reproduces itself through distraction, alienation, and isolation. Operating as political theatre (Aydarova 2019), reforms obscure how education becomes reoriented to reproduce inequality. In this context, educational systems are redesigned to produce spectators who are ‘supposed to know nothing and deserve nothing. Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act: such must be the spectator’s condition’ (Debord 1998, 22). What is important about Debord’s observation is that in the end, the shift from the knowledge paradigm to competence-based reforms creates subjects who accept inequality and injustice as a given, thus subjecting themselves to low positions in social hierarchies.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on a critical multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Quantz and O’Connor 1988) conducted in the Russian Federation between May 2011 and December 2015. The study examined a recent wave of neoliberal reforms introduced in the Russian Federation, such as the *New Federal Standards for General School* (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation 2011, 2012), *Teachers’ Professional Standard* (Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation 2013), and the *Concept of Support for the Development of Pedagogical Education* (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation 2014). Ethnographic
fieldwork incorporated a variety of sites, including a policy-making hub in Lyutvino. Across sites and events, I kept detailed narrative notes of observations, conversations, and experiences (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011) as I participated in classes, meetings, and presentations. In addition to participant observation, I conducted 80 open-ended semi-structured interviews in Russian with a variety of policy actors: policy-makers, officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) as well as from international organisations, administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers in the Russian Federation. In addition to interviews, I assembled reports produced by international organisations, Russian policy texts, academic and mass media publications, as well as videos of interviews and events related to the introduction of reforms. Data was analysed using thematic coding and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003).

Ethnographic engagement with reform processes allowed me to identify a network of reformers and experts who – even though not formally affiliated with the Ministry of Education – played an important role in shaping new waves of Russian educational policies. These policy actors were, for the most part, academics and educational researchers incorporated into global policy networks through their positions as consultants, experts, or analysts for international organisations. They participated in several projects of reforming Russian education – from per-pupil funding to the introduction of the Unified State Exam, from the design of new school and professional teachers’ standards to the restructuring of higher education. Through their global connections, reformers introduced competency discourses into national reforms (Figure 1) and garnered resources for reorienting the educational system based on their designs.

Findings

**International discourses and national transformations**

Debates about the directions of education reforms in Russia started before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 with the emphasis placed on humanising education and reorienting schools towards serving students’ needs, rather than the needs of the state (Dneprov 2006). After 1991, international organisations such as OECD and the World Bank conducted evaluations of the Russian education system and argued that it had to be reformed to make it more market-based and outcome-oriented (Aydarova 2015). This focus on outcomes – rather than inputs and processes traditionally in place –

![Figure 1. Timeline of Russian Educational Reforms.](image-url)
emphasised the need for the educational system to transition to competencies that students would acquire by going through the P-16 system (OECD 1998, 1999). In 2002, the Government of the Russian Federation laid out a vision for transforming the educational system in a policy paper, The Concept of Educational Modernization (Government of the Russian Federation 2010), that redefined the role of the state in educational provision – from provider to overseer – and reoriented the educational system towards a production of neoliberal subjects (Aydarova 2014). This reorientation reflected a hybridisation of the previously utilised approach of ‘knowledge, skills, and abilities’ (commonly known under the Russian abbreviation ‘ZUN’) and new competency frameworks:

General school should form a holistic system of universal knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as students’ independent activity and personal responsibility – or the key competencies that determine the quality of modern education. (MOE 2002)

In the report prepared by reformers and experts in their circles, the World Bank (2004) lauded the Russian government’s efforts to modernise the educational system, noting the importance of competency-based education for responding to the challenges of ‘information societies’ and ‘knowledge economies’. Using other countries’ competency-based standards for K-12 education as a model for the Russian system, the World Bank urged the Ministry of Education to revise general school standards in Russia in order to move education away from knowledge transmission:

In Russian philosophy of school education, the most important role is played by multidimensional (encyclopaedic) information, whereas most developed countries emphasize the acquisition of skills and the development of applied thinking. This is one of the reasons why Russian students continue to show a high level of theoretical knowledge and a developed ability to solve typical problems, but are often less prepared to apply theoretical knowledge to solve nonstandard problems in real life. (Author’s translation, World Bank 2004, 14)

Without explicitly stating it in the text, the authors of the report brought Russian students’ performance on international assessments to bear on the decisions about the direction for reform. Russian students performed relatively well in The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, referenced in this quote by ‘developed ability to solve typical problems’), but at or below OECD average on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, ‘less prepared to apply theoretical knowledge’). Debates in reformers’ circles and their media appearances emphasised the crisis of the Russian school system that PISA revealed as opposed to a more positive reflection of Russian schools revealed by TIMSS (Aydarova 2019). PISA’s alleged ability to test what was needed for the twenty-first century and predict the nation’s capacity for economic development based on the quality of its human capital were also used to underscore its value for the Russian context. Reformers and experts in their networks provided translations of the World Bank (2006) reports on the role of competencies in the production of human capital and published analyses of Russian students’ performance on international assessments as quality indicators of that human capital (Logos 2004, 2005).

Despite the overall apathy towards international assessments in Russia, reformers and other actors in their networks used Russian students’ performance on PISA to reorient the educational system towards ‘international standards’ (Aydarova 2019, 161). This reorientation towards ‘international standards’ reflected the pursuit of national economic development laid out in Strategy 2020, a set of policy recommendations developed by
reformers and experts in their networks that included reforms in financial, social, labour, and educational sectors. Arguing that abandoning the Soviet educational legacy was necessary in order for Russia ‘to catch up with the rest of the world’ and participate in the global knowledge economy, reformers advocated for a shift in the educational paradigm from knowledge to competency-based approaches (Strategy 2020). With partial funding from the World Bank (Startsev 2012), this shift was introduced through new school standards.

**New school standards: the contents of education**

Throughout the 2000s, debates had raged about competencies that should serve as the foundation for school education. Some of the experts in reformers’ networks, connected to the World Bank through national agencies that administered the Bank’s loans, drew on competency frameworks developed by the Council of Europe, Great Britain, and several Russian regions (VO 2007). Using the World Bank’s (2003) reports translated into Russian (World Bank 2006), which in turn replicated the OECD’s (2005) Key Competencies, these experts called for the use of the key competencies – informational, social, and problem-solving competencies. Reminding their readers that ‘educational standards are the model of tomorrow’s society’ (29), the experts pointed out that competency frameworks proposed in their work did not emerge out of research in education and pedagogy, but were rather a result of ‘a clearly articulated demand directed towards the system of education from the outside’ (VO 2007, 34). These observations echoed the World Bank report translated into Russian in 2006 that discussed the need to reform education because the corporate sector spends too much money on retraining its workforce.

The group that received the assignment to develop the standards was headed by a close ally of President Putin (Becker and Myers 2014) and the CEO of one of the largest educational publishing houses in Russia Prosveshchenie –– Aleksandr Kondakov. Kondakov was also a member of the working group that prepared the World Bank (2004) report that called for the modernisation of Russian education based on the competency paradigm (discussed in the previous section). Echoing the competencies laid out in the OECD DeSeCo (2005) and World Bank (2003) frameworks, the standards were oriented towards problem-solving, information-processing, and social skills. Some competencies discussed in the DeSeCo text found their way into Russian standards in a more or less recognisable form (Table 1). For example, ‘the ability to form and conduct life plans’ (OECD 2005, 15) appeared in the Russian standards as ‘the ability to set goals and create life plans’ (MOE 2012, 4). Other skills, however, mutated on the way into the Russian text. The ability ‘to assert rights, interests, limits and needs’ and ‘defend them actively’ (OECD 2005, 15) turned into mere ‘awareness of rights’ and ‘respect for law and order’ (MOE 2012, 4-5).

Apart from stylistic and semantic transformations, however, there was a difference in how different skills and abilities were grouped together into personal, meta-subject, and subject competencies in the Russian standards (Asmolov 2009; MOE 2011, 2012). Personal competencies incorporated character traits that graduates should display, such as patriotism or ‘love for the Motherland’ (MOE 2012, 3). Meta-subject competencies represented interdisciplinary skills that could be applied across different contexts, such as the ability to communicate or work in teams. Subject competencies were associated with school disciplines, such as Russian language or math. As one of the standards’
developers explained, this parsing of competencies reflected the advances of the systems activity theory developed by Russian psychologists Vygotsky, Elkonin, and Davydov (Asmolov 2009).

Of these three competency clusters, it was the personal competencies that operated as the core driver of the reform. In a video interview, Kondakov explained that ‘the new purposes of school education that are stated in the standard are upbringing, social-pedagogical support, [as well as] the development of a Russian citizen with high morals, responsibility, creativity, and initiative’ (Agranovich 2009, n. p.). In the school standards, this emphasis on ‘the development of personal qualities’ was reflected in the ‘portrait of a graduate’ that identified the outcomes schools are expected to produce – ‘a person who loves his/her Motherland’, ‘accepts traditional family values’, ‘follows a healthy lifestyle’, and ‘is creative’, among other abilities (MOE 2012, 3-4; for more see Aydarova 2019). Even among the experts involved in the design of the standards, however, there was shared scepticism about schools’ ability to create personal qualities. As one reformer explained to me during an interview, for many years all school children in Russia had been learning about integrity by reading a story about a boy who stole a plum, but ‘people around the country continue to steal’ (Interview # 56, March 2014).

What was decidedly missing from this portrait of the graduate is any reference to knowledge. During public seminars and policy debates, reformers discussed how overburdened Russian students were by school subjects full of factual knowledge. As one of the standards co-authors explained, ‘Today’s children do not need concrete knowledge! They have long departed for a different reality, in which each person can use a search engine by him/herself’ (VOA 2019). This sentiment echoed what reformers often discussed in their circles – in the information age, knowledge becomes obsolete very quickly, so children do not need knowledge because they can find information online. Instead of receiving knowledge, children should be provided socialisation and learn to solve problems in life (VO 2005).

Yet despite its ubiquitous presence, this focus on socialisation was not applied to all K-12 students in equal measure. Kondakov in his public interviews explained that based on sociological studies conducted in Russia neither families, nor businesses, nor the state

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<td><strong>Personal Competencies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Meta-subject Competencies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Readiness and ability for self-development and self-determination</td>
<td>• Universal learning activities (regulatory, learning, communicative)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Motivation for learning and goal-oriented learning activity</td>
<td>• Ability to use universal learning activities in learning and social practices</td>
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<td>• Systems of relevant social and interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>• Independence in planning and carrying out learning activity and organisation of learning collaboration with teachers and peers</td>
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<td>• Systems of value and meaning that reflect personal and civic positions in activity</td>
<td>• Ability to create individual learning plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Awareness of law</td>
<td>• Research, project, and social activity skills</td>
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<td>• Ecological culture</td>
<td><strong>Subject Competencies</strong></td>
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<td>• Ability to set goals and create life plans</td>
<td>• Skills and abilities specific for different disciplines</td>
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<td>• Ability to acknowledge Russian civic identity in a multicultural society</td>
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cared about subject knowledge (Kondakov 2018). Instead, they wanted to see people with good upbringing or socialisation. In response to these demands, the team that developed the standards proposed to leave only a limited number of mandatory subjects (Russian language, math, physical education, Russia in the world, and safety of life) and introduce the competency-based paradigm of education. At the same time, Kondakov (2012) explained that children who were planning to receive higher education needed to know significantly more to be better equipped for further professional preparation. To meet their needs, the standards incorporated differentiation and advanced tracks (Rus. profil'noe obrazovanie), so that students could choose the subjects they could study in-depth (Kondakov 2012).

A more stark explanation of this differentiation emerged from an interview that I conducted with one of the reformers where the shift in educational paradigms was explained in the following way:

> From working with Shchedrovitsky and Davydov, I discovered that the masses do not need to learn how to calculate the derivative of a complex function. But everyone should learn how to think logically. And how to build mathematical models. Some can build simple ones, others more complex ones. So, the focus here is not to study a subject but to use it for development. When I inquired whether there was consensus on what type of person should emerge as a result of this development, he scoffed in response:

> That would never happen, neither here, nor in the U.S., nor in any country of the world. For a very simple reason – the society is heterogeneous. Different social strata hold different conceptions of how things ought to be. Of course, there will always be parents who will say, ‘You have to guarantee that my child can enter a university’. For them, the knowledge paradigm will remain the leading paradigm. But there will also be parents who will say, ‘Listen, do whatever you want with my child, just don’t bother me. Don’t burden me with my child’s problems’. There are parents that are beginning to talk about socialisation. Due to internet, due to drugs, due to other asocial patterns of behavior. So, children from a drunk part of town don’t need advanced mathematics and the knowledge of algebraic functions. The teacher should use math to develop them as people. (Interview # 55, February 2014)

This explanation showed that the principle of differentiation was based on the family’s social background. Well-off parents who seek to maintain their privileged position will demand that their children will receive the knowledge necessary for entering and succeeding in higher education. As the reformer explained, for those parents the knowledge paradigm will remain in place. But for children from less privileged positions, the focus of school education would be competencies or, more specifically, socialisation to minimise the effects of negative social influences.

This differentiation became even more evident in the text of the standard where subject competencies were divided into basic and advanced levels. Basic level competencies would be sufficient for daily functioning in the society, whereas the advanced level competencies were set at the level that allowed students to pursue ‘subsequent professional preparation’ (MOE 2012, 6), or more specifically, admission to higher education institutions. For example, the basic level for history standards focused on facts and dates, whereas the advanced level was supposed to allow students an opportunity to explore how knowledge is produced in history as a discipline and how various facts can have different interpretations depending on the observer’s social position (Figure 2).
Different tracks, however, afforded students not only different opportunities for their future careers, but also different positioning in the world (Marcuse 1964). Those who receive instruction at the basic level would be presented with the knowledge of history as a completed act and the world around them as a given. Seen through the lens of Debord’s (1994) and Marcuse’s (1964) theories, this type of knowledge is more likely to produce spectators or docile subjects willing to maintain the status quo. Learning disconnected facts at the basic level teaches students to ‘adapt to the world’ around them, so that they would accept their position in a social hierarchy. Those who pursue an advanced track could learn about history as a form of struggle with multiple interpretations of processes and events, which would position them as actors who see their own ability to steer social processes and pursue social transformation. Yet because this track would only be accessible to a limited number of school children, only students from more privileged backgrounds would be likely to see themselves as creators of the world.

Even though publicly this differentiation was presented as a matter of individuals’ preference for a future professional path, its justification was rooted in a redesign of the social contract between the state, families, and other stakeholders. In a background paper for the standards (Kondakov and Kuznetsov 2008), the authors explained that the new contract emerges from recognising that growing social inequality makes it impossible for the state to provide education of high quality to different social groups. Even though all families might want to receive the maximum from the educational system, they should recognise existing limitations, such as students’ motivation levels and ‘material and technical, curricular, and staff resources of schools’ (11). Therefore, the standards set the framework for a differentiated provision: the minimal provision encapsulated in the basic level of education as the ‘agreed-on minimum sufficient for functioning in the society’ and the provision of advanced tracks for those who had the means to take advantage of more opportunities ahead. Criticising the Soviet legacy of equality as the underlying principle of educational provision, Kondakov in media interviews explained that education should not be just a public good the way it had been constructed in Russia during the Soviet era, but also a private good. This way ‘each family can receive what they want based on their demands, needs, and resources’ (Kondakov 2011). This coded
language captured the justification for a bifurcated system that delivered different educational goods to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

This bifurcation of expectations for different groups of students fit in the overall framework of new designs that reformers and experts pursued. For example, Our New School (Government of the Russian Federation 2010), issued as a declaration of reform principles for the educational system encapsulated in the new standards, emphasised the need to have an educational system where students could choose to pursue different educational tracks based on their future plans. Strategy 2020 that encompassed reform proposals across different sectors followed a similar move in its discussion of what new school education should be like. Reformers who designed that proposal offered two scenarios for the development of the educational system. The restoration scenario consisted of rejecting advanced level as a separate track of education and keeping a ‘unified’ knowledge base for all school children. Referring to the Soviet model of education that sought to provide equitable access to knowledge and opportunity to all children regardless of their social standing or ethnic background, reformers rejected that model as unsuitable for the twenty-first century. Instead, they emphasised the importance of pursuing the modernisation scenario that moved towards offering different levels of education, with advanced tracks for those who planned to pursue higher education and basic level of education for everyone else. In projections of which scenario would serve the Russian economy best and afford it greater competitiveness in the global economy, reformers emphasised the advantages of modernisation and a bifurcated system offering separate educational tracks to children from different social classes.

**New school standards: educational approaches**

The standards’ radical departure from the past appeared not only in the shift towards competencies, but also in the introduction of systems activity theory as the main educational approach. As Kondakov explained in his interviews, ‘Systems activity approach is a means of producing desired competencies in students, of teaching them how to be successful’ (Kondakov 2018). The two approaches on some level were seen as synonymous to each other. As one of the reformers explained to me during an interview:

Competency-based approaches used to be a fad, precisely just a fad. Technically, there isn’t much of a difference [between activity-based and competency-based approaches]. See, Russians don’t like to build a model based on common sense. They need to use some weird foreign words and then fight for three years about those three words. So, let it be activity-based, learning through activity. I would add that learning should be oriented towards a result, but then it becomes a competency-based approach, but it had been talked into oblivion and lost its credibility among those who make final decisions about policies. (Interview #48, February 2014)

As I noted before, systems activity theory was developed by Soviet psychologists, such as Vygotsky, Elkonin, Davydov, and others. Those scholars sought to create a system of learning that would allow students to develop conceptual understandings through the process of discovery (Zuckerman 2014). Based on this approach, a teacher uses dialogue to lead his or her class through a set of tasks that would help students develop their own hypotheses and test them until they reach their own conclusions. While in theory it sounded revolutionary from the perspective of potentially empowering students to
take control of their learning, reformers translated this approach into instructions for a teacher to ‘know what is developing in your student and support it with the tools of the subject you are teaching’ (Interview # 55, February 2014).

This translation was inspired by the work of the Soviet-era philosopher and psychologist Georgiy Shchedrovitsky who had enormous influence on the reformers as many of them and experts in their networks belonged to the circle of Shchedrovitsky’s followers. Shchedrovitsky was a strong supporter of radical constructivism, or the ability to change, mould, and design human beings for the needs of state, society, or corporation (Kukulin 2011). In Logic and Pedagogy (Shchedrovitsky 1993), which one of the reformers described as a foundational text that shaped reformers’ approaches, Shchedrovitsky employed the language of engineering to design formulas for blueprinting human beings of the future with technological precision. He explained that it was necessary to identify the functions different children would perform in the future and use pedagogy as an engineering tool that moulds these children for those functions. Kukulin (2011) discussed Shchedrovitsky’s ideas as an ‘alternative social blueprinting … for a transformed human nature’ (54). Fundamentally, this meant that students became ‘objects’ for pedagogical action intended to ‘design people’ (Shchedrovitsky 1993, n. p.) for social and professional roles, instead of allowing children to pursue their own open-ended becoming. Apart from pursuing a technocratic order, this technological precision was meant to achieve efficiency: since not all children are capable of learning advanced concepts, resources should not be wasted on teaching them those concepts. Instead, the focus should be on basic preparation for life in the society and functioning in the workplace. Thus, calls for teachers to use students’ problems as a starting point for instruction was, on the one hand, the acknowledgement of students’ varying abilities and, on the other, a step towards determining students’ future destinations in the social structure.

Students’ future destinations reflected their positions in social hierarchies. Departing from the Soviet pursuit of equality and equity, Shchedrovitsky believed that it was necessary to create an elite class endowed with intellectual resources to govern while the rest of the population would be subjected to the elite rule (e.g. Kakovkin 2004). In a video explanation of the new educational paradigm pursued by the new school standards, Kondakov echoed this position using PISA results:

We have to understand the risks. PISA shows that Russia falls behind developed nations based on the level of functional literacy and the number of representatives of the elite class who have a high level of preparation … Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge in Russia, children who belong to this category comprise only 1.4% whereas in European countries – 14%. PISA results show low competitiveness of Russian schools, which means that Russian society and state are also not competitive. (Kondakov, Video Interview, 2011)

In other words, according to Kondakov, PISA revealed that Russia lacked the ability to educate the elite. The standards were designed to address this problem by creating a bifurcated system with deeper disciplinary training for the future elite and socialisation for the rest. Kondakov (2011) went on to explain that this represented ‘a model of progressive development based on the best international experience’.

Problems with competency-based education and its fusion with nationally developed systems activity approaches went beyond theoretical underpinnings and agendas of creating a national elite at the expense of the rest of the population. There were also
problems with how this approach played out in practice. As reformers and educators shared with me, systems activity approaches presented in the standards were not widespread in Russia. Experts estimated that at the height of their success, schools employing these approaches amounted to only about 7% of all public institutions. At the time of my fieldwork, less than 1% of schools in the country continued to adhere to the principles of developmental education because there were not enough educators who knew how to enact this pedagogy (Interview # 49, February 2014). The activity-based approach also tended to thrive in ‘boutique schools’ where principals had a strong vision and preparation to implement this approach, but there were challenges in replicating these models in regular public schools. Teachers and schools that implemented activity-based approaches faced opposition from parents who were not familiar with different notation systems or models deployed by this method.

More importantly, however, systems activity theory resulted in the reproduction of inequality. During my interview with a researcher from the Lyutvino Centre for Innovation in Education, I learned that this approach did not serve all children equally well (Interview # 60, March 2014). The research that the centre conducted – despite their overall support for this approach – showed that only children from well-off families were thriving in activity-based classrooms where learning was based on the principles of guided discovery. Children from underserved backgrounds, on the other hand, were only falling further behind. This research, however, was not published for the fear of repercussions from those who held power in policymaking circles.

The Centre’s findings did corroborate what was documented (and in some situations censored out) by researchers in other contexts – activity-based approaches can hinder learning for students from working class communities, immigrant families, or racially minoritized groups. This happens, in part, because the process of discovery requires an extensive use of academic language. Students who come from backgrounds where a more restricted code is more common struggle with the elaborated code used in schools and fall behind when the mastery of the latter is required to engage in dialogue and (self)guided discovery (Bernstein 2000; Heath 1983; Theule Lubienski 2000). Thus, the creation of a bifurcated system emerged not only as a project of Shchedrovitsky’s followers who sought to create a national elite through educational reforms, but also as an unintended consequence of educational approaches that favoured those students who already brought extensive symbolic resources to school. If widely implemented, the use of activity-based approaches would contribute to the production of elite in ways that re-inscribe existing social hierarchies and reproduce unequal structures, reducing the possibility of social mobility for those who come from underserved backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

My analysis of the introduction of competency-based approaches into the Russian system shows that the promise of increased educational quality disguised the attempts to create a two-tiered educational system that would place students from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds into separate dead-end tracks. Based on new standards, children from underserved backgrounds were supposed to receive primarily socialisation – or the basic level of competencies that, according to Lyotard (1984), would
constitute knowledge for survival. The shift towards developing students’ individual qualities rather than providing them with expansive theoretical knowledge similar to the changes in France (Clément, this volume) prevents most students from learning tools of social analysis and critique. For families who wanted and had the means for their children to receive higher education, however, there would always be options to get advanced preparation in key disciplines. These groups from more privileged backgrounds could count on having access to knowledge for investment – investment in one’s individual advancement as well as investment into one’s ability to become a part of the consolidated power structure.

Ironically, activity-based theory, developed primarily during the Soviet era, became a tool to remove the legacy of Soviet approaches to education. New school standards in conjunction with other reforms that emerged in Russia in the 2010s negated commitments to equity and justice of the Soviet school system that had provided all students with access to intellectually demanding curriculum and had made available pathways to higher education to students from underserved groups (Zajda 2010). This departure from the Soviet legacy, however, fuelled some of the opposition to the reforms, which to this day remain a matter of tremendous controversy and conflict.

The denunciation of the Soviet legacy came hand-in-hand with mobilising activity-based approaches for the purpose of neoliberal social engineering (Anderson 2005). International organisations and policy-entrepreneurs promoted scripts according to which students should develop certain competencies to participate in the global economy (Aydarova 2019; Rizvi and Lingard 2009). Those scripts overlapped with Shchedrovitsky’s argument that the society had to blueprint future generations based on the functions they would fulfil in the society. This match between a transnational script and nationally cultivated theories produced traction for reform. As a result, globally circulated competency discourses became appropriated to facilitate Russia’s inclusion in the global neoliberal order.

The introduction of new K-12 standards within the context of other policies reformers promoted also reoriented the educational system towards serving businesses and corporations. Reformers and experts often discussed the need for change through the lens of corporate demand for a new type of workforce (Aydarova 2019). The new school envisioned by these changes also became framed as a corporation. In a meeting with representatives of the educational community that addressed proposals put forward in Strategy 2020, President Medvedev discussed the culture of educational institutions through the lens of corporate allegiances:

Any person who enters an educational establishment whether it is a schoolchild even young ones or a university student … should understand that s/he takes on corporate responsibilities. They should sense their allegiance to the corporation, if you do not live up to the status or title of this corporation, there should be sanctions … Allegiance to a corporation is a very important thing and that’s why behavior code should be accepted by everyone and should be used as a discipline tool. (Soveshchaniye 2012)

This statement echoed reformers’ perspectives that new standards and educational reforms that accompanied them would become a tool for producing subjects that need competencies and adequate socialisation to become compliant workers desired by international businesses and corporations.
This article raises questions not only about the changes in educational systems but also about the future that is being constructed through these transformations. As Debord (1994, 1998) noted, spectators will never act and are therefore less likely to fight against injustice. Turning educational systems towards the production of compliant workers, spectators, and docile subjects paves the way for the type of social control and social inequality that benefits those already in power in the global neoliberal order. This analysis, however, presents an opportunity for comparative and international education to intervene in the hybridisations of global discourses. More research is needed to support the grassroots struggles against the production of spectators and the normalisation of inequality.

**Note**

1. All geographic names used in the paper are pseudonyms. To protect participants’ anonymity, I also do not use full citations for the data sources that could reveal their identities and do not include those sources in the reference list.

**Disclosure statement**

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