DECENTRALISATION AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN SIBERIA AND THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

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Abstract – Based on field research in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, this paper examines the consequences of the diversification policy in education and culture after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. It reports on work conducted by a team of Japanese researchers. The paper investigates the nature of decentralisation in education, giving particular attention to the rise of the private sector and the education of ethnic minorities. Highlighting the similarities and differences between the two regions within the national framework, it shows the value of intra-national as opposed to cross-national comparative studies.


Resumen – Sobre la base de un estudio de campo realizado en Irkutsk y Jabarovsk, este trabajo examina las consecuencias de las políticas de diversificación en educación y cultura tras el colapso del régimen soviético en 1991 e informa sobre un estudio realizado por un equipo de investigadores nipones. El artículo investiga la naturaleza de la descentralización en la educación, otorgando especial atención al alza del sector privado y de la educación de minorías étnicas. Al realzar las similitudes y diferencias que existen entre ambas regiones dentro del marco nacional, demuestra el valor que revisten los estudios intranacionales, en oposición a los estudios comparativos internacionales.

Резюме — Основываясь на исследовании, проведенном в Иркутске и Хабаровске, в данной статье рассматриваются последствия расширения образовательной и культурной политики после распада советской системы в 1991 году. В нём даётся отчет о проведенной работе группы японских
Education in the Russian Federation has been reformed to enlarge the responsibilities of local governments and schools in the domains of finance, curriculum, school establishment, and school choice. The new system is very different from the Soviet one, the ultimate goal of which was development of human resources for the construction of the communist nation. Decentralisation has been a major feature of the reforms. In addition, economic disorder in the new Russia has led to substantial privatisation of public schools through paid educational services and financial support from parents. Differentiation in the status of schools has become especially evident in urban areas.

Through the process of globalisation, new political and cultural frameworks are brought by economic forces. Globalisation theorists observe that control of social systems is being taken by trans-national institutions and market forces. The theorists suggest that nation states are losing control, and that national education systems are not such meaningful entities as they used to be. However, as Green (1997) has pointed out, national governments continue to see education as an important vehicle for both economic and social development.

In Russia, educational reform during the perestroika (restructuring) at the end of Soviet era brought improvement in the level of general education, extension of compulsory schooling from 9 to 11 years, decentralisation of control over school curricula, and democratisation of school management. These reforms were also influenced by globalisation. A decade after the establishment of the Russian Federation as an independent nation, decentralisation had been expanded further but in a complex pattern.

This paper reports on work conducted by a research group which has focused on education in Russia and the former USSR. It is named Nauchino-Issredovatelskii Kollektiv po Obrazovaniyu v Rossii i SSSR, abbreviated as NIKORS, and has been conducting research on education in the region since the mid-1970s under the direction of Satoshi Kawanobe. Although Japan is a neighbour of Siberia and the Russian Far East, and exchange programmes among citizens of sister municipalities grew during the 1990s (see Iwasaki 1999), the situation in this region, especially that of education and culture, is still not well known in Japan. This is chiefly because Japanese research on education in the former USSR and Russia until recently focused mainly on the work of the central government and relied on policy papers and laws published in Moscow. Only in the second half of 1990s did Japanese specialists...
in Russian education start to undertake local field research. Some of this research, including the present article, has had a particular focus on the education problems of non-Russian ethnic nationalities.5

In 1999, the author and other NIKORS members undertook field research in Sakhalin, Vladivostok, Irkutsk and Khabarovsk. The following year, in-depth field research was undertaken in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, which were considered representative of East Siberia and the Far East region. Irkutsk, the capital city of Irkutsk Oblast, is the central city of East Siberia; and Khabarovsk, capital city of Khabarovski Krai, is the central city of the Far East region. Information and basic data were collected through visits and interviews at local educational administrative organs, kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, colleges, universities and out-of-school education facilities.6

This paper explores the nature and implications of decentralisation in the Russian Federation, paying particular attention to the ways in which the education of non-Russian ethnic minorities was conducted in the remote areas during the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet regime. First an overview is presented of the educational reform conducted by the Russian federal government; and then the current situation and problems of education in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk are described and analysed from comparative perspectives.

As Bray and Thomas (1995) observe, comparative education analysis may be undertaken at many geographic/locational levels. The seven levels that they identified are world regions/continents, countries, states/provinces, districts, schools, classrooms, and individuals. This paper is concerned with the third of these levels, i.e. states/provinces. It focuses on activities at this level within the context of the national framework of the Russian Federation.

Overview of educational reform in the Russian Federation

Background and circumstances of the reform

Among the various dimensions of educational reform during the 1990s in the Russian Federation, many were rooted in the process of perestroika (reconstruction) of policy under the governance of Mikhail Gorbachev. This policy had been initiated in the mid-1980s, before the collapse of the USSR.

Because the main goal of the Soviet education system was to develop the human resources considered necessary for the construction of the communist society, education was provided in accordance with Marxism-Leninism under a centralised education administration and in close relation with the communist party. With deepening economic crisis in the 1980s, it became apparent that education in the USSR was not meeting the needs of changes in the society. The uniformity and inflexibility of the education system was identified as a particular problem. At the 1988 Plenary Meeting of the Central
Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, slogans including “democratisation”, “humanisation”, “humanitarisation”, “diversification”, “development of individual character”, and “creation of lifelong education system” were presented as basic components of the perestroika policy on education, and set the direction for educational reform.

The framework for the reform was described in a revised draft of the Basic Law on Public Education published in 1990. The draft emphasised various principles of education based on democracy and humanism rather than educational ideas based on Marxism-Leninism and the regulations of communist education. The draft was not adopted because the USSR collapsed in 1991; but the main concepts were developed in the education policy of the new Russian Federation.

Basic direction of the reform

The education reform in the Russian Federation denied socialism, and started to build a new education system in accordance with a goal of constructing a Western-European-style market economy and democratic society. The reform aimed to take into account the needs of individuals and groups through decentralisation, deregulation and specialisation. Each of these dimensions is here commented upon.

Concerning decentralisation of educational administration, during the Soviet regime education had been regulated by laws and decrees which operated in a hierarchy with the Respublik (Republic) at the top and the Oblast (State), Krai (County), Gorod (City), Raion (District) and Okrug (Ward) at successively lower levels. Local governments were expected to implement the education policies set at higher levels, and to adhere to the standards determined by the Soviet government with appropriate adaptation to local conditions. However, since the local governments were closely connected with local communist organisations headed by the Soviet Communist Party, and thus faithfully obeyed the education policy made by the Soviet government and Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, they could not provide local residents with education which met their needs and local circumstances.

Such rigid and uniform education was criticised under the perestroika policy in the second half of the 1980s, and the movement to secure local competence was strengthened. This direction was maintained in the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR. It aimed to establish local autonomy in education in the new administrative structure of the Federation and its component parts.

The nature of the decentralised system was set out in the 1992 Federal Law on Education. The law limited the function of the federal government to guidance and co-ordination in order to maintain unity within the federal system. Decentralisation included deregulation of the curriculum standard. The standard under the Soviet regime regulated not only the goals to be achieved in each grade and the method of teaching, but also lesson plans and
other details. Thus, schools throughout the nation conducted uniform lessons following rigid standards. In the new system, federal curriculum standards for primary and secondary education were simplified, and local governments and schools were given more scope to determine the contents of school subjects.

The Federal Law on Education required the Russian federal government to make a National Education Standard for the curriculum; and the standard for the compulsory stage (Grade 1 to 9) had to be approved by the State Duma (Lower House of Parliament). However, even at the end of the 1990s the National Education Standard had not yet been established as a law. Only the Basic Subject Plan and Standard Program had been published as Ministerial Ordinances, and there was no regulation on goals, structure and operation on these standards. Therefore, legal obligations on these standards were under question, and schools were confused.

The Russian federal government also encouraged an increase in the number of schools which had more competence in composing curriculum on their own. These included special schools, lycées and gymnasiums. The measure promoted differentiation of primary and secondary education to meet the needs of individuals and the society.

“Special” schools were primary and secondary schools which offered in-depth education in specific subjects such as natural science, foreign language, physical education and art, and were first established in 1958. Initially, they aimed at enrichment of gifted children in specific fields; but when it was decided to increase the number of such schools during perestroika, the definition was changed to schools promoting development of individual characteristic ability in response to the interests of each pupil. Such schools increased in number, especially in urban areas, and new types of special-character schools named lycées and gymnasiums were established in 1989. The Soviet government changed the status of some existing public general secondary schools as an experiment, and provided education of higher standard than normal schools especially aiming at preparation for entrance to higher education. Most of these schools were linked with higher education institutes, and provided lessons conducted by professors from affiliated institutes. They also offered pupils chances to enter affiliated higher education institutes without taking entrance examinations.

In 2000, the number of such schools in Russia exceeded 1,000 gymnasiums and 700 lycées, which was about 2.6 per cent of all general secondary schools (Goskomstat rosii: 184). The number of pupils enrolled was about 6.3 per cent: 840,000 pupils in gymnasiums and 493,000 in lycées (ibid.). Lycées and gymnasiums had become rather popular, as they were seen to foster elites and develop the market economy. However, since no laws regulated the number of years and conditions of education for such schools, the curricula and facilities varied. In 2001, the Russian federal government produced a document on Typical Regulation of Educational Institutes, which clarified the definitions of lycées, gymnasiums and special character schools. In accordance with the principle of cultural autonomy, the government guaranteed
the right to study the languages of ethnic minorities; and since at the same time the concept of special needs education was enlarged, children who suffered from learning disorders were given enhanced opportunities for compensatory education. Thus, educational reform promoted differentiation in various ways.

However, society faced major problems from the severe financial situation and the pains of political and economic transition. These problems included delay of teachers’ salary payments and the lack of textbooks and other teaching materials. As the major part of educational expenses was subsidised by local governments, the problems were more severe in localities facing financial difficulties such as East Siberia and the Russian Far East. These problems were major obstacles to the reform. Therefore, in order to understand the processes of reform, it is necessary to understand the financial system at federal and local levels.

Another important feature was the recovery of popularity of secondary specialised colleges and higher education institutes. In the early 1990s, the number of students in secondary specialised colleges and higher education institutes decreased because many school leavers chose to go directly into the business world. However, during the second half of the 1990s many of these institutes went through restructuring to cope with market economy, and became more popular. As a result, the number of students in the institutes increased again.

The numbers of private higher education institutes and students increased every year during the 1990s. Particularly notable was the number of students in private correspondence courses. However, because of the decrease of birth rate, the future of private higher education institutes was not very bright. Competition between institutes to recruit students is likely to intensify, and some private institutes will probably collapse.

Case studies in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk

In 1999 and 2000, field studies were conducted in Irkutsk Oblast and Khabarovski Krai. In Irkutsk Oblast, field study was undertaken in Ust’-Orda Buryat Autonomous District. As mentioned earlier, Irkutsk Oblast is a representative area of East Siberia, while Khabarovski Krai is representative of the Far East. Both are close to Japan, and are considered to be important parts of the Russian economic area surrounding the Sea of Japan.

Irkutsk

Irkutsk Oblast has an area of 767,900 square kilometres, and in 1999/2000 had a population of 2,742,000. Throughout the 1990s, the population gradually decreased. The proportion of Russians in Irkutsk Oblast slightly increased, while the proportion of Buryat, the indigenous ethnic minority of the area,
decreased even though the total population of the Buryat in the Russian Federation as a whole increased. Ust'-Orda, which is the Autonomous Ward (Okrug) of Buryat, was one area in which the Buryat population increased during the 1990s. This reflected the recent tendency of Buryat people to live together in the ethnic administrative unit.

The state capital city, Irkutsk, was developed in the 17th century for fur hunting. Later the lumber industry was developed, making use of the forest which occupies about 80 per cent of the state. The state also has water and coal which can be used to generate electricity. Oil manufacturing and chemical industries have been developed, utilising an oil pipeline from West Siberia. Other industries include machine production and aluminium smelting. Thus Irkutsk is a centre of industry and culture in East Siberia.

In 1999/2000, Irkutsk had 1,074 kindergartens, 1,418 elementary and secondary educational institutes, 66 professional technical schools, 55 secondary specialised colleges, and 14 higher education institutes (Table 1). Irkutsk city, which had about 600,000 people, had 10 private elementary and secondary schools at one time, but only two remained in 1999/2000. One of them was operated by the Russian Orthodox Church. There were only 10 private schools in the whole state of Irkutsk, which was less than the number in Khabarovsk Region. Special character schools at elementary and secondary education levels had been created in the public system. Irkutsk Oblast had 60 lycées and gymnasiuems, and half of the general secondary schools had special classes for enrichment study of specific subjects.

At the higher education level, Irkutsk Oblast had only three private institutes in 1999/2000. These institutes enrolled 2.6 per cent of the total number of students in higher education, which was considerably below the national average of 7 per cent.

Several institutions had established vertical co-operation and partnership between kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and universities. Networking was also evident with the 122 out-of-school education facilities. For example, the Creative Castle for Children and Youth was networked with Culture House, the public library, and other adult education facilities. Although the number of such out-of-school education facilities per population was half the national average, the facilities were very active. The researchers had not expected to find these out-of-school education facilities still functioning as public bodies in the way that they had during the socialist regime.

In the rural areas, nationality languages and other aspects of ethnic education were emphasised in schools serving ethnic minorities. The local government was supporting the movement of Buddhism renovation, though efforts were still limited. The researchers conducted field visits and interviews in Ust'-Orda Buryat Autonomous Ward, Tarasa Ethnic Education School Complex, and Khomtova No.2 School. In Ust'-Orda Buryat Autonomous Ward, about 40 per cent of the residents were Buryats. The ward had 243 elementary and secondary general schools, with 32,800 pupils. Buryat language was taught in 98 schools, the number of which had increased since

**Federal level**
- Government of the Russian Federation
- Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation
- Collegium of the Ministry of Education

**Regional level**

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<th>Irkutsk Oblast (Population 2,742,000)</th>
<th>Khabarovski Krai (Population 1,507,000)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Government of Irkutsk Oblast</strong></td>
<td><strong>Government of Khabarovski Krai</strong></td>
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<td>General Administration of General and Professional Education</td>
<td>Department of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of Khabarovski Krai</td>
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<td>14 universities and institutes (11 national, 3 private)</td>
<td>17 universities and institutes (10 national, 7 private)</td>
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<td>55 secondary specialised schools</td>
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*Source: Goscomstat Rossii, Regioni Rossii, 2000, Moskva.*
the Soviet era. One school had introduced Buryat as a teaching language on an experimental basis for the elementary stage, i.e. from first to fourth grade, and other schools taught the Buryat language as a subject. With the increase in the number of Buryats learning the Buryat language, some Russian children had also started to learn the Buryat language. A similar phenomenon was also reported at Tarasa Ethnic Education School Complex. While regeneration of the ethnic identity of Buryats was promoted, Russian pupils were also attracted by the Buryat language and culture.

In one school, subjects and extra-curricular activities concerning ethnic culture other than language, such as Leather Craft and Ethnic Art, had previously been conducted in separate nationality groups. This practice had been changed so that anyone could select these subjects. Probably encouraged by such initiatives, the Buryat national Sulkharavan festival had become popular and had attracted the participation of Russians. This reflected moves toward creation of a common local culture as Siberians as well as members of ethnic groups.

Khabarovsk

Khabarovski Krai has an area of 788,600 square kilometres, and in 1999/2000 had a population of 1,507,000. As in Irkutsk, the population gradually had decreased during the 1990s. Most of the territory is hilly or mountainous, and there is little cultivated land. Traditional industries include forestry, fishing and gold mining, and more modern industries include automobile repair, oil refinery, chemical industry and shipbuilding. During the Soviet era, Khabarovski Krai had a military aircraft factory. Transition to civilian industry has been promoted, but not with full success. Nevertheless, Khabarovsk, which is the capital city of Khabarovski Krai, is a hub for domestic and international transportation by plane, rail, road and river. It is thus developed as an economic and cultural centre.

Within the population, the proportion of Russians slightly decreased during the 1990s, while that of Ukrainian people increased. Sakhalar (Yakuts), who are an Asian indigenous people, also increased but less significantly.

In 1999/2000, Khabarovski Krai had 461 kindergartens, 513 elementary and secondary general schools, 49 professional technical schools, 28 secondary specialised colleges and 17 higher education institutes (Table 1). There were nine private elementary and secondary general schools. Although the absolute number of private schools was not so high as in Irkutsk, it was greater as a proportion of the population.

In Khabarovski Krai, pupils at all stages of the education system were encouraged to identity themselves as citizens of the Far East and as members of the Pacific Rim Region. In the curricula of primary and secondary education, Literature in the Far East and Far East Economy were compulsory subjects. Teaching materials for these subjects had been developed locally. Artistic education was also emphasised. Vocational technical schools and
secondary specialised schools recovered their popularity during the 1990s as they restructured their courses to meet the needs of market economy.

Among the 17 higher education institutes, seven were private. The fact that the number of private educational institutes was growing in Khabarovski Krai contrasted with the situation in Irkutsk Oblast. Khabarovski Krai also had more higher education students, with 3,809 students per 100,000 population compared with 2,717 in Irkutsk. The number of students in private higher education institutes was around 3,400, and the ratio was 226 students per 100,000 population, which was close to the national average of 236. In Irkutsk Oblast, the ratio of students enrolled in private higher education institutes per 100,000 population was as low as 95.

Khabarovsk also had a gymnasium and pedagogical university which offered special courses for ethnic minority students from the northern area. Teaching of nationality languages was not so advanced as in Irkutsk, and was still in the stage of preparing textbooks for minority languages. Khabarovsk Teachers’ Training Institute was active in developing teaching materials and references for ethnic education. Every school in Khabarovsk studied the cultures of various ethnic groups. Compared to Irkutsk, however, ethnic education seemed less dynamic.

Discussion and conclusion

The turbulence of political transition and economic decline, accompanied by the decentralisation and enlargement of management autonomy, has required local communities and schools to use their own initiatives to survive. In some cases leadership has been provided by former communist-party members, but in other cases it has been provided by the new Russian elites. In the initial years after 1991 the federal government role was minimal, but it was strengthened in the late 1990s.

Compared to Moscow, where even public schools have been at least partly privatised through introduction on fees and other revenue-earning schemes, private schools have not been popular in either Khabarovsk or Irkutsk. This fact reflects the poor economic situation of these regions. However, there is clear difference between Irkutsk and Khabarovsk in terms of development of private higher education institutes. One factor behind the differences has been divergence in economic wealth and in the patterns of development. In Khabarovsk, industries developed during the Soviet era faced difficulty in adapting to the transition to market economy because of their military foci, while Irkutsk maintained its timber, pulp, aluminium smelting and other industries supported by rich energy and forest resources. However, Khabarovski Krai’s role as a transportation hub could be an advantage in promoting the market economy.

In Irkutsk, where it was easier to adapt to the change of economic regime with traditional forms of industry, facilities concerning education and culture
were maintained. In Khabarovsk, by contrast, where it was difficult to adapt to the market economy with existing form of industry because of the location, it was much easier to attract a flow of people, goods, money and information especially from foreign countries. This appeared to be a further factor in the increase of private educational institutes.

Although the cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities was institutionalised, opportunities for ethnic education in the urban areas were limited. However, the researchers observed a movement of forming new local culture in parallel with promoting ethnic culture, especially in localities inhabited by many ethnic minorities.

Concerning the emphasis of local identity, a common trend was evident. In Irkutsk, however, which had a stronger element of ethnicity, there was a sign of fusion of ethnic culture into local culture. The structure of school education made it possible to open up ethnic cultures to people of different ethnic origins. The ways in which this develops and the kinds of meanings it can have in the formation of local and ethnic culture would be an important focus for further research. Also deserving further investigation are the changes in local identity in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk as they adapt to the market economy in the context of their different industrial infrastructures.

Decentralisation after the collapse of Soviet regime, together with the abrupt introduction of the market economy, caused extreme disparities among different local areas. Some analysts might argue that recentralisation is needed for recovery and for both effective and balanced development of education in the different parts of the federation. Whatever the case, full understanding requires detailed analysis at the local level as well as macro level, for, as shown by this comparison of two regions within the Russian federation, major differences may exist even among regions which are geographically quite close to each other.

Notes

1. According to Mark Bray (1999), there are various types of decentralisation and centralisation. Among them is the distinction between functional centralisation/decentralisation, which refers to a shift in distribution of powers between various authorities that operate in parallel, and territorial centralisation/decentralisation, which refers to a redistribution of control among different geographic tiers of government. Territorial decentralisation may include deconcentration, delegation and devolution as major subcategories. In this paper, the term decentralisation is used to indicate territorial decentralisation, mainly delegation of the power of central authority to local ones.

2. The particular project on which this paper reports was launched in 1999 with a grant from Japan’s Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, Culture & Technology. The team has the following members: Satoshi Kawanobe (Tokoha-gakuen University), Tadashi Endo (Utsunomiya University), Seiji Fukuta (Tsuru Bunka University), Shougo Iwasaki (Tokyo Metropolitan College), Akiko Minei (Tsukuba University), Kuniko Mizutani (Ashiya University), Hiromichi Ojima (Tsukuba University), Yukiko Sawano (National Institute for Educational Research), Hiroshi
Sasanuma (Shizuoka University), Keiko Seki (Hitotsubashi University), and Atsushi Takase (Fuji Women’s College). Other persons inside and outside Japan have also participated on an ad hoc basis. This paper was originally written in Japanese by Tadashi Endo, and has been translated and edited by Yukiko Sawano.


4. The importance of these areas is likely to increase in the Russian Federation as the government implements its Long-term Development Programme of the Far East and Trans-Baikal Regions.


6. The field visits were achieved with the kind assistance of Nikolai Nikandrov of the Russian Academy of Education. We also appreciate the arrangements made by Leonid Vygovskii (Director of General Administration of General and Professional Education, Government of Irkutsk Oblast), Ludmira Obkhova (Director of the Committee of General Education of Khabarovsky Krai), Fedor Dovshko (Director of the Department of Elementary Professional Education of Khabarovsky Krai), and Anatoliy Levchenko (Vice Director of the Department of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of Khabarovsky Krai).

7. The total fertility ratio in the Russian Federation in 1990 was 1.887, but decreased rapidly to 1.171 in 1999 (Goskomstat Rossii, Rossiiskii Statisticheskii Ezhegodnik 2000, p. 97). Among industrialised countries in 1996, only Spain had a lower figure
than Russia (Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 1997*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe).

8. During the field studies in 1999 and 2000, the researchers visited three private schools: two in the city of Irkutsk and one in the city of Angarsk. However four public schools visited in the urban area in the same period were similar to the private schools. It seemed to the researchers that the Irkutsk City No. 25 Gymnasium, which was the best among the four public schools, was better than the private schools.

References


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