

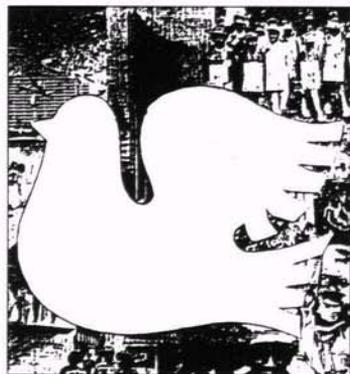
Teaching About
the U.S.S.R.

Contemporary Education in the U.S.S.R.:

A Conversation with Robert F. Byrnes

Distinguished Professor of History at Indiana University since 1967, Robert F. Byrnes was the first director of the university's Russian and East European Institute from 1959-63. The author of over a dozen books on French, Russian, and East European history, he recently completed his 17th trip to the Soviet Union. In this interview, Harold G. Shane, Distinguished Professor of Education Emeritus at Indiana University and a former ASCD President, asks Byrnes his views about the nature and status of education in the Soviet Union today.

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In view of your in-depth study of education in the U.S.S.R., what do you deem to be the past and future purposes of Soviet education?

The basic purpose resides in and reflects the decisions made by the Communist Party leaders and the government they control: they see education as they see the army, the press, or any other institutions of Soviet society that might strengthen the system. Party leaders thus strive to improve the skills and technical ability of the Soviet population, making their economy stronger and their military force more powerful.

Do you feel that Russia's Central Committee is successful in developing a school population that supports its goals?

The Central Committee seeks to bring up young men and women who will be useful to their society. For example, the Ministry of Education, if directed to do so, will decide that the state needs 3,000 new Ph.D.'s in organic chemistry in the next five years; and they will assign the best students they can find for work in organic chemistry. The following year the priority may be something else—and young men and women will study what the government directs them to study.

By and large, then, to answer your question, the Russian government is accomplishing its purposes. We have a somewhat inaccurate view of the Soviet Union because our media emphasize Soviet dissenters and their dissatisfactions. Out of a population of about 270 million people, however, there are between 5,000 to 50,000 dissenters—depending on how one defines *dissent*. If given the opportunity to emigrate, 2 or 3 percent might leave, but I think most of them would choose to return fairly quickly. Most Soviets are relatively satisfied, perhaps more satisfied in many ways than we are in the U.S., and education has been effective in helping to develop this attitude.

Education, then, is a means of indoctrinating people as they go through school with an under-

standing of the values of the Soviet Union and its goals in the global world community?

That's certainly part of it. The Communist Party uses everything in the Soviet Union—the press, the schools, the army, the radio, the media—as agents for the same party propaganda.

Does this concept of indoctrination apply to the education of teachers?

They are indoctrinated the way everybody else is, and they get heavy doses in the teachers' institutes. The teachers I met are devoted to the party and to the country. They also are highly devoted to education. They display firmness in the classroom but also have a real affection for students, particularly noticeable in the primary grades.

How does the socioeconomic status of Soviet teachers compare with the status of teachers in the U.S.?

They tend to have better social status than our teachers do. They are respected as people of importance; however, they are not paid more. The typical teacher receives fewer rubles than an average skilled worker. Incidentally, most of the teachers in the U.S.S.R. are women. Their sense of commitment often seemed to me to

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be greater than that of teachers in our society.

In the U.S. there is a good deal of emphasis on community and parent relationships. Is this important in the U.S.S.R.?

Russians have basically the same kind of P.T.A. that we have, and they engage in some of the same activities. They collect money for playground equipment, for instance, and they meet regularly with the teachers. They do not have the same influence as parent groups in the U.S., however, because direction comes down from the top in the Soviet Union.

How do administrators function in the U.S.S.R.? Is there a position comparable to that of our superintendent of schools?

I have talked to a number of principals in Russia, but I don't remember having met a superintendent. The persons in administrative control are carefully selected and trained to un-

derstand and support government policies. Principals in Russia have far more authority than do most principals in our country. They have real power and influence over the faculty as well as over the students and their parents. Let me repeat that they get this authority from the government, which directs their activities.

What are your perceptions of curriculum practices in the Soviet Union?

One of the things that impresses me about primary and secondary education is the emphasis on discipline. I refer both to self-discipline and to orderliness in classrooms, to restraints which one is less likely to find in many American schools. The government seeks to produce a highly disciplined population, disciplined in terms of their own personal goals and in terms of individual contributions to the strength and stability of Soviet society.

On the negative side, there is a need for *perestroika* through the last year of graduate school! At the university, for instance, no matter what one wishes to be—a doctor, an engineer, a teacher—I estimate that 5 to 10 percent, or even 15 percent, of the curriculum is devoted to propaganda or doctrinaire instruction.

Do elementary, secondary, and university curriculums on the whole have about the same uniform content whether they happen to be in Moscow or Leningrad, in rural or urban areas?

In general, yes. However, rural schools prepare the youngsters to engage in farming, putting appreciably more emphasis on the rural economy.

What kinds of experiences are stressed?

In the schools I have visited since 1980, I would say that emphasis is placed on rote learning rather than thinking. The thinking processes that we try to emphasize in the U.S. receive much less attention. This emphasis on indoctrination has created dissatisfaction among some students who hope that the *glasnost* begun in the 1980s will help encourage thinking and open-mindedness.

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Is *glasnost* making a difference?

This year in particular, people who have been quietly thinking on their own are now being allowed to express themselves openly—this is generating some tension. At the same time, there is a great love for the country. Part of it comes from history, part of it from indoctrination, and part from a sense of obligation to society.

Despite more openness and restructuring, will the U.S.S.R. continue to seek to influence schooling?

Yes. In the U.S., historically as well as today, education has come up from the bottom and been controlled by parents. But in the U.S.S.R., every aspect of education is funded and controlled by the government. On one of my visits, for example, I talked with a Minister of Education, who said that at that hour in every 4th grade across the Soviet Union, every youngster was studying geography and that he or she was probably on page 27 of the same textbook. That's very firm control.

What is the status of undergraduate and graduate students with respect to selection, financial support, and the freedom to prepare for a career of their choice?

Admission to institutions of higher education is very competitive. Students take examinations that last a week. The exam in history, for example, is a six-hour written one. There are also four- or five-hour examinations in language, mathematics, phys-

ics, chemistry, and so on. If their family name carries prestige, of course, students receive special treatment; they can go to special schools.

What about funds for students?

When students enter the university, they receive financial support. In the 1980s it's about \$40 a month. If you are in a field of study thought to be important, you get more money; however, the best students get the more remunerative scholarships, and the very best go into graduate school.

In effect, Soviet higher education qualifies persons for various roles, both which the government sees a need to fill and which their intelligence suggests they can handle. Does freedom of choice exist at all?

You don't really have freedom of choice unless you are in the top of your class. You bargain if you want to go to medical school. If you don't succeed, then you may settle for chemistry and try to work your way into medical school afterward.

You've been visiting in Russia for 16 years. Have you noticed any major changes in education in that time?

There have been some changes. Unfortunately, at this time, they are not far enough along for me to predict whether there will be genuine *perestroika*, or rebuilding, in education. □

Selected Readings

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