

# Alternative Education: Comparative Study of the American, Russian and Kazakhstan Experience

Roza A. Valeeva

*Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kazan, RUSSIA*

Dilara I. Vafina

*Kazan National Research Technological University, Kazan, RUSSIA*

Aygul A. Bulatbayeva

*Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, KAZAKHSTAN*

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The article presents the results of comparative study of the American, Russian and Kazakhstan experience of alternative education. It reveals the implementation of alternative ideas in schools of Russia and Kazakhstan. The article describes the 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.

*Keywords:* alternative education, USA, Russia, Kazakhstan, didactical values, educational practice, alternative school, American students, Russian students, educational process,

## INTRODUCTION

### Actualization of the problem

Increasing interest in nontraditional, alternative forms of education is manifested today in many countries. Inspiration for the development of alternative schools and

Correspondence: Roza A. Valeeva,  
Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Russia, 420008, Kazan, Kremlyovskaya  
Street, 18.  
E-mail: valeykin@yandex.ru  
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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.

## **Theoretical background**

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 (a), M. A. Raywid (1990), S. R. Aronson (1995), R. E. Butchart (1986), B. Jacobs (1994), S. Kadel (1994), C. A. Kershaw & M. A. Blank (1993), P. C. Rogers (1991), Y. Nagata (2007), F. Wheelock & M. E. Sweeney (1989). R. E. Morley (b) carried out a review and analysis of the early studies of alternative education. T. W. Young (1990) dedicated his works to the alternative conception of the impossibility of the only best way of education for all. M. Raywid (1994) proposed general typology of alternative education.

Among the Russian researches on problems of alternative education T. V. Tsyrlina's (1999) works devoted to the phenomenon of the author's humanistic school are of great interest. R. A. Valeeva (1996) investigated experience of the first half of the twentieth century reformatory schools in Europe. A. A. Valeev (2007) studied the implementation of free education in democratic schools. D. R. Gilyazova (2009) explored the development of alternative education in Commonwealth countries in the twentieth century. D. M. Zinnatova (2013) undertook a serious study on the development of alternative didactic systems abroad. The Ukrainian researcher I. N. Vetrova (2008) examined the development of alternative of secondary education in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **The aim and tasks of the research**

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

### **Theoretical and Empirical Methods**

In compliance with the goal, the following methods have been selected:

- theoretical - analysis of the pedagogical and psychological literature; study and generalization of innovative pedagogical experience, analysis, synthesis;
- empirical - participant observation, questionnaires, tests, interviews, conversations.

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**

### **Alternative education in Russia**

There is no developed network of alternative schools in Russia today. There are many reasons and one of them is the lack of effective advocacy of ideas and experience of such schools. Some steps to remedy the situation are partly taken. For example, the creation of online communities of like-minded, who, thanks to Internet, get to know each other, and share their information and experience. If we talk about the weaknesses of public recognition of alternative schools, then we have to mention lack of a reliable mechanism to support non-traditional schools. Therefore, their creation meets a number of difficulties with apparent obstruction on the part of the state educational institutions. This was to some extent facilitated by the fact that there is no the necessary solidarity between alternative schools in Russia, causing absence of the Ministry of Education and Science, and the public positive attitude towards alternative schools. Thus involved in alternative education schools should increasingly disseminate their experience and express their opinion on the problems and challenges they face in organizing author schools. It is imperative that they shared with each other and exchanged their findings and conclusions on various forums and in the press.

Ideas of alternative education in Russia were developed in pedagogical writings of Leo Tolstoy (1990), experience of the schools of P. P. Blonsky (1979) and S. T. Shatsky (1964). The number of adherents of alternative education is growing nowadays. The Russian and international education community interested in changing the traditional school system is constantly expanding. This is evidenced by the implementation of the ideas of alternative education in different regions of Russia, such as: School Park (Balaban, 2001), "School of self-determination" (Moscow) (Tubelsky, 2005), Grammar school № 597 (St. Petersburg), Lyceum "Politek" (Sibai, Bashkortostan), School No 58 (Ulan Ude), High school No 12 (Tyumen), Real school (Neryungri, Sakha Republic). This association includes educational institutions from different regions of Russia; Waldorf schools united in the Association of Waldorf Schools of Russia (they are presented in ten cities); Montessori-School with Montessori Center of the Moscow. They usually appear on the initiative of parents who are interested primarily in the fact that their children studied in comfortable area and that they are protected from threats to their health, education and development.

The Russian education makes in this direction certain steps. In particular, this can be observed in practice of scientific and educational association "School of self-determination" of A.N. Tubelsky that actually embarked on democratic reforms in the education sector (Tubelsky, 2005). Founded in 1992, on the decision of the Ministry of Education of Russia and the Moscow Department of Education on the basis of secondary school number 734 and kindergarten number 869, this school

combines the scientific search for alternative approaches to the content and implementation of student-centered teaching technologies for children from 3 to 17 years.

"School of self-determination" is characterized by adapting many of the values and ideas of alternative education, in particular, such as:

- Children and teachers are equal in their rights as citizens of the school;
- Student is not an object of study, not a participant in the process, but the subject of education;
- Education in school is not only for socializing, but above all - for the development of the individual student;
- Student has the opportunity to decide what, when, from whom he will learn;
- The main result is not the amount of knowledge on the subject, but universal individual skills;
- Educational process is not only the lessons, but also free educational spaces, creative games, projects, etc.;
- Interaction between older and younger students, their joint care is significant for the growth of each member of the community;
- Care for all is to create a democratic and tolerant way of life;
- The main body of the school is the general council of students and teachers;
- The credo of the school - each defines himself only at his own expense.

Among parents seriously interested in pedagogy, adaptive school developed by the Moscow teacher Eugene Jamburg (officially - Education Centre number 109) is becoming increasingly popular as a model of alternative education (Yamburg, 1997). Its essence is adaptation of educational system to the capabilities and needs of the student, in contrast to traditional schools, where the opposite is true. Altering the school system under the child is not a new idea, but the Yamburg's method is particularly flexible. And that makes it especially interesting. The school consists of several units (kindergarten, junior school, middle and high school, equestrian club, and so on). The main educational doctrine here is that no child adapts to school, and the school is ready to adapt to it, on the basis of his features. As a result - multi-level training system, enabling self-realization of each student. Today the Center unites more than 200 teachers and more than 2 thousand students. There is also a drama school, the school of arts and crafts and even a hairdresser (staff - the students themselves).

So, one of the most important characteristics of alternative education inherent in the Russian educational institutions, is the desire to give the national education primarily student-centered character, overcoming authoritarianism in education and training and empowerment of cognitive activity, creativity and emotional start. All that is turned in a foreign alternative movement, now gradually becomes the property of the Russian education and penetrating into different pedagogical models and gaining universal.

### **Alternative education in Kazakhstan**

According to the Law of Kazakhstan "On Education" (2007) there is an obligatory education in Kazakhstan (The Law, 2007). There are 7307 public day schools in Kazakhstan. More than half of all schools (52%) are trained in the Kazakh language, 18% - in Russian, 29% - in a mixed order, 1% - in other languages. Out of every 10 schools in 8 are in the countryside and only 2 in the city. However, 56% of all students of the country are enrolled in urban schools. There are 2,5 million students in Kazakhstan (Statistics, 2014; Statistical Bulletin, 2013).

For citizens, who cannot attend the organizations of primary, secondary, and general secondary education for a long time because of their state of health, individual free training at home is organized. Order of the Minister of Education and

Science on January 31, 2007 №34 (registered in the Register of state registration of normative legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, February 13, 2007 under the number 4543) approved the Rules of external training in educational institutions, implementing educational programs of secondary education. According to the rules, the form of external training can get students having not completed on time training in organizations of secondary education; gifted students; unable receive secondary education due to family circumstances, illness. Therefore, home schooling in Kazakhstan is not available to all children.

There are several varieties of alternative education in Kazakhstan. These are: external studies, Montessori school system, Waldorf education system, home schooling, and distance learning.

Montessori-method is most developed in Kazakhstan on the level of pre-school organizations, and the Children's Rehabilitation Centers. First Montessori-specialists training from Kazakhstan was organized in 2011. It was attended by 38 teachers. Every year the number of teachers who wish to take part in this courses increases.

There are Waldorf Schools too. Although their number is very small, nevertheless, the practice of such schools is consolidated and disseminated.

The most common practice is external studies and extracurricular education for gifted children. But someone needs approving that he has a gifted child, and only then he will be given permission to train a child at home.

Another alternative form of education is distance learning. It is most widely used in the framework of higher education programs. Regarding schools, there is an active work on computerization of schools and connection to broadband Internet. Kazakhstan ranks 63rd in the world for Internet accessibility in schools. However, 25% of schools in the country are not connected to broadband Internet. In the countryside nearly half of the schools are not connected (47,7%).

Therefore, the problem of alternative education development in Kazakhstan remains relevant. Recently in Kazakh social networks the problems of alternative education development, and changes in legislation are actively discussed. One of the main complaints against the present system of education is the quality of learning and teaching.

### **American and Russian students' attitude to the alternative education in schools**

Among the diagnosed qualities we number: public consciousness of the personality, performance of a civic duty, 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 pound 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.

## **CONCLUSION**

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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