John Dewey and the Development of Education in Russia before 1930 – Report on a Forgotten Reception

IRINA MCHITARJAN
Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University Greifswald, Germany

Abstract. This article explores the kinds of response John Dewey (1859–1952) received in Russia between 1900 and 1930, and the impact he had on the educational debate there. The study's main findings are: Both before and after the Socialist October Revolution of 1917, Dewey had a significant impact on the development of the Russian school system. The ultimate rejection of Dewey's pedagogy towards the end of the 20s was not due to educational but to political and ideological reasons.

John Dewey (1859–1952) “is one of the few educators of the 20th century, whose work, in both theory and practice, has gained worldwide influence” (Klafki, 1978, p. 781). Like elsewhere, Dewey's work also got wide response in Russia, particularly in the period between 1900 and 1930. Yet apart from a few exceptions (e.g. Komarovsky, 1926), the Russian reception of Dewey’s educational ideas has largely remained unexplored. This article attempts a reappraisal of this neglected part of Russia’s history of education. My guiding question will be: what was nature of the response Dewey received in Russia between 1900 and 1930, and to what extent did he influence the educational debate there? I will try, first, to establish the reasons or preconditions for Dewey’s critical reception in Russia; second, to reconstruct this reception in terms of chronology and content; and third, to explore the significance of Dewey’s reception for the educational reform process in Russia.1

In order to understand Dewey’s reception in Russia during the first three decades of the 20th century, it is important to have at least a rough idea of the historical background, particularly the school politics, in which it took place. Therefore, I shall begin with a brief description of this historical context to then present the principal features of Dewey’s reception in the second part of this article. A third part will draw some conclusions.

1. The Social and Historical Context

(1) School development in Russia in the period between 1900 and 1930 – and hence the reception explored here – was strongly influenced by the country’s general socio-political development. Major historical breaks that also had an effect on
Russia’s school development and the reception examined here were the bourgeois democratic revolution of 1905, the Socialist October Revolution of 1917, and the introduction of the first five-year plan in 1928.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russia was still an absolute monarchy, characterized by an illiberal or repressive attitude towards critical public discussions. The bourgeois democratic revolution of 1905 marked a transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy and brought in its wake a number of democratic liberties. These led, among other things, to the establishment of a critical educational public with strong tendencies towards reform, as manifested in the founding of progressive schools and educational journals, the organization of school conferences, etc.

The Socialist October Revolution of 1917 led to the foundation of the Soviet state and to a radical change in Russian educational policy. Although Soviet educators attempted to ameliorate many of the existing school problems, they excluded ideologically “suspect” initiatives of the progressive movement from their discussion and practice. Henceforth, progressive educational ideas – including those from other countries – had to conform to the educational standards of the Soviet state. Yet, despite state control, the 20s in Russia (until the introduction of the first five-year plan in 1928) can be seen as a period of extensive educational experimentation.

Since the introduction of the first five-year plan in 1928 – aimed at stepping up Russia’s industrialization – the measures of reform to be promoted in the education system (compulsory education, the elimination of illiteracy, the vocational and technical training of the masses etc.) were primarily aimed at ensuring the cultural growth of the working masses and the education of highly qualified specialists and scientists (‘KPSS v rezoliutsiakh syezdov, konferentsy i plenumov TsK’, 1954, p. 465). These measures went hand in hand with the “intensification of the class struggle” and an increase of party control – including the control over schools. The Central Committee’s resolution “On Elementary and Secondary Schools” of September 5, 1931, “conclusively prohibited any experimentation in schools providing general education” (Froese, 1963, p. 196). Henceforth, any reference to the Russian heritage of educational reform, or to foreign models of progressive education, became impossible.

(2) At the end of the 19th century, the Russian school system was divided in two subsystems known as “lower” and “higher” education. As far as “lower” education was concerned, by the beginning of the 20th century Russia did not have compulsory education, nor a sufficient number of schools to introduce it. In 1897, only a quarter of the population was able to read and write (cf. Johnson, 1969, p. 173 passim). Russia’s higher schools were attended by only 0.13% of the population at the end of the 19th century (cf. Johnson, 1963, p. 196). Access to “higher” education was strongly restricted by law (cf. Konstantinov, 1947, p. 48). Accordingly, the central issues of the Russian educational discussion at the turn of the century were: the extension of the network of elementary schools, the introduction