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HOME Revista ESPACIOS ⌄ ÍNDICES / Index ⌄ A LOS AUTORES / To the AUTORS ⌄

Teaching at the Modern Russian Primary School: Pros and Cons

Enseñanza en la escuela primaria rusa moderna: pros y contras

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Contents

ABSTRACT:

The article examines the positive and negative trends in contemporary Russian primary school. The author connects the new primary education priorities and the building of a fundamentally new process of teaching primary school pupils to ensure successful implementation of the national primary general education standard. The paper describes didactic conditions for adjusting the process of primary school teaching: focus on organizing exploratory and investigative activities and broadening of the range of teaching organization forms and offers a new classification for modern types of lessons which use makes a substantial contribution to improving the teaching process at the primary school: sensory, exploratory-research, explanatory and creative reproduction. The author argues for reducing the share of the reproductive type of lesson which limits the pupil's role to reproductive activity, explains the need to use the types of activities of primary school pupils that shape new instructional roles: "observer," "researcher," "creative improviser."

Keywords: primary school pupil, state standard, trends, goals, education process, classification of types of lessons.

RESUMEN:

El artículo examina las tendencias positivas y negativas en la escuela primaria rusa contemporánea. El autor conecta las nuevas prioridades de educación primaria y la construcción de un proceso fundamentalmente nuevo de enseñanza de los alumnos de primaria para garantizar la implementación exitosa del estándar nacional de educación primaria general. El documento describe las condiciones didácticas para ajustar el proceso de enseñanza primaria: centrarse en organizar actividades exploratorias e investigativas y ampliar la gama de formas de organización docente y ofrece una nueva clasificación para tipos modernos de lecciones que utilizan una contribución sustancial para mejorar la enseñanza. proceso en la escuela primaria: sensorial, exploratorio-investigativo, explicativo y reproducción creativa. El autor argumenta a favor de reducir la participación del tipo de lección reproductiva que limita el papel del alumno a la actividad reproductiva, explica la necesidad de utilizar los tipos de actividades de los alumnos de la escuela primaria que dan forma a nuevos roles de instrucción: "observador", "investigador". improvisador creativo ".

Palabras clave: alumno de escuela primaria, norma estatal, tendencias, objetivos, proceso educativo, clasificación de tipos de lecciones.

1. Introduction

The first decade of the new century has seen major changes in the system of Russian education, above all at the primary level. Russian educators are proud of the successes of the primary school: junior pupils win top places in international assessments (TIMSS, PIRLS, 2011-2017), get high scores at internal Russian assessments and show an interest in cognitive activities.

The beginning of the new century saw a substantial adjustment of the goal of primary education. While in the Soviet period primary school was geared mainly to imparting knowledge and skills, in which case the child's development was seen as a natural consequence of this process, today there is a broad consensus among educationists that possessing information does not yet equip the school pupil for using the acquired knowledge. It is covered by two pedagogical categories: the means and the results of teaching.

Under the Federal State Educational Standard of Primary General Education, the education of the primary school pupil is focused on the pupil's personal, meta-disciplinary and disciplinary achievements. As part of the Primary School in the 21st Century concept (Vinogradova 2017) and in keeping with the federal standards for primary education requirements (Federal State Educational Standard of Primary General Education 2011) a profile has been developed of the primary school graduate. It includes the following elements:

– an ability to apply the acquired knowledge in non-standard situations, to work with information presented not only in textual but also in graphical shape;

– an ability to extract knowledge, to determine the overall approach to the task in hand, and to build a sequence of required operations;

– an awareness of gaps in knowledge, an ability to identify the causes of the mistakes made, and to model actions aimed at forecasting these mistakes;

– a readiness to rationally choose the mental operation (analysis, comparison, classification, etc.) as a method of solving the study task; awareness of the various methods of cognizing the objects in the surrounding world;

– a certain level of general culture, erudition and cognitive interest.

A conclusion suggests itself: the results of teaching primary school in the first fifteen years of the 21st century show convincingly that the change of priority targets in primary education vindicates the validity of the education policy in the Russian Federation.

At the same time, it has to be admitted that the introduction, in the mass primary school, of the primary education standard is not proceeding without a hitch. A contradiction has arisen between the declared new education goals and the fact that some teachers are not equipped to implement them (Kuznetsova 2013, Basyuk 2015, Vinogradova 2017, Rydze 2017). How does this manifest itself? First, the teacher orients the pupil towards the result ("what needs to be done") and not towards "how it should be done." Second, the pupil's activity is reduced to multiple repetition of the teacher's actions, to following a model whereas the child only develops successfully in the process of constructing an algorithm of actions jointly with the teacher and the classmates. Third, the teacher prefers to use methods that tax perception and reproductive memory, therefore the pupil's activity is confined to three roles ("listener," "spectator" and "reproducer.") However, productive learning and cognitive activity is based on thinking, discourse, imagination, that is, on the pupil performing the roles of "explorer" and "creator." Fourth, all the above features of the organization of the primary school pupil's activity are based on the authoritarian style of communication (guidance – subordination), and yet joint successful learning and cognitive activity of all the subjects can only be ensured through a democratic style of teacher-pupil interaction.

2. Problem Statement

I propose to discuss the following problem: to eliminate the above-mentioned contradiction

it is necessary to establish a link between the new priorities of primary education and the building of a fundamentally new teaching process at primary school to ensure the pupils' optimum development and the possibility of successful implementation of the state primary general education standard.

3. Purpose of the Study

To identify the pedagogical conditions under which the teaching of primary school pupils in present-day conditions becomes developing teaching.

3.1. Research Methods

Theoretical: analysis of research approaches to the goals, content and methods of teaching primary school pupils; assessment of modern trends in the theory and practice of teaching primary school; formulation of new approaches to primary education's didactic system.

Experimental: testing the new didactic system that ensures the development of the primary school pupil; assessment of the achievements of modern school pupils in the context of traditional and renewed learning-cognitive activity.

3.2. Research Questions

1. What are the features of the priority goals of primary education and what is the value of education structure in educational activities?

2. What types of the modern lesson are most suitable for implementing the goals of developing the primary school pupil.

3. What forms of organizing education are most conducive to the adoption of new social roles by the pupil?

4. Findings

What is the profile of a Russian primary school graduate, what are the components of the pupil's culture if the didactic process is purposefully renewed with an eye to the above-mentioned problem of study and the research questions posed?

The author proposes to characterize the primary school pupil in terms of five cultural components.

Intellectual culture includes a positive attitude to learning ("I like learning"), ability to analyze, compare, generalize and reflect ("I can think"), age-related erudition ("I know a lot"), "unflagging inquisitiveness" ("I want to know more") and profound cognitive interest ("I am interested in everything"). A substantial part of intellectual culture is the development of the habits of correct relationships in the "man-nature-society" system, an awareness that life is the highest value in the world.

Communicative culture reflects an awareness of the value of academic and daily communication for human development ("people cannot help communicating with one another"), an ability to cooperate in the process of dialogue, an honest and upfront attitude, manifestations of trust and tact ("one should communicate in a polite and cultured manner.") Communicative culture presupposes a certain ability to create various oral and written propositions and texts that are substantively and logically structured, are understandable and interesting for the listener or reader ("I can tell and invent stories").

Information culture is a person's readiness to work with information presented in various shapes – text, graphics, illustrations, the set of skills required to find, assess and reasonably use it to solve educational and day-to-day tasks.

Ethical culture is about compliance with the rules of behavior in the social environment; personal characteristics reflecting universal human values ("I can feel empathy and help other people"). Part of ethical culture is the person's will, the ability to asses and regulate one's behavior ("I want to be good").

Esthetic culture is the desire and ability to appreciate the beauty of the surrounding world ("I can notice beauty when I see it…"). Esthetic culture manifests itself in preparedness for creative activity, an ability to improvise, to invent stories, to express a creative idea ("I like to invent things").

4.1. Pedagogical principle that calls for constant attention

The commitment of the education of a primary school pupil to fostering his/her culture determines the positive perspective in the development of the entire didactic system of primary education, its focus on at least three socio-pedagogical phenomena: socialization of the child, preparing him/her for further education, development of his/her personality in accordance with the requirements of modern society (Elkonin 1997, Davydov 1986, Duncan et al. 2007, Peterson et al. 2010, Poropat 2009). This raises the issue of adjusting the traditional teaching process. What, then, is wrong with the 20th century approach to primary education whose huge positive role in building the Soviet education system has been proven? The answer is provided by folk wisdom: "every time has its own songs:" a new society, a different information environment, massive changes in the amount of knowledge a modern child possesses, a different attitude of the family to education, important results of research proving hitherto unknown potential of children, etc. All this is potent proof of the need to move forward in the initial didacticism, without, of course, rejecting the traditional didactic experience.

"Every journey begins with the first step." This piece of folk wisdom provides an epigraph to the conversation about how the primary school teaching process should be changed in order to achieve the goals of education, to meet the demand of the state, the parents and other agents of educational activities. Indeed, it is up to every person to make the first step in life while the adult's help should not be like leading strings, let alone shackles… To teach means to enable the child to go about solving any academic or daily task independently (Leontiev 2005, Elkonin 1997, Davydov 1986, Tymms et al. 2012, Domitrovich et al. 2017, Zaporozhets 2000). Orientation of education toward diverse activities of the child has become pivotal for the education standard (Federal Component of the State General Education Standard 2004, Federal State Educational Standard of Primary General Education 2011). One of its requirements is fostering the primary schoolchild's study activities.

The author's study has shown that the structural elements of educational activities (need-task-motive-action-operations-monitoring--assessment) hinge on substantial changes in the didactic process, above all the organizational form of teaching. The need has been established for a new classification of types of lessons and for identifying types of "teacher-pupils" interaction system in which every pupil is an equal participant in the teaching-learning process. Considering the challenges of organizing teaching in the context of new goals of primary education, the author proposes the following classification of lesson types: sensory, exploratory-research, explanatory, creative and reproductive. Follows a brief description of each type.

4.2. The sensory type

This type of lesson is necessary because modern children experience "sensory hunger," there is a paucity of sensory models, and children are unable to observe and notice changes in the surrounding world. There is a psychological postulate that goes like this: "How do I know what I think if I don't know what I am doing in the process." It distils the essence of educational activities. The deficit of sensory perceptions has a negative impact on the development of logical thinking. Coherent speech, the ability to reason, draw conclusions, make inferences and judgments. *The main method* of the sensory type of lesson is above all diverse observations of the objects studied – language and literature, nature and society, technological processes and artistic images. Observation takes place as part of an experiment or an excursion.

4.3. Exploratory-research type

This type of lesson is necessary because 20 percent of school pupils have difficulty using their knowledge in non-standard situations (data of international research, 2011-2017: OECD 2015, Kautz et al. 2014). Children struggle to cope with the tasks which require them not only to cite an example, but also to explain something, prove and argue a point of view. In fulfilling non-standard tasks children try to *remember* something that would help them to solve the task or *to guess* the right answer. They do not try to analyze the problem situation, do not resort to comparisons, classifications and other mental operations (Rydze 2017)

The aim of exploratory-research lessons is to form learning actions and operations; to propose and discuss hypotheses, to select and prove the validity or falsehood of their suppositions. Obligatory structural elements of such lessons are: the didactic dialogue (discussion of problem issues and situations), collective building of an algorithm for solving the educational task, modeling and work with various types of information. *The main methods:* setting the problem, creating an intellectual *obstacle* that the pupil cannot "take in his stride" without research, analysis and obtaining additional information (Vinogradova 2016).

4.4. Explanatory type of lesson

This type of lesson is necessary because primary school pupils lack the habit of making a case, explaining their point of view, drawing conclusions and making generalizations. *The main aim* of the explanatory lesson is to cast the pupil in the role of "moderator," presiding over or taking part in a dialog, the role of "analyst." *The main methods* of such a lesson are: meaning-oriented reading assignments, learning dialog, solution of logical problems, work with text and graphic information, modeling, formulating judgments, etc.

4.5. Creative type of lesson

This type of lesson is necessary because "intellectualization" of the entire system of education inhibits the child's wish to express him/herself through creative activity, to improvise, fantasize and exhibit initiative. Indeed, the focus of teaching on exact reproduction of the model, formal repetition of the teacher's actions already discourages the pupil from expressing his individual attitude to what is taking place. Unfortunately, today's primary school pupil seldom feels wonder or experiences positive emotions from cognitive activity. That is why it is important to organize a creative lesson aimed at fostering the need to approach any didactic task creatively. *The main methods are*: putting the pupil in a situation of selecting various combinations, doing improvisation exercises and creating expressive images.

4.6. Reproductive type of lesson

It is not by chance that I put this type of lesson at the end of my list. The persisting tendency of primary education to include an unreasonably large number of lessons based on reproductive activity, the exploitation of such mental processes as perception, memory, attention, speech reproduction creates many problems. For instance, children get used to relying on formal (short-term) memory often resorting to study by rote and thus learn the material mechanically. The result is a superficial and often formal learning of the algorithm of solving a task ("if I remember, I'll fulfil the task," "if my memory fails me, the solution is wrong.") Logical, theoretical thinking gets little encouragement and development of reasoning speech lags behind. This suggests that the use of the reproductive type of lesson should be limited. Moreover, the reproductive type can be usefully combined with other types of lessons, above all, the exploratory type. The structure of reproductive lessons should include problem situations, exploratory and search activities; combine reproductive tasks with assignments that require logic, thought and reasoning.

We propose to discuss one more topical problem, ie, the organization of a new didactic process involving the creation of opportunities *for joint activities of primary school pupils.* The ability to take part in collective intellectual work creates the pupil as a subject of

learning activities. A primary school pupil is notoriously reluctant to enter into a didactic dialog, has no habit of listening to the interlocutor and tends to lose the thread of the argument. While the teacher of humanities (literary reading, the surrounding world, art) organizes discussions, such discussions at mathematics or technological lessons are rare. Having pupils work in pairs or groups helps to develop the habit of joint activity: distribution of responsibilities, settling differences, yielding, submitting, upholding one's own view. All this develops reflection which is highly important in building a cognizing type of individual.

5. Conclusion

Let us put forward the following idea: the implementation of the goal of developing a primary school pupil provides an answer to the question: "In what way will the child who starts studying differ from that same child at the end of teaching?" For the first stage of school education the following novelties can be formulated: readiness to apply knowledge, the ability to use intellectual operations judiciously (analyze, compare, generalize, etc.), to reason and to explain, to know and fulfil the rules of dialog and joint activities, to possess propaedeutic skills of engaging in regulatory activities (control, assess and forecast). Our study confirms the idea put forward by D.B. Elkonin, a theoretician of developing education (1997), to the effect that learning and development are linked through the activity of the subject.

Effective didactic conditions of the development of the primary school pupil as an individual are various in-class activities: sensory, exploratory-research, explanatory, creative. Research shows that the share of the use of the reproductive type of lesson in primary school should be minimal.

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[Index]

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