

Stalinizing American Education

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Of the following three statements, which refer to the Soviet Union in the 1930s and which refer to America today?

1. “Teachers are asked to achieve significant academic growth for all students at the same time that they instruct students with ever-more diverse needs....The stakes are huge—and the time to cling to the status quo has passed.”
2. “We had to have a campaign for 100 percent successful teaching...all students must learn.”
3. “Poor work by the school and poor achievement by the entire class and by individual pupils are the direct result of poor work by the teacher.”

Although all three of the above sentiments could be attributable to current officeholders in Washington, D.C., only the first is American—from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (Duncan 2010, January). The second and third are policy statements which emanated from old Soviet policy papers on educational reform (Ewing, 2001, p. 487).

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union was mired in recession. Poverty and unemployment, especially among the peasant class, were rampant. Although the existing educational system was efficient and progressive, especially considering schools’ negligible funding, most Soviet children did not attend school. The Soviet government, led by Joseph Stalin, instigated a series of educational reforms designed to obliterate the established educational system and to create a new centralized structure that would increase literacy, create “good citizens,” and transform the Soviet Union into a global power, particularly in the areas of science, mathematics, and technology. The similarities of Soviet educational initiatives in the 1930s to American educational reform today are as discomfiting as they are striking.

Trend 1: The move to a nationalized curriculum

The adoption of a new, national curriculum in the United States has proceeded rapidly with little fanfare. Despite the small difficulty that no one is exactly sure what the final standards will look like, 48 states have already accepted the new, improved standards *de facto* as a national curriculum.

Although the federal government in the United States pays a proportionally small percentage of costs for public K-12 education (as low as 4% of costs for New Jersey schools, for example), states and local school districts are increasingly ceding power to the central government. In the recent past, federal policymakers have mandated the following:

- Students must take standardized tests at frequent intervals,
- Schools must provide “least restrictive environments” for all children (including instruction in the student’s home language)
- Schools must incur all costs associated with providing the “least restrictive environment,”
- Schools must track the achievement levels of all students by ethnicity (and soon, by teacher and teacher preparation program).

Despite such demands, the federal government contributes little towards the costs of implementing these policies. With *Race to the Top*, federal intervention in public schooling has been taken to new heights. Now to qualify for federal funds, a state must agree to undermine its own system of public schools by guaranteeing the proliferation of charter schools (possibly run by corporations); must promote alternative pathways to certification by bypassing state universities (for-profit institutions); must guarantee that organizations formed to protect teachers, such as collaboratives or unions, be rendered powerless.

At a recent speech to the national Parent Teachers Organization, Secretary of Education Duncan said, “For years, we have actually been lying to children and lying to ourselves by pretending that 50 different standards, in 50 different states, will make America competitive and help our children succeed in life. We have to stop pretending. We have to tell the truth. And we have to raise the bar for all children” (Duncan, 2010b). Obviously, the goal of

the current administration is to establish national standards and national testing so that states, regions, schools, teachers, and students can be compared and ranked.

Before Stalin's educational reforms in the Soviet Union, teaching was characterized by local control. Educational policies were significantly influenced by what were known at the time as "pedologists," scholars who considered learning the result of a conglomeration of genetic, cultural, environmental, and instructional factors. Soviet pedologists were early believers in using research to inform practice and were blatantly oriented towards a "child-centered" education.

Educational theorist Lev Vygotsky, a revered figure among many American academics, was writing some of his seminal works, such as *Adolescent Pedagogy* (1931) and *Language and Thought* (1934) during this time (Vygotsky died in 1934). Despite some promising practices, the communist party rejected the child-centered, scholarly approach of the pedologists and replaced it with a standardized curriculum that featured frequent examinations, competitive grading, and an emphasis on mathematics, science, and technology (Ewing, 2002; Holmes, 1999; Petrone, 2000). Sound familiar?

Trend 2: An emphasis on the teaching of science, math, and technology

Sporadic promotion of the study of mathematics, science, and technology has been a hallmark of American initiatives in education for more than a century. Legislation such as The Morrill Act of 1862, the National Defense Act of 1958, and Goals 2000 generously funded universities and school districts that agreed to encourage study in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). While there is little debate about the importance of STEM to future developments in medicine, engineering, robotics, and computer science, the emphasis on the sciences has resulted in a corresponding national evisceration of the arts, humanities, and physical education.

The elementary school in my neighborhood, like the elementary schools in many American neighborhoods today, no longer employs an art teacher. The physical education teacher is shared by two schools. The school nurse is shared by six schools. If a student in an American public school becomes ill while at school, he or she had better do it on the one day per week that the nurse is scheduled to be in the building or the student will be out of luck.

A vestige of the punitive policies of No Child Left Behind, elementary schools in many states that fail to meet adequate yearly progress standards [markers?] are reprimanded by removing all electives, such as art and physical education, from the curriculum. As a result, students who have the misfortune of attending a low-performing elementary school may never have the chance to draw, paint, run, or play during school hours. Instead of art or physical education, they receive a relentless diet of "the basics" until scores improve.

In a speech in November, 2009, President Obama (2009b) lamented the waning of American leadership in the sciences, but pledged "that's what we're going to be about again." Similarly, Stalin saw education in STEM as key to a flourishing economy. "We frankly and deliberately consented to incur what in this case would be inevitable charges and over-expenditures owing to the inadequate number of technically trained people" (Stalin, 1954, p. 45). In September 1931, the Soviet government officially decreed that the "abstract sciences" should dominate the curriculum. With billions of federal dollars earmarked to support STEM in K-12 and post-secondary schools, the United States has decreed the dominance of the "abstract sciences" as well.

How close is current American rhetoric on the importance of STEM to the old propaganda of the Soviet Union during the 1930s? Try to identify who said what below—Comrade Stalin or President Obama.

1. "There is no doubt that our educational institutions will soon be turning out thousands of new technicians and engineers, new leaders for our industries."
2. "Improving education in math and science is about producing engineers and researchers and scientists and innovators who are going to help transform our economy and our lives for the better."
3. "Galileo changed the world when he pointed his telescope to the sky and now it's your turn."
4. "In the course of its development science has known not a few courageous men who were able to break down the old and create the new, despite all obstacles, despite everything. Such scientists as Galileo...are widely known."

Key: Joseph Stalin said the first (Stalin, 1954/c1934). President Obama said the second (Obama, 2009, November 23) and the third (2009, October 8), and Stalin said the fourth (Stalin, 1978/c1940, pp. 329-330).

Trend 3: Focus on predetermined outcomes

Soviet teachers in the 1930s had little leeway to veer from the newly revised Soviet curriculum, despite the composition of the children who might be sitting in their classrooms. Similarly, in most states in America today, the same curriculum must be delivered to all students—whether they happen to be poor immigrants from Somalia sitting in an urban classroom in Minneapolis or a group of profoundly gifted savants sitting in a classroom in a wealthy suburb of Atlanta.

Perhaps one of the most debilitating new policies is the federal mandate to use test scores to assess the quality of learning. When the test becomes a template for the curriculum, any diversion from the sanctioned curriculum becomes suspect. For example, for all intents and purposes, a teacher of social studies in most states cannot teach anything about the Iraq War, though the conflict is ongoing, one of the most expensive confrontations of all time, and the lengthiest war in American history. The Iraq War is neglected as a topic of study not because it is inconsequential, but because it rarely shows up on standardized exams. On the other hand, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which occurred over 150 years ago, is a staple on standardized examinations so it is furiously “covered” in American schools from coast-to-coast.

The students of a teacher who launches into an intensive study of the Iraq War, then, will likely score lower on a standardized exam than students of a teacher who has chosen to focus attention on the intricacies of the American Civil War. In this way, learning for the real world has become supplanted by the directive to memorize facts and events that someone else has deemed important. The distance between inert and useful knowledge is not just a feature of the social studies. Contemporary breakthroughs in science, mathematics, and technology, while profuse in real life, are conspicuously absent in K-12 schools because the discoveries are too new to have been formally vetted by the bureaucracy that controls the sanctioned curriculum.

Proponents of standardized testing claim that making tests better will, perforce, make the curriculum better (Hirsch, 2009). However, the development of a sanctioned curriculum takes collaboration, negotiation, and incredible expenditures of time, energy, and money. In the current era of rapid, radical change, by the time a curriculum gets codified and approved, it may well be obsolete.

Finally, the very notion of establishing predetermined outcomes for American children seems antithetical to democratic ideals. Establishing precisely what a child should know and be able to do sounds more like an antediluvian communist fantasy of yesteryear than an American policy for the twenty-first century. In fact, it is.

About the Soviet curriculum of the 1930s, Zajda (1980) comments, “Uniformity in the curricula, teaching methods, and textbooks was also followed by a blue-print like uniformity of the entire educational system in the USSR” (p. 25). One might have thought that the American way would be to offer rich opportunities and varied experiences, then allow students to decide for themselves what they mean. A prefabricated curriculum takes the adventure out of learning; it dictates both what is important and why.

For most children, especially American children, prescribing final outcomes seems absurd. Most parents would find laughable the notion of forcing all their offspring to think, act, and speak in identical ways, yet the expectation for American teachers today is to get all students to think, act, and speak in the ways that the sanctioned curriculum specifies. Despite its flagrantly anti-democratic, anti-individualistic underpinnings, outcomes-based education has become pandemic, providing the very foundation for American educational reform for more than forty years. Ubiquitous in American schools, outcomes-based education seems more suited to the goals of communism than the ideals of democracy. “The activity of the [Stalinist] system of education was not oriented toward encouraging creativity, and the development of the personality but rather toward universal leveling, averaging, and the fulfillment of the social mandate” (Borisenkov, 2007, p. 7).

Trend 4: Stronger teacher accountability, less teacher autonomy

Both Secretary of Education Duncan and President Obama praised the recent firing of the entire teaching staff at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island. True, test scores at the school were far from stellar, but absenteeism and misbehavior were down and graduation rates were up, no small feat for a school located in one of the poorest areas of the state. Below is a table that compares the achievement of students at Central Falls High School, again, located in one of the poorest parts of Rhode Island, with that of Barrington High School, a school located in one of the richest areas of Rhode Island, over the past two years.

School	Change in mean reading score, 2008-2009	Change in mean mathematics score, 2008-2009	Change in mean writing score, 2008-2009
Barrington (rich students)	-1	No change	-.3 (-5%)
Central Falls (poor students)	+3	+2	+1.5 (+10%)

The teachers from which school were fired?

Perhaps inspired by the plaudits from the White House for firing teachers, Teach for America alumna and ex-superintendent of Washington, D.C. schools Michelle Rhee fired 6% of her district’s teachers for not sufficiently raising student achievement. Perhaps the fired teachers in D.C. also happened to work with the most disadvantaged children in the poorest neighborhoods.

Increasingly, teachers in urban schools are alternatively certified brand new graduates from “somewhere else,” who were trained in quick-and-easy, non-university programs. With the enthusiastic support of Secretary of Education Duncan, alternative certification continues to gain momentum across the country.

Keisha, a recent graduate of a research university in the southwest who went through five years of intensive study that included field experiences in four different schools before a full semester of work as a student teacher, returned to her old high school, an underperforming high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to accept a job as teacher. Despite her ties to the neighborhood and a superlative first year as teacher, Keisha was laid off by Tulsa Public Schools and replaced by a fresh recruit from Teach for America’s New York office, an individual with no classroom experience, zero courses in education, who has never set foot in Oklahoma.

The recent firings of teachers across the country represent a new wave of vituperative accountability for teachers. Historically, the lure for American teachers has been job satisfaction and job stability. The unwritten rule was that teachers would exhibit dedication, indefatigable enthusiasm, a modicum of intelligence, and an unshakable belief in the potential of children in exchange for low pay and job security. No more. A teacher who finds herself in a school of at-risk children and does not produce tangible jumps in test scores in the first year is in danger of losing her job.

While a teacher is an important influence in a child’s life, the social and cultural contexts of learning are also cogent. To illustrate, of the 2,000 high schools that produce half of the nation’s dropouts (Duncan, 2010c), none are located in middle class or wealthy neighborhoods. In the United States, the percentage of schools where 75 percent or more students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals rose to 17 percent in 2008. Almost half of all students attending urban elementary schools live in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Data substantiating the link between poverty and academic performance is well established (Baines, 2007; Bracey, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Khadaroo, 2010), though largely ignored in recent American educational policy decisions.

As with current American educational reformers, Soviet leaders of the 1930s “rejected any suggestion that heredity or environment presented limits that could not be overcome with the proper combination of enthusiasm and dedication” (Ewing, 2001, p. 481). As in American schools today, Soviet teachers in the 1930s were expected to conform to governmental demands or they would lose their jobs; exile and imprisonment for uncooperative Soviet teachers were possible consequences, too. In the Soviet Union, increased pressure on teachers resulted in enormous rates of turnover, quick attrition, and unsurprisingly—teacher shortages.

Consider the experience of Nikolai Nennik, a Soviet teacher during the 1930s who received scant training before being sent to a rural school as full-time instructor (Ewing, 2002). Mr. Nennik’s first year of teaching was considered “practice teaching,” though it was full-time and involved real children: “more than fifty pupils...around only ten desks” (p. 178). To Soviet leadership, the composition of students in Mr. Nennik’s classroom, his (negligible) training and experience, and the deplorable conditions under which he was expected to teach were superfluous. He would produce significant achievement gains or he would lose his job--or worse.

While the Soviet government expounded upon the vital role of the teacher, genuine professional development was virtually nonexistent. If training was given at all, it was brief and sporadic; most teachers learned “on the job” as do teachers from alternative certification programs in the U.S. today. Teachers who would “keep their heads down” and “do what they are told” were preferred.

Teachers in the Soviet Union during the 1930s often operated out of fear—fear of failure to control a classroom, fear of not knowing how to teach effectively, fear of “stepping out of line,” fear of repercussions for not

performing the job of teacher as the government requires. Yet, fear is not a particularly desirable trait for an individual whose job it is to stimulate interest and build intellectual curiosity among the young. Fear inhibits learning, increases stress, limits possibilities, and shuts down creativity.

A Militaristic Turn

In many ways, Stalin’s Five Year Plan amounted to a military takeover of Soviet schools, replete with the surrender of the pedagogists, the conversion of teachers to the Communist party line, and the whole-scale politicization of schooling. The Five Year Plan forced Soviet schools to change from loosely-organized, largely locally-controlled, child-centered schools to tightly-governed, centrally-controlled, outcomes-focused schools.

Of course, one of the problems with a militaristic orientation is that it often clashes with the delicate, immeasurable, exhausting work that goes along with helping a child develop into a fully realized adult. Openness, benevolence, spontaneity, tolerance, and intellectual skepticism might be attractive traits for a teacher, but they could cost a soldier his or her life. The American military today is strong, agile, and effective, but a militaristic orientation may not be optimal for educating young children.

If pay-for-performance becomes a reality for teachers in America, as it looks like it will, the transformation from teachers as caretaker-nurturer to teacher as technician-soldier will be complete. Thus, the qualities of what constitutes a “good teacher” will be transformed utterly—from child-centered to curriculum-centered.

Which comments are about American schools today and which comments are about Soviet schools of the 1930s?

1. “You can’t compare teachers if they’re not pursuing a common standard.”
2. “No provision was made...for critical thought in cultural and other matters or for creative growth in a non-collectivist direction.”
3. “To a great extent, teachers’ relations with state power were shaped by a constant sense of vulnerability to repression.”

Key: Bill Gates said the first about American teachers in speech in 2008. Mathews (1982, p. 3) wrote the second and Ewing (2002, p. 258) wrote the third about Soviet educational reforms of the 1930s.

Conclusion

Why is current American educational policy so focused on punishing teachers rather than helping students? In examining the credentials of the individuals in the Secretary of Education’s cabinet, those who are guiding the educational reforms that will inexorably alter the character of American public education for the foreseeable future, one characteristic becomes apparent—none of the members of the cabinet listed below has ever worked as a teacher in a public school.

Decision-makers in the United States Department of Education

Name	Title	Number of years as teacher	Other experience
Arne Duncan	Secretary of Education	0	Chief Executive Officer, Chicago Public Schools (appointed)
Gabriella Gomez	Assistant Secretary for Legislation and Congressional Affairs	0	Assistant Director of the Department of Federal Legislation
Anthony Miller	Deputy Secretary	0	Operating partner of private investment firm
Peter Cunningham	Assistant Secretary for Communications and Outreach	0	President of a communications company in Chicago
Peter Groff	Director of the Center for Faith Based and	0	Executive Director of the Center for African American

	Neighborhood Partnerships		Policy in Denver
Jacqueline Jones	Senior advisor to the secretary for early learning	0	Educational Testing Systems administrator
Carmel Martin	Assistant Secretary of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development	0	Formerly, a general counsel (lawyer) and advisor to Senator Edward Kennedy
James Shelton	Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement	0	Program director for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, business consultant.

In an interview with H. G. Wells in 1934, Stalin said, “Education is a weapon the effect of which is determined by the hands which wield it, by who is to be struck down.”

The Stalinization of Soviet schools during the 1930s had a pervasive, enduring impact on Soviet life. Scholars (Rust & Dneprov, 1992; Brodinsky, 1992) reckon that Soviet schools remained largely unchanged for more than fifty years, well beyond Stalin’s demise.

Perhaps surprisingly, Stalin was somewhat envious of the unbridled vigor of the American student of the 1930s, whom he considered to be wholly free from the artifices of regimentation. He stated: ‘In America two types of creativeness are recognized—one is the creativeness of the study and the other is broad, life-inspired creativeness, manifestations of the creative spirit in life’ (1954/c1934, pp. 269-270).

Educational reforms currently underway in America promise to trade the uncertainty of the “creativity of the study” for measurable, prescribed outcomes. As proven by the Soviet educational reforms of the 1930s, the goals of a nationalized curriculum, a focus on STEM, measurable outcomes, stronger accountability for teachers, and increasingly militarized schools are, indeed, attainable. But, these goals are gained at enormous costs—to schools, to children, and to democratic ideals. Once “the creativity of the study” goes, the “the creative spirit in life” cannot be far behind.

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