

CHAPTER 12

LEARNING TOGETHER

The Educational Experiences of Adolescents in Moscow

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Over the course of more than 30 years, research on achievement motivation has decisively established that students' learning beliefs have a profound influence on their achievement-related cognitions and behavior, including their learning goals, attributions for success and failure, self-regulatory strategies, and academic outcomes (Covington & Dray, 2002; Dweck, 1999; Eccles, Roeser, Vida, Fredricks, & Wigfield, 2006; Elliot & Mapes, 2005; Weiner, 2005; Zimmerman, 1989). For researchers interested in the origin of achievement beliefs, culture, or more specifically, how “mind comes under the sway of culture” (Bruner, 2008, p.29), is central to inquiry.

Culture—shared beliefs, expectations, and values—guides both self-construal and socialization practices. Yet culture itself is coconstructed and indeed negotiated through social interactions in context. The development of attitudes and values is very much a reflection of the individual and the cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, the ways

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in which individuals make meaning of their everyday experiences is influenced not only by their cultural and sociohistorical context, but also by the social interactions through which meaning is negotiated (Haste, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

Among cultural psychologists, individualism and collectivism, which are often portrayed as opposite poles on a continuum, represent a conceptual anchor for understanding the cultural context of meaning making. Individualism represents a set of cultural values on individual rights, personal autonomy, and the fulfillment of personal goals. One's primary responsibilities are to oneself. In contrast, collectivism embodies the view that one is deeply integrated into and mutually obligated to one's in-group, whose core is one's family. Individuals share common goals and values, and place their own needs below those of the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Koon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Increasingly, researchers are noting that individualism and collectivism do not represent "pure dichotomies," but that there exists considerable variation within cultures in how its members conceptualize these constructs (Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000; Realo & Allik 1999; Tamis-LeMonda, Way, Hughes, Yoshikawa, Kalman, & Niwa, 2007; Traindis & Gelfand, 1998). Indeed, the qualities that characterize a group do not necessarily have to parallel or echo those of the individuals within that group (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004; Kagitçibasi, 1994).

Notwithstanding this more nuanced view, comparative studies of both personality and culture have found that individualism tends to characterize Western and more industrialized nations, such as the United States, while collectivism has been found to predominate in Eastern and less developed nations (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). It is not surprising then, that Russia, a nation that spreads from the European West to the Far East, has increasingly captured the attention of motivation researchers since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its authoritarian and collectivist traditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Stetsenkso, Little, Oettingen, & Baltes, 1995), in combination with its transitional status to a market based economy and its geographical position (Brainerd, 1998; Gerber, 2000) define Russia as a unique cultural context in which to study students' achievement beliefs. Russia is a rapidly evolving society, in which economic and social changes have occurred over a relatively short period of time. This has given rise to a great deal of employment and earnings uncertainty (Gerber, 2000; Grigorenko & Steinberg, 2001), and in this new reality, new beliefs about schooling and education may be reasonably expected to evolve.

To date, there has been less research in the West on Russian child development and education in general; even less research exists on motivation in Russian students. The limited research done on this topic has

examined critical beliefs, including goal orientation and control-related cognitions, using constructs defined from previous research (e.g., Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001; Stetsenko et. al, 1995). This work is largely survey based and correlational in nature, and as a result, we have a limited understanding of students' internal views of the educational system in which they function and coconstruct meaning every day. To address this gap, rather than imposing motivational constructs from the literature, we paid close attention to students' words and phrases as they discussed their daily school lives. In short, our emic study was designed to illuminate meaning making in a society in flux.

Our study is theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of mediated cognition, both of which place culture and context at the center of individual meaning making, but with differing emphases. With his focus on the mutual influences of proximal (e.g., microsystem of the school) and distal (e.g., the macrosystem of the culture, the chronosystem of sociohistorical events) contexts on development, Bronfenbrenner's model is an especially useful lens through which to examine students' achievement beliefs in a changing society. For example, the public discourse on education reform may encourage teachers to move away from traditional pedagogical practices, and students may experience differences in teaching styles in a given teacher or even between teachers. At the same time, Vygotsky's emphasis on culturally situated social interactions points to the importance of understanding how students negotiate the meaning of their learning experiences with their peers and teachers. To the extent that they experience variation in pedagogical practices, how do they construct their understanding of classroom learning?

Following a brief review of the Russian education system in the Soviet and post-Soviet era, we examine the ways in which we may advance our understanding of culture and learning through the experiences of adolescents in Moscow.

EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

The system of education under Soviet rule, from 1934 on, was highly centralized and standardized, with little to no variation between schools across the country. The federal government had sole authority in the administration of the schools, including selecting curricula, establishing pedagogical practices, training and hiring teachers, and admitting students (Gerber, 2000). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the education system became much less rigid and uniform. Since 1991, a good deal of education reform has occurred at the local level, in response to local or

regional needs (Borisenkov, 2007; Grigorenko, 1999). According to Grigorenko (1999), two notable educational trends have emerged—the rise of alternative schools with innovative programs, and attempts at reform within traditional public schools, through curricular revisions. Despite such structural changes, observers have noted that the system remains largely intact, and that most schools remain traditional in nature (Elliott & Tudge, 2007; Gerber, 2000; Grigorenko, 1999).

In Russia today, formal schooling begins at 6 years of age, and students may receive a certificate of “incomplete secondary education” at the end of the ninth grade. The certificate grants the holder access to further studies in either the secondary (complete) general education stream or the vocational stream, as well as to nonuniversity level higher education. In the academic stream, students complete secondary school after 2 years of study (Grades 10-11) during which they receive a minimum of 31 hours weekly instruction.

Students are awarded the Certificate of Complete Secondary Education after successfully passing the state attestation examinations, for which students must be examined in no less than five disciplines: two compulsory examinations (composition and mathematics) and no less than three examinations in elective fields. General or academic secondary schools function as college preparatory schools, while the vocational schools train students for technical and what would be considered blue collar jobs (Gerber, 2000; Khamarito 2009; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2010).

Students in Russian public schools are educated in groups of 20-30, usually studying as one cohort “class” held together for most of their schooling, and are usually supervised by the same homeroom teacher for 3 to 4 years at a time. Academic feedback is administered publicly, thus heightening social comparison of academic and behavioral assessments, which are recorded by their teachers in a diary that students share daily with their parents. In general, the value of students’ privacy in this area is not given much thought. Indeed, learning in school is seen as an inherently public process. With just a few students coming into or leaving the class in any given year, the class often remains intact for the entire 9 or 11 years of schooling (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Hufton & Elliott, 2000). This stable group context largely defines the dynamics of peer relationships as well as the relationships between students and teachers. Each class is assigned to a classroom and is supervised by a homeroom teacher who is required to spend six hours per week with students, engaging them in general educational activities, and to conduct two nonacademic classroom events per month (Russian Academy of Education 2010; http://www.ucheba.com/met_rus/k_klass_ruk/kl_ruk_obyazannost.htm). The class is seen by both constituencies as a whole organism or collective. This

perception is only strengthened by the enduring nature of Soviet-era values in contemporary Russian pedagogy, including an emphasis on collective action and responsibility, unequivocal support for the authority of the teacher, minimal individualized teaching, and teacher-centered education, including the widespread unidimensional and one-for-all methods of teaching (Alexander, 2001; Stetsenko et al., 1995; Wertsch, 2001).

The origin of these values becomes clear when one understands the meaning attached to education in Russian society. As Alexander notes, “to educate” in the English or American context largely means to school children, in the formal sense. In contrast, in Russian, the root word for education is “*obrazovanie*,” which means development of a “form or image.” This is connected to the word “*vospitanie*,” a concept of upbringing which combines the ideas of personal development, character building, public and private morality, and civic engagement (Alexander, 2001). Whereas “development” in the English language is seen as reflecting psychological and physiological maturation, which occurs both in and outside of formal schooling, the concept of development in Russian implies a “task that requires teachers’ active involvement” (Alexander, 2001, p. 512). This suggests stronger teacher agency, involvement, and responsibility than is presumed by education in the English or American sense. Indeed, compared to their Western counterparts, Russian parents seem to expect the schools to take a larger share of responsibility for bringing up their children, including their character and civic education.

Against this cultural backdrop, correlational studies have found, for example, that Russian adolescents perceive significantly less autonomy support from teachers than their American peers (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001), and that their perception of the importance of teachers in academic outcomes increases over time (Stetsenko et al., 1995). In a recent analysis of the interviews examined in the present study, we examined adolescents’ perceptions of personal autonomy and parental involvement in schooling. Students indicated that, in contrast to their teachers, their parents granted them considerable degrees of autonomy with respect to their daily school lives (Holloway, Mirny, Bempechat, & Li, 2008). For example, parents for the most part did not monitor homework completion, largely because they believed their children—now high school students—should take on this responsibility. Further, the students themselves did not believe it was appropriate for parents to be involved in their daily school lives to this extent. Compared to their Western counterparts, Russian parents seemed to give over a greater share of responsibility in child education to the school and its agents.

These findings suggest that embedded cultural beliefs in the superior role of the school in education and the authority of the teacher continue to influence both pedagogical practices and their interpretation by stu-

dents. Yet Russian students are in a distinct position, in that they are coming of age in a society in transition, but being raised and educated largely by parents and teachers who grew up under Soviet-era authoritarianism. This juxtaposition provides a unique opportunity to understand meaning making in cultural context. Thus, in our qualitative study, we asked, *What are the ways in which students speak about and describe their educational experiences?*

METHODS

Participants

Participants ($n = 32$) were drawn from two public schools in southwest Moscow. At each school, 16 students (half male, half female) were randomly selected from the ninth grade class and invited to participate. Participation was voluntary, and all agreed to take part in the study. Parental permission was received for all participants.

The mean age of the students at Interview I was 14 years, 11 months ($SD = 5$ months). With the exception of five students, all were born in Moscow. These few students did not offer information about their place of birth, and thus we do not know their ethnic background. All participants indicated that they spoke Russian at home. Their immediate families were small. Just over half of the students were only children, 39.0% had one sibling, and 9.0% had two or more siblings. In addition, most of the students (81%) lived with both their parents or with one parent and a step-parent, and 12.5% reported that a grandparent lived with them.

According to the students' reports, parent education and occupation was varied. Most (61.0%) mothers had attended college, 29.0% had attended vocational or technical school, and 10.0% had attended high school only. Most (66.0%) of the mothers were professionally employed, while 14.0% worked as nonprofessionals (e.g., janitor, cook). Fewer fathers than mothers had attended college (42.0%), while half had attended vocational or technical school. Only 8.0% had not furthered their education beyond high school. Most fathers worked as managers or professionals, and a few were nonprofessionals (e.g., police officer, security guard).

The fluid nature of the Russian economy makes it difficult to identify these families' socioeconomic status. A higher education and professional position do not imply middle class life style, as these might in a more developed and stable economy such as the United States. As we reported elsewhere, the average monthly salary of a teacher in Moscow at the time of the study (2005) was reported by one of the school principals as between 6,000 to 7,000 rubles per month (about \$240 to \$280).

Local educators assisted us in the selection of schools that were both nonselective and traditional. At the time of data collection in 2005, one school enrolled 634 students and the other enrolled 500 students from first to eleventh grade. At the high school level, there was a total of 216 students in School 1, including four ninth-grade classes ($N = 95$), two 10th-grade classes ($N = 50$), and three 11th-grade classes ($N = 71$). In School 2, there was a total of 142 students, including 20 ninth-graders in one class, two 10th-grade classes ($N = 44$ students), and three 11th-grade classes ($N = 78$). Neither school was included in a government report on the top 20 academically excellent schools in the southwest region, indicating that these schools were not elite. According to traditional school criteria outlined by Grigorenko (1999), both schools used the grading standards and the traditional curricular programs developed by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. In addition, these schools did not self-identify as providing a nontraditional orientation toward education, were not specialized in any way, and had not changed their names to "lit-sei" or "gimnazia," either of which would have signaled their status as non-traditional schools.

Procedure

Students participated in two standardized, open-ended individual interviews, conducted separately in the fall and spring of the ninth grade. Each interview was approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for later coding. At the end of the school year, students were randomly assigned to one of eight focus group sessions. All interviews were translated into English by a research assistant who is also a native Muscovite. The bilingual interviewer then double checked the translations against the Russian transcriptions to make sure the original Russian meanings were respected and maintained in the translation.

Interviews

Individual Interviews

Using a standardized, open ended format, two interviews were designed by the research team and conducted in Russian by the second author, a native Muscovite who received her graduate training in the United States. The first interview was designed to focus on the details of students' daily routines, and included questions about school-related aspects of their day (e.g., the classes in which they were enrolled, homework, attitudes toward

their schoolwork). The second interview, conducted approximately 1 month after the first, was targeted more narrowly on students' perceptions of their learning, including their coursework, teachers, peers, and learning beliefs. The interviewer probed for deeper meanings in students' responses by asking them to provide examples and explain comments that were vague or ambiguous (see Appendix A for sample questions from both interviews).

Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interviews, which were approximately 50 minutes in duration, were designed to elicit more nuanced accounts of students' experiences as a result of their interactions with their peers. In addition, this format allowed for participant check, and thus served as an important validation tool. We presented students with the themes that emerged in both of the individual interviews, and also asked them to reflect on their overall judgments of their learning experiences (see Appendix A for sample questions). The interviewer managed the discussion by eliciting responses from each student, probing for deeper meanings, and encouraging students to respond to their peers' observations and comments.

Interview Coding

We adopted a multilayered approach to coding the interview data. Our primary concern was to maintain the integrity and meaning of students' open-ended statements. Toward this end, we analyzed the interview transcripts holistically for classroom experience-related content. Specifically, we engaged in an inductive method of reading and rereading the interviews in order to identify emergent themes. Using this emic approach, three of the authors (Bempechat, Mirny, and Wenk) first reviewed a random 20% of the interview transcripts with the goal of identifying emergent themes related to students' classroom learning experiences. We reached consensus in identifying four major themes, which were focused on perceptions of: (1) teacher competence, (2) equity and fairness in teacher treatment, (3) the quality of teacher-student relationships, and (4) perceptions of peers. The first and fourth authors coded the remaining interviews. Questions about the meaning of words, expressions, and phrases were discussed with the second author, whose status as a cultural insider allowed for a check against any assumptions held by the U.S. coders. In addition, reliability checks were continuously performed as the coding proceeded. Coding reports for each theme were generated by NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, and the first three authors created and shared memos that described and summarized the nature of students' comments.

RESULTS

Overview

Overall, students' comments revealed a surprising tendency to speak for the group when they articulated their personal views on their educational experiences. In other words, students spoke in the "we" voice even when they were asked to articulate their own views about their courses, teachers, and assignments. In addition, students held their teachers largely responsible for their learning, both in terms of knowledge acquisition and classroom environment. Analysis of the individual and focus group interviews revealed that students' views were organized largely around their perceptions of *teacher competence*, their views on *equity and fairness* in teacher treatment, the *quality of teacher-student relationships*, and their *opinions of peers* in the context of learning as a group.

A Shared Image of the Good Teacher

Teacher competence emerged as a critical issue for these students, and surfaced through statements regarding subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skill, disciplinary practices, and the fair and equitable treatment of students. For example, many students described good teachers as ones who make their lessons interesting, have fluent knowledge about their subject, and provide enough challenge for the students. When asked to describe teachers who make learning enjoyable, Tanya stated,

Well, our classroom teacher Irina Romanovna, she teaches Russian and Literature; and our Physics teacher Nadezhda Andreevna, both make their lessons interesting. Some teachers give the material only from the textbook and these two teachers give us information not only from textbooks, they prepare at home, they bring notes. They make learning interesting; they know how to plan the lesson so that everybody gets really interested in the material.

Similarly, Svetlana noted that her English and history teachers,

teach very well, everybody understands everything and it is very interesting to listen to them ... I don't know about the other group, but our [English] teacher is very demanding and interesting, that is why our group does much better. The other group has a different teacher who has a different method of teaching. For example, they don't go beyond their textbook and we take different tests and read other stuff.

According to our participants, providing good explanations of the educational material was also evidence of “good” teaching. Many stressed the importance of teachers explaining “everything” for their learning and for the effectiveness of the lessons. For example, Dmitry stated that teachers who make learning enjoyable are the ones who “explain everything very well and make it easier to understand their subjects.” Olga asserted that what she likes about math is the fact that, “we never even open the theoretical part of our textbooks, our teacher gives us everything and she gives her own examples. I think it is very good, because one can understand subject much better like that.”

Students voiced concerns about teachers who wanted students to work things out on their own. Oleg described a shared dissatisfaction with the Chemistry teacher: “If the material is not explained well by the teacher we don’t really learn anything.” Andrej complained about a new teacher: “He doesn’t explain anything, he wants us to figure out everything by ourselves ... we don’t like it.” Lena went further in describing her own and her peers’ unease in chemistry class,

Well, he has this weird system—he doesn’t explain a new topic, he gives us a problem that we should manage to solve ourselves, and he gives us only three minutes to do it, then he asks someone to go to the blackboard and solve it and if this person can’t do it, he gives him 2 [out of 5], even though it is a new topic and we all try our best to solve it and he insists that you should solve it on your own and you are not used to it. We are not used to it, because it is usually about a new topic and we don’t know how to do it.

The position that it is the teacher’s job to explain everything emerged during the focus group discussions. For example, in their group meeting, Ira insisted that,

In the ninth grade they tried to give us more information about their subjects, and this year it seems like they don’t really care if we learn stuff or not, they say like: ‘If you want to study, do it and if you don’t want to do it we won’t force you.’ They don’t help us with anything. If we don’t get the material it is our problem, as if it is not their job to make sure we understand everything.

Nadya provided another example:

Our chemistry teacher briefly explains us new material and then we have test on the next lesson. And I am not that kind of person who can understand the material quickly, I need a detailed explanation.

Alexej voiced a similar concern during his focus group conversation when he noted,

Well, Dasha mentioned it already, that teachers often don't treat kids right. Sometimes it feels like they could explain certain things and they don't when they give you bad grades.... Sometimes the teacher calls you to the blackboard and you say that you didn't get something and ask him to explain it to you, and the teacher says like: "It is not my problem." I don't think it is very nice.

When discussing classroom discipline, students stated clearly that their good teachers were the ones who were able to uphold discipline in the classroom and sustain their authority over their students. Further, they expected all teachers to do so, and believed that their ability to learn was compromised by teachers who were unable to maintain order. Indeed, teachers who were able to maintain discipline were seen as having the students' best interests in mind. For example, Natasha named Algebra and History as subjects where students learn a lot, in part because "there is discipline on both lessons." Kolya named his Russian teacher as a good teacher, partly because she "knows how to make us work." Tanya offered that "The Russian teacher is stricter and the discipline is good, so we study more and memorize things better." Similarly, Ilya stated, "Well, they [good teachers] are strict but not very strict—they have to be strict with us at least a little bit, there is no other way to cope with kids of our age—but they are also quite tolerant when we need it, they understand us very well."

Zhenya, like most of her peers, laid the responsibility for discipline squarely at the teacher's feet, "[when students misbehave] I believe that it is the teacher's fault, because the teacher should be our leader, he should know how to calm us down and make us work hard." Andrey similarly asserted that discipline "depends on the teacher. If the teacher is like, normal, he won't let kids mess around." Katya affirmed that misbehavior "is the teacher's fault. If the teacher is strict, the discipline is good, and if the teacher is soft, kids realize that they won't be punished for their behavior and they start messing around." Many students identified world history of art (WHA) as a class where students do not learn a lot, and the primary reason was the teacher's inability to control the class. Timur compared WHA unfavorably to his history and math classes, stating, "[In WHA] we mess around and party {laugh}... [What makes this class different from history and math?] Nobody listens to the teacher. [Why?] I don't know—she probably lets kids do it." Inna concurred in her explanation for why no one was learning in WHA by stating, "No discipline. Our class is very noisy."

In sum, students' comments suggest that they hold a particular set of expectations for what a good teacher should do. In short, a good teacher is well versed in the subject matter, explains everything fully, and demands a high level of engagement through challenging work. Students

appear to give their attention, dedication to hard work, and respect to those teachers who fulfill these expectations, while expressing disappointment in weak teachers through disengagement and lack of respect. This in and of itself is then perceived as a further failure on the part of the teacher to engage students' in learning.

Fairness and Equity

Conforming to common practice, these students are graded on a scale of one through five continually throughout the school day, based on their academic performance and behavior. For many, fairness in how they were treated by their teachers and equity in grading practices emerged as salient issues, in both individual and focus group interviews. Many spoke passionately about teachers who had "favorites" and who treated students unfairly. For example, Olga complained that her Russian teacher "has her favorite students and gives good grades only to them." Timur stated, "our algebra teacher. She is very strange. Like if you turn around and ask someone for like a ruler, she gives you 2 [out of 5] right away." Sergej and Stas voiced their anger at the preferential treatment of some students at their expense:

I just don't like for example when I'm called to the blackboard and I make like a tiny mistake, like in 0.5 I put comma instead of decimal point I can get 4, while for example Olga Temnova—I think there is something between her and the teacher, Olga can make so many mistakes and still get 5! [So the teacher has her favorite students?] Yes, she does, and I really hate it. Someone can like know nothing and get 5, and someone can say everything right but make just a little mistake and get 4. (Sergej)

No, it's just something is always happening on our lessons of English and algebra, like in English the teacher is really unfair to me. If I miss or mix some phrases I get "2" instantly and someone else with the same mistakes could pass it just well, or if somebody else is fooling around she would always say it's my fault because I distracted that person. I don't complain, I just tell my parents what's happened, I think this teacher is not doing her duty being fair to the students. (Stas)

During a focus group interview, Yana voiced concerns about teacher stereotyping, as follows,

Well, I think sometimes, very often the teachers' attitude to you is a big deal. Like if the teacher has a stereotype of you as a bad student, he won't give you good grades no matter how hard you try. I personally have such experi-

ence. Such things don't influence the amount of knowledge you get, but they influence your grades.

Russian students' passion about and sensitivity to fairness and equity appear to be echoed in most formal schooling across cultures. However, Russian students may be particularly sensitive to this issue because of constant and overt social comparisons of achievement between students, an issue we will take up in the discussion.

Quality of Relationships With Teachers

For many students the quality of group relationships with a teacher seemed to be a defining factor in their learning. It is interesting to observe how, in speaking in a "group voice," individual students described the effect the relationships between the teacher and a group has had on their learning. Again, our participants demonstrated a sense of a common attitude and confidently described the feelings of an entire group toward their teacher, as well as an understanding of how the teacher relates to the group as a collective entity. Indeed, students readily spoke of teachers' attitudes toward "us." Misha suggested that students "learn a lot in this class because of our relationships with her [the teacher] almost everyone loves her." For Uri, the reason for much learning in algebra "is hard to say, we are in such wonderful relationships with our teacher that we just learn everything very well." Timur explained that "Zinaida Andreevna [math teacher] also tries to make like friends with us, so that we don't cut lessons and better understand her subject," and Galina described her geography teacher thus, "We had a very good young teacher, she understood us very well." Similarly, Sergej stated that, "They [the teachers who make learning enjoyable] don't only teach their subjects but they also tell us a lot about themselves about their private life, so we have really good relationships with them."

Students' close relationships with teachers figured prominently during the focus group interviews. In all the focus groups, students spoke about the special bond they have with their classroom teacher in particular, the one with whom they journey across much of their school career. When asked who they may choose to confide in if they had a problem, these students mentioned their classroom teacher first, and sometimes over their own parents. The classroom teacher was considered by many students as the individual who knows them best, as indicated by the following exchange, which took place between four students: Anna, Olga, Svetlana, and Tanya.

- Interviewer: If you had something important you need to talk to some adult about here at school, is there anyone you could talk to? Who would that person be?
- All: Our classroom teacher.
- Tanya: She is the only person you can talk to.
- Interviewer: Would you talk to her even before you went to your parents?
- All: Yeah

In another focus group, Dmitry similarly summed up the views of his peers in his focus group by asserting, "I think we would talk to our classroom teacher before telling anything to our parents, she is wonderful, she is very understanding. You can talk to her about anything, even about your problems at home." The same conversation in a third focus group led Lena to proclaim, "I think absolutely everyone in our school could come to Elena Grigorievna and Yana Andreevna with their problems, they are like our second moms."

In fact, while fairness was definitely a salient issue for these students, sometimes a nonformal, close relationship with a teacher was also the reason to forgive inconsistent or unfair behavior. In several instances students were ready to justify discrimination and even poor treatment (such as yelling) on the part of their favorite teachers. For example, Igor stated, "They [teachers who make learning enjoyable] treat well those kids who listen to them. Of course if you don't work they won't treat you well. [Do you think they are fair?] Yes." Similarly, Andrey noted, "Well, basically all our teachers respect students. [You said some of them yell at kids.] Well, yeah, but they usually have a good reason for yelling at us." At the same time, though, Natasha articulated the downside of a poor relationship with a teacher, stating, "I also think teachers can sometimes fail you if you don't have good relationships with them."

Based on these views, it seems that these Russian students benefit from and thrive on a cohesive school life that revolves very much around a good and trusting teacher.

Perceptions of Peers

We found, again, that students tended to speak in the collective voice about their peers. More specifically, their comments reflected perceptions around cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral approaches to learning. For example, Sonya described sociology as a class where students learn a lot by stating, "Nobody says a word and we all are concentrated on the subject." Kolya offered that in WHA, "the majority of our class doesn't really

care about it, so basically our WHA lessons are useless.” Oleg also confidently described WHA as a class where “Nobody does anything, ... everyone chats, it is easy to get good grades in WHA and that is why nobody cares about studying it.” Nastya confidently described others’ feeling and attitudes toward their Russian class, when she stated, “Nobody messes around on these lessons; everyone sits still.”

In the context of focus group conversations, the issue of peers as a motivating or demotivating influence emerged. For example, in the following exchange, two students described the sway that higher achieving students have on the entire class:

- Sergej: If everyone does well in the class, you also want to do well. So it really depends on your classmates.
- Interviewer: Are there many people in your class who do well in school and whose example helps other people to improve?
- Alexej: Yeah, we do have such people.
- Interviewer: So you feel the pressure to do better?
- Sergej: Yes.
- Interviewer: Is it more like a competition?
- Alexej: Yes. But you also feel that you want to do it for yourself as well.

In discussing factors that make it difficult to be a good student, the students in another focus group spoke collectively about how the peer context can have a negative influence on achievement. In this case, they focused on lower achieving classmates:

- Igor: I think the class also plays a big role, if most of the kids in your class are stupid, compared to others you look smart and you don’t feel that you need to study
- Dasha: But the situation has changed [since last year]; we have many new people in our class.
- Igor: Our last year’s class was much stronger, but we were tossed, so we found ourselves in the new class with very bad students, so we feel like we are so smart.
- Dasha: We don’t really feel like studying.

In sum, students’ perceptions and beliefs about learning convey a strong sense of community and shared experiences. It appears that these students hold each other up as models to measure their own learning. There seems to be a greater degree of receptivity toward each other, one that allows one to be influenced by one’s peers. As a result, most students

in the group act more or less in synchrony. Such alignment serves to benefit individual students in their sense-making process and in managing their learning.

DISCUSSION

The most interesting finding of this research is that all students expressed a common attitude and described, with seeming confidence, the feelings of their entire cohort when they discussed their own beliefs about their teachers, their courses, and their learning experiences. A given student's assessment of good teaching, for example, tended to be articulated as the group's view of good teaching. This finding illustrates the ways in which the collectivist cultural setting in which these students are growing exerts its unique influence on educational meaning making.

For these students, successful learning and effective teaching were very much dependent on, and defined by teachers who possessed strong subject matter knowledge and were able to impart this knowledge well and clearly. These qualities were seen by the students as the definitive core of good teaching, and they were clear and quick to judge their teachers on these very characteristics. Those who passed this standard were held in high esteem.

Although these Russian students may appear to be demanding very specific standards for teacher knowledge and pedagogical skill, there is more complexity in their judgments than meets the eye. On the surface, the unidimensional nature of traditional teaching is evident in the students' descriptions of classroom life, despite the major educational reforms that have characterized education in Russia post-1991 (Borisenkov, 2007). The Russian teachers seemed to operate with great authority, granting little autonomy to students. The teachers needed and were in control. Students appeared to have little say about what is taught, how learning takes place, and what the standards are for achievement.

Yet, students had a great many opinions about their teachers and were quite open about expressing them. From our analysis, we see a mutually constitutive dynamic between the students and the teachers that is not the typical dynamic in the U.S. or British schooling contexts. In the latter, tension between students and teachers often arises as a result of disinterest, disengagement, and lack of motivation on the part of students (Elliott, Hufton, Hildreth, & Illushin, 1999; Hufton, Elliott, & Illushin, 2002). In contrast, the Russian students' expressions about their teachers reveal their interest, eagerness, and strong motivation to learn, albeit from a very specific perspective.

In our view, this dynamic is analogous to the coach on a sports team, a dynamic commonly seen in the United States. There is no doubt that the coach is in control, and in fact he or she needs to be in control. But the team knows perfectly well what skills the coach has to have and how the coach has to execute his or her role in order to direct the whole team's effort and work. Comparably, teachers who fulfill and demonstrate in action their end of the bargain are met with strong support, dedication, cooperation, and respect from the students. It is as if the students withhold their effort and then observe, waiting to witness evidence of the teacher meeting their pedagogical standard before they are convinced to give their best in this teaching-learning dynamic. When they do, both students and teachers experience mutually satisfying results in learning and teaching.

However, teachers who fail to meet students' expected standards for knowledge and pedagogical responsibility are disregarded and actively resisted, and thus encounter disinterested and uncooperative students. These students are far from lacking a sense of agency in shaping their own learning and achievement. Instead, their sense of agency operates within the distinct Russian sociocultural context of schooling. This is a very different dynamic from the unprepared or uninterested students often encountered in the U.S. or British context. For example, Elliott and Hufton's comparative research has found that, relative to their Russian peers, American and British adolescents are much less engaged in their learning, both in and out of the classroom. Unlike their Russian counterparts, who viewed being an educated person as a value in and of itself, the American and British teenagers in these studies spent significantly less time on homework, reading, and in cultural activities (e.g., going to museums), and expected to exert significantly less effort in concentrated learning while at school. In addition, they spent significantly more time in leisure activities, reported significantly more disruption in their classrooms, and were significantly less likely to hold positive beliefs about learning (Elliott et al., 1999; Hufton et al., 2002).

It is interesting that the students quite unanimously found that independent learning was not meeting their expectations and therefore not appealing or deserving of their full engagement. Indeed, their praise for teachers who explained everything was matched by strong criticism for those who encouraged independent learning. For these students, an unwillingness to explicate all they needed to know was a clear sign of bad teaching. It could very well be, however, that this perception was not matched by teachers' pedagogical goals. There is some evidence that Russian educators are working to encourage more independent and critical thinking in their students (Nikandrov, 1995), which are hallmarks of Western education. As such, it is possible that, far from shirking their

responsibilities as perceived by students, these teachers may have been trying to foster more independence in learning. Yet, Russian teachers who used this style were regarded as not doing anything to foster learning, not taking their responsibility seriously, and not knowing how to teach or engage students.

Since our study did not collect data from teachers themselves, we do not know if these teachers were genuinely trying to introduce independent learning to their students, or if they were haphazardly implementing abstract Western pedagogical concepts without substantive support for student learning, or if they were just going through the motions. Regardless, based on students' expressions, we have reason to doubt that teaching for independent learning would automatically succeed in Russia without integrating new ideas and practices with their existing education system. If independent learning is a high goal of the major educational reforms since 1991 (Borisenkov, 2007; Mirny, 2007), then the Russian education system is likely to continue to face challenges.

As evidenced by their comments, the students in this study were passionate about equal and fair teacher treatment. It could be that their adamant protests against favoritism and the sometimes random nature of grading were fueled by a classroom context in which performance assessment and grades are open and public. At multiple points throughout the day all students are aware of the grades that have been assigned to their peers and for which tasks. For example, students are often called to the front of the classroom to recite a passage or solve a math problem on the board. Teachers assign their grade out of five at that moment, in full view of their peers. This practice makes social comparison especially salient and likely heightens competition between classmates. This reality may very well help to also explain students' dependence on teachers. Students may feel more assured of attaining higher marks if they know exactly what the teacher expects.

At the same time, previous research has shown that teachers who are overly critical and controlling engender classroom climates which depress student engagement (Wentzel, 2002). It is interesting to note that these students did not speak of their experiences with open and public grading as psychologically or emotionally threatening. Rather, their overwhelming reaction was one of anger. Of course, it could be that they did indeed experience this system of grading as psychologically threatening, but simply did not or could not articulate it as such. However, this system is the only one they (and their parents and teachers) have known. In their cultural context, this practice may not take on the meaning that it might in the U.S. context, for example.

The closeness of the relationships that students felt with their teachers reflects, again, an educational structure that keeps pupils and classroom

teachers together for many years, creating for many students an important source of social support, and a salient feature of their learning environment. Students' perceptions of social support from teachers have received increased attention from motivation researchers (e.g., Dowson & McInerney, 2003). In a recent study designed to explicate aspects of this rather complex concept, Wentzel and her colleagues identified four dimensions that promote student engagement—emotional nurturance, help to achieve outcomes, clear expectations (academic and behavioral), and a safe environment (Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). These Russian students appear to have experienced all dimensions of support from their teachers, but in ways unique to their sociocultural context. There seemed to be strong support for achieving academic outcomes from those teachers who meet their pedagogical standards, albeit in a nonindividualized manner. Such teachers explained “everything” and made their expectations, academic and behavioral, very clear. The students' comments suggest, however, that the teachers who encouraged independent learning may not have been providing the support they needed or had become accustomed to in their learning context.

There is little doubt, however, that the students experienced emotional nurturance, and that the multiyear teacher-student grouping structure provided a context that fostered such nurturance. Indeed, the emotional connections described by these students are not surprising in light of the psychosocial benefits that are associated with looping, such as reduced anxiety at yearly transition points (Hanson, 1995; Little & Dacus, 1999). Interestingly, these students' experience of closeness to the classroom teacher does not correspond to the experiences of many American adolescents, who report a decline in emotional support from teachers when they transition into middle school, and a corresponding decrease in motivation and achievement (Midgely, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). From a Western perspective, a safe environment evokes notions of physical and psychological safety. In the Russian context, these students' comments suggest that a safe classroom had a different meaning—it was one in which the teacher maintained a strong ethic of discipline in which learning could take place.

Much research has demonstrated that peers have a significant impact on student engagement in learning and achievement (Ryan, 2001), and the students in this study supported this finding in the ways in which they spoke about the motivating and demotivating influence of their peers. As to the former, for example, these students' comments about the positive influence of “everyone” doing well is suggestive of a classroom climate in which there may be shared norms, values, and standards for effort and engagement. To the extent that this may be the case, it is possible that this climate of shared achievement beliefs is fostered by the communal nature

of classroom learning, the statewide curricular standards, and the many years in which these students were learning together.

Limitations of Our Study

Our study explored the learning beliefs of Muscovite teenagers who attended typical schools. It would be interesting to examine the views of rural students, whose experiences in this rapidly changing society may very well be different. Further, our sample was limited to students of mostly Russian descent. We do not know how Russian students from other ethnic groups might experience the same learning environment.

We focused exclusively on students' perceptions of their learning experiences. We do not know how their teachers perceived their responsibilities toward their students. In the context of an educational system in flux, it would be of value to examine how teachers, schooled under Soviet-era principles, describe what constitutes good teaching today. To what extent might their beliefs have evolved over time, as they have observed the profound changes in the social fabric of their society? Further, it would be of interest to probe teachers' perceptions of the purpose and value of spontaneous and public grading. Relatedly, we did not tap into parents' perceptions of their children's schooling experiences. We do not know the extent to which they adhered to the socially constructed view of the teacher's authority in their children's schooling. We do know that despite the rapid changes that have occurred in Russian society, including reforms to the education system, Soviet era collectivist values endure, as evidenced by classroom grouping, teacher-centered learning, centralized curriculum, and open and public grading practices. In this very dynamic context, the system of education in these students' typical schools remained quite rigid.

CONCLUSION

Our study underscores the importance of the sociocultural context in influencing how students make meaning of their educational experiences. These students' opinions mirrored the mutually reinforcing influence of the micro- and macrosystems of their environment. The schools' practice of public assessment and looping, as well as the entire teacher-centered system of education are clearly reflected in students' perceptions of their learning. The school context was at once reflective of traditional and novel pedagogical practices. Students social interactions with their teachers and peers provided a means through which they negotiated the mean-

ing of their learning experiences, public grading, and independent learning in their unique cultural context. These students' tendency to speak in the "we" voice about their learning experiences, as well as their willingness to place the responsibility for learning on their teachers, seems to be an outcome of their society's collectivist orientation toward education. These students' idiosyncratic views about their educational experiences emphasized their group affiliation and reflected the collective self (Kashima, Kokubo, Kashima, Boxall, Yamagichi, & Macrae, 2004). This does not imply, however, that they were unconcerned with their individual progress and performance. Cultural psychology is increasingly recognizing the need to move away from conceptually simplistic dichotomies (e.g., individualism/ collectivism). This in-depth exploration of students' beliefs in sociocultural context demonstrates the importance of within-cultural nuances in the ways in which individuals negotiate and construct meaning (Haste, 2009).

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE QUESTIONS

From Individual Interviews

- 1a. Think of two classes where kids learn a lot. [Can be any class they mention, and not necessarily this year]. What do these two classes have in common? [Write down the student's descriptors, and refer to them throughout the student's comments. Use probe "what else about them makes these classes ones where kids learn a lot? Aim for at least three attributes].
- 1b. Think of one class where kids don't learn a lot. [Write down the name] What makes this class different from these other two? [Point to the others] [Write down the student's descriptors, and refer to them throughout the student's comments. Use probe

“what else about them makes this class different from the other two? Aim for at least three attributes].

- 2a. Think of two teachers who make learning enjoyable. Tell me their names. [Write down their names] What do these two teachers have in common? [Write down the student's descriptors, and refer to them throughout the student's comments. Use probe “what else about them makes these teachers people who make learning enjoyable? Aim for at least 3 attributes].
- 2b. Think of one teacher who doesn't make learning enjoyable. Tell me his/her name. [Write down the name] What makes this teacher different from the other two? [Point to the others] [Write down the student's descriptors, and refer to them throughout the student's comments. Use probe “what else about this teacher makes him/her different from the other two? Aim for at least 3 attributes].
3. If students mess around in class, what do you think are the main reasons why they do it?

From Focus Group Interviews

4. Not everyone in this school is a good student. What are the things that make it hard for someone to be a good student here?
5. If you had something important you need to talk to some adult about here at school, is there anyone you could talk to? Who would that person be?

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