

Comparative study of American and Russian students' attitude towards alternative education

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Abstract. The article presents the results of comparative study of students' attitude to the alternative education in American and Russian schools. The study was held in a number of Montessori schools in Minnesota USA (Sunshine Montessori School, Seward Montessori School, Great River School). Methods of observation, survey, questionnaire, personal interviews with students and teachers of schools were used. Questioning of American students was held in Great River School. The study surveyed 100 school students. They answered questions about their learning experiences in an alternative school. The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of 14 questions. The questions were both of direct and expanded character, with a choice of options. Russian students from three secondary schools in the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan answered the same questions. The study showed that despite the differences in the production of alternative education in the United States and Russia, among the characteristics of alternative education inherent in the American and Russian schools, students noted student-centered character of education, overcoming authoritarianism in teaching and creativity and cognitive activity.

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Introduction

Increasing interest in nontraditional, alternative forms of education is manifested today in many countries. Inspiration for the development of alternative schools and programs is primarily dictated by the need of modern society in the personality ready for self-development. Particular place in modernization of education system and in the development of alternative education is occupied by the United States. This country has established stable alternative models of education implementing achievements of the best global practices.

In Russia today, there is no developed network of alternative schools. There are many reasons and one of them is the lack of effective advocacy of ideas and experience of such schools. In recent years, the study of alternative education in Russia and abroad is becoming increasingly important. This is due to the fact that the most important requirement for the modern school education is not only and the need to provide students with knowledge as to form a highly moral person ready to self-educate, having the skills and competencies to acquire new knowledge.

The issue of alternative education is the subject of study of many American researchers. Analysis of the history, essential characteristics, contents and methods of alternative education in the U.S. is reflected in the works R.E. Morley [1], M.A. Raywid [2], S.R. Aronson [3], R.E. Butchart [4], B.Jacobs [5], S. Kadel [6], C.A.Kershaw & M.A. Blank [7], P.C.Rogers [8], Y.Nagata [9], F.

Wheelock & M.E. Sweeney [10]. R.E. Morley carried out a review and analysis of the early studies of alternative education [11]. T. W.Young dedicated his works to the alternative conception of the impossibility of the only best way of education for all [12]. M. Raywid proposed general typology of alternative education [13].

Among the Russian researches on problems of alternative education T.V. Tsyrlina's works devoted to the phenomenon of the author's humanistic school are of great interest [14]. R.A. Valeeva investigated experience of the first half of the twentieth century reformatory schools in Europe [15]. A.A. Valeev studied the implementation of the free education in democratic schools [16]. D.R. Gilyazova explored the development of alternative education in Commonwealth countries in the twentieth century [17]. D.M.Zinnatova undertook a serious study on the development of alternative didactic systems abroad [18]. The Ukrainian researcher I.N. Vetrova examined the development of alternative of secondary education in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century [19].

The aim of this paper is a comparative analysis of American and Russian students' attitude to the alternative education in schools.

Methods

The study was held in a number of Montessori schools in Minnesota USA (Sunshine Montessori School, Seward Montessori School, Great

River School). Methods of observation, survey, questionnaire, personal interviews with students and teachers of schools were used. Sunshine Montessori School is for preschool children from 3 to 6 years. Seward Montessori School includes preschool and basic school (1-8th forms). Questioning of American students was held in Great River School that has high school classes. The study surveyed 100 school students. They answered questions about their learning experiences in an alternative school. The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of 14 questions. The questions were both of direct and expanded character, with a choice of options, the Likert Scale. The students were asked to select an answer from a numerical scale from 1 to 5, "Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree". For comparison of the results of secondary schools graduates were also interviewed. Russian students from three High schools in the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan answered the same questions.

Results

When answering the question "Which factor has played a decisive role in choosing a school?" alternative school students called small class size, closer contact with teachers, as well as the fact that they had already attended such a school before, and did not represent possible to proceed to secondary school. Secondary school students are more guided by the fact the school is close to their residence and just because it was the parents' choice.

When answering the question about what parameters characterize their educational institution, students from alternative schools often called age difference (23%) and student centered training (22%). In secondary schools students are grouped by age (17%), and a teacher is in the center of training rather than a student(15%). Students of secondary schools are often taught the same course (9%), and teaching is based on textbooks and lectures (24%), while students from alternative schools are grouped by interests and abilities (17%), and teaching is based mostly on projects (19%).

The third issue was the attitude of to the system of evaluations in alternative and secondary school. Alternative school students are very loyal to estimates. Opinions were divided almost 50% to 50%. Those who support the evaluation system, wrote that the assessments are necessary "for monitoring the learning process, for stimulating them, not allowing feel relaxed," as it is important for them "to compare their results with classmates, i.e. to know their rating." Opponents of assessments think the assessments "simply regulate their learning activities, but do not provide opportunities for creative research." They pouned them in a certain

frame, but do not encourage self-development. Furthermore, the assessments form the feeling of uncertainty and fear before the final test. 97% of students in secondary schools can't imagine their studies without assessments. They believe that only "assessment is a measure of their knowledge, success and influence their further education in higher education institutions." Only 3% of students would learn with pleasure without ratings.

Next, we examined indicators of two types of educational institutions attractiveness in the opinion of students. A very high percentage of alternative schools pupils believe that they have gained a good knowledge and skills, and most importantly the school helped them to reach their full potential. It should be noted that secondary school students also expressed their preference for these criteria, but the percentage of positive responses was a bit lower.

When answering the question "To what extent did your school instill a love of learning and develop skills necessary for college?" students' responses differed greatly. More than half of the students responded positively to these questions, and only a quarter of secondary school students gave positive answers. The answer to the question of choosing a future profession makes it possible to visualize the career-oriented focus of an alternative system of education. According to alternative school students, "a number of core subjects helped their self-determination" and nearly half of all surveyed students (46%) noted that "the school had helped them in choosing a future profession." In secondary school only 19% of the students know what profession to choose in future.

In their responses to the question about what school gave to them, most alternative school students stressed that "the school had helped them to develop their leadership potential and to form interpersonal communication." 65% of respondents said that they "felt the personal touch and attention from the teachers." According to comprehensive school respondents' answers, only a third of them remained satisfied with individual approach in learning and the ability to reach their leadership potential.

76% of alternative schools students would like to repeat the experience in the same school. In contrast, only 53% of secondary school students would agree to it. Compared with the alternative school, they gave more negative responses (20%) and expressed their doubts (27%) in repeating the experience. The overwhelming majority of alternative schools pupils (73%), imagining themselves in the role of parents would like to see their children alternative school students. While only

a third of secondary school pupils (30%) would like their children to repeat their experience.

Among the positive results of alternative schools in the USA there is a good attendance and reducing the number of dropouts from school, fewer problems related to the behavior of students, maintaining academic achievement, a high level of meeting social needs, dignity, security and self-realization, a positive attitude toward school, parents' increased involvement in school life. Alternative schools graduates are represented at all levels of employment, the number of unemployed is low. They are engaged in volunteer work, participate in elections, and reveal their talents in amateur and not so much of people overstepping law.

After the study in Minnesota, USA, we organized a similar study with Russian schoolchildren. Survey covered a hundred 11th form students of three Kazan schools of different types: secondary school with advanced study of English No18, gymnasium № 93 and secondary school number 23.

Among the factors playing a decisive role in choosing a school Kazan students named the choice of parents (37%), the proximity of the school to the home (52%) and the school's reputation (41%). According to students, the school material is studied without regard to individual features, and the lesson is targeted at average students (64%), interest in the lesson and the significance of the object is directly proportional to the personality of a teacher. In teaching students reproductive style is prevalent, learning is based on textbooks and teacher's lecture (58%), 32% of students indicate that they are engaged in project activities.

83% of students find it necessary to use the assessment system. Kazan students' answers were consonant with the opinion of their peers from American schools, that "assessment is necessary for monitoring students' knowledge and also is the "means of motivation and stimulation of students' learning." According to respondents, assessments provide an objective assessment of knowledge, and let you compete with your classmates."

More than a half of respondents agreed that they had acquired a good knowledge (56%) and skills (63%) in school. 28% of students mentioned that the school helped them to unlock their potential and 25% said the school had instilled an interest in their self-education. 46% of respondents noted that the educational institution hardly helped them in choosing a future profession. The answer to this question once again stressed the need for early career guidance in schools and the introduction of special disciplines that would help students' self-

determination, as it happens in American alternative schools.

Answering the question how they felt when communicating with teachers, 34% said they felt uncomfortable, 37% could not answer the question. This suggests that in many Russian schools there is a certain barrier in teachers' - students' communication, providing this feeling of uncertainty and unease. 28% of respondents to the question of the individual approach application by teachers responded negatively, while 35% of students confirmed the use of individual approach on the part of teachers.

34% of students said that the school had helped them in discovering leadership potential, 29% wrote that they could not reveal their leadership qualities. On the question of sympathy for their school 60% of students answered positively, 23% - negatively. 73% of respondents answered positively to the question whether they would like to re-learn the same school. But the next question, "Would you like to send your children to the same school," most respondents (52%) responded negatively, since they do not believe that the level of education in their educational institution will remain the same. Moreover, they are aware of the existence of more advanced schools.

Conclusions

Currently, the number of alternative education adherents in Russia is growing, domestic and international communications of pedagogical community interested in changing the traditional school system are expanding. One of the most important characteristics of alternative education inherent in the Russian educational institutions, is the desire to give education student-centered character, overcoming authoritarianism in education and training and empowerment of cognitive activity and creativity. Positive experience with alternative education outside Russia today gradually becomes the property of the Russian education, getting into different pedagogical models and gaining universal character. In order to approve Russia's positive attitude towards alternative education and raise it to a higher quality level it is necessary to address at least three challenges:

- 1) To develop humanistic educational principles, to improve teaching and disseminate their accumulated experience;
- 2) To disseminate information on alternative education movement and its ideas;
- 3) To work together in the international movement of alternative, democratic schools; make this move permanent factor of Russian education in

order to make it into the mainstream of modern school.

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