5 Movements for Change

The basis of democratic individuality in education is freedom and responsibility, not just the pupil's responsibility for himself but responsibility for the whole of his environment.

Oleg Gazman

The Party Plenum of February 1988 which for the first time gave official blessing to the individual teacher innovators also encouraged the emergence of a variety of innovative groups. The years 1988 to 1990 and part of 1991 were the era of experimentation and innovation in the Soviet Union. It was the period of glasnost and perestroika, the ending of the Cold War in Europe, the fall of the Berlin wall, the beginning of some personal freedom for the populations of the former Soviet Union and the other eastern European countries, and the introduction of private enterprise and the market economy.

Perestroika in education, as in most aspects of Soviet life, did not always go smoothly. There was often more talk than action. The State Committee for Education and its Chairman, Yagodin, gave verbal support for the new look in Soviet education. But in practice this support was sometimes lacking, as it was for example at the Congress of Educational Workers when they did not speak up for the teacher innovators. Again, backing was absent at the January 1989 elections for new officers of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, when many people with no pedagogical experience were elected. The Committee did not always speak out when these matters were being discussed. The Academy, the traditional arbiter of educational theory, came under severe criticism after 1988, for its conservatism and pedagogical incompetence, and it was to have been completely reorganized under a commission set up by the State Committee. There were frequent meetings of the commission throughout 1988 to discuss the way forward, which were reported in Uchitel'skaia gazeta under the heading 'Kakoi byt' APN SSSR'. But in spite of pressing calls by the innovators for the APN to involve itself in complex research which would necessitate the setting up of experimental schools and laboratories for experimentation and technology, when it came to the elections 'they merely filled the vacancies'.

J. Sutherland, Schooling in the New Russia
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Many good people were chosen, such as I. Ivanov, a founder of the Commune group, Shalva Amonashvili, teacher and innovator, I. Kon, the philosopher and sociologist, I. Antonova, Director of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, I. Zyazun, Rector of the Poltava Pedagogical Institute, and Manyushin, innovator and specialist in higher education. Many others were left out, such as E. Dneprov, then head of VNIK and leader of support for the new school, the learned psychologist V. Zinchenko, M. Shchetinin from the Ukraine, E.P. Il’in, teacher of literature from Leningrad, S. Ryabtsev and others who had given constant support to the aims of humanism and democracy in education. The ‘complete reorganization’ was postponed not for two or three months but for two or three years. The late Matveev, formerly Chief Editor of *Uchitel’skaia gazeta*, said that the government commission for the reorganization of the APN had taken the easy way out. ‘Is this a step towards renewal or stagnation?’ Matveev asked.3

Since Gorbachev, at the February 1988 Plenum of the Communist Party, confirmed that a complete restructuring was needed in Soviet education, publicity was given to a whole new series of radical ideas. Almost everyone was agreed that a change was needed from the strict traditional methods of teaching by fear and pressure, which had prevailed since the time of Stalin. There were however still differences of opinion about how far the change should go and in what way it should be achieved. What seemed to many observers like a new wave of radical ideas, in reality probably started as far back as the late 1950s and might well have blossomed into a full-scale revolution in education, as happened in many countries in the 1960s, had it not been for the 20-year period of stagnation which followed the rise of Brezhnev.

Khrushchev’s attempts at educational reform in the 1950s and his insistence on vocational work, although not successful or popular, had caused educators to consider changes to the rigid Stalinist system. And throughout the years, others made moderate attempts to change or diversify educational methods. There was for example the initiator of the Commune movement, I. Ivanov, in Leningrad, and later V. Davydov, Vice-President of the APN in 1988 and founder of School No. 91 in Moscow. When I visited this experimental school in 1990 it had been functioning for over twenty years. The children were encouraged not to rely solely on memory, as in the traditional methods, but to work out certain concepts for themselves; for example the pieces of a square were put together and taken apart by children, giving them the knowledge and acceptance of algebraic formulae. In the Russian language class the children were taught without being