

by Denis M Zhilin

**Historical background**

**W**ork with gifted children in Russia has a long history. However, it hardly ever has been systematic. It has had its ups and downs and until now is still full of paradoxes and contradictions.

First of all, it should be noted that in Russian pedagogy the word "gifted" is not popular, especially in official papers. Soviet pedagogy, claiming to follow Marx-Lenin theory, neglected the natural abilities of pupils, as well as the cultural influence of the family, and considered the quality of education to be the result of the efforts of the teachers and the whole governmental educational system, including propaganda. It has been only in the last ten years that the word "gifted" has appeared in official papers. However, teachers who work with gifted children also do not like the word "gifted" because it is considered to cause arrogance. Instead, they unofficially prefer the word "smart" and define this term as "children who want to study and are able to study".

However, the approach that each pupil can be well taught led to a system that was really convenient for those children who really were smart. The curriculum in all schools used to be relatively difficult, the demands were high and the style of teaching was mostly academic, with only slight connections with reality. In addition, the classes were overcrowded, with 40 pupils in a class as the norm, and there was a lack of equipment. When teachers were involved in their subject (some schools with such teachers had pre-revolution history), smart children could withstand intensive courses in overcrowded classes and really got a very good academic education. However, if they had no luck with the teachers, their education, if conducted, was not thanks to but despite the school. This was possible, due to the tremendous amount of popular and scientific-popular books that have been published since the 1930s and were available, at least, in the libraries. Propaganda valuing good education and making positive heroes of educated people such as scientists and engineers, encouraged children to make an effort to get a good education. Thus, since the establishment of the Soviet educational system, it was

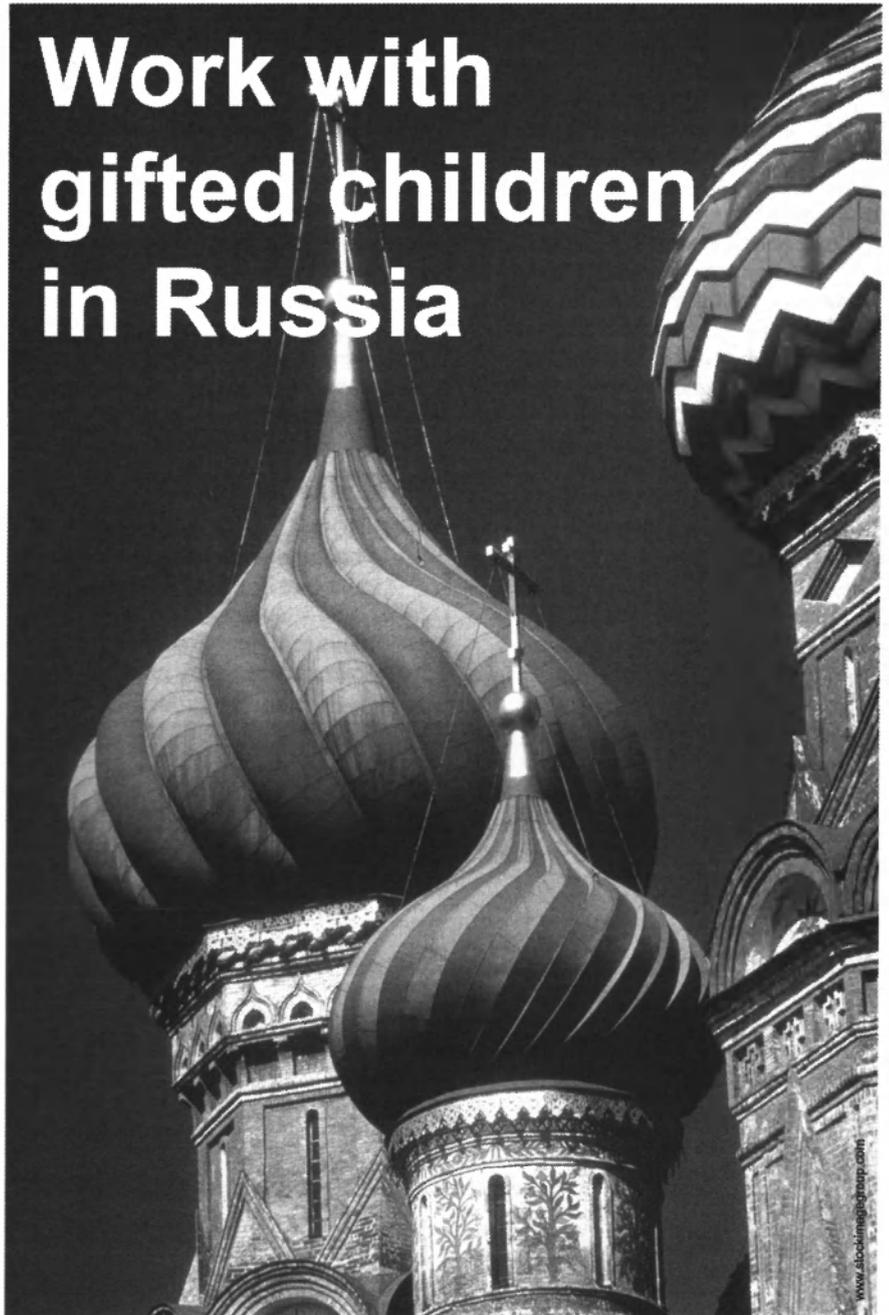
# Work with gifted children in Russia

the teachers and pupils themselves who were really in charge of good study. Since that time, the quality of education in a particular school has depended on the team of teachers. It is also since that time that teachers do the great bulk of work with smart children.

At the beginning of the 1960s this system began to show flaws. Furthermore, people's trust in propaganda began to dissolve. On the other hand, the developing space and weapons industry required extremely well-educated people, especially in physics and mathematics. Besides this, good teachers were sick and tired of teaching just anyone,

preferring smart pupils (a situation that still remains). This combination of government's demands and teachers' requirements created the necessary prerequisites for the formation of schools with higher demands and a more complicated curriculum. These schools are called "specialised schools", "accelerated schools" or "schools with accelerated classes". The pupils for these schools are selected.

The first of such schools, "The Second School" in Moscow, was created in 1957 by the efforts of its first principal, Vladimir Ovchinnikov. Following this, accelerated schools began to be formed in large cities



where there were enough good teachers to form a team, with support from the local authorities. In 1963 three world-famous academicians, I. Petrovsky (mathematician, the rector of Moscow State University), A. Kolmogorov (mathematician) and I. Kikoin (physicist), pushed for the formation of boundary schools attached to the universities. These schools gathered smart pupils from all over Russia. It is interesting that the vast majority of students were from families with educated parents, although the selection was fair. (This gives rise to the issue of the family's influence on the child's giftedness.)

Russian authorities have always been suspicious of clever people. Meanwhile, many accelerated schools very soon turned into "democracy-breeders". On the other hand, many high-ranking parents wanted their children to get a good education. It

and galvanise society by stupid ideas of unreasoned reforms that would first of all strike at the gifted pupils. Experimental schools were deprived of government support and the functioning of the private schools was hampered due to tax and certification policies. However, and it is also a contradiction, in some places the local authorities assumed support. In Moscow the local authorities initiated the establishment of a school for gifted children (called "Intellectual") where the results of psychological evaluations are taken into account.

**Who teaches gifted children and how?**

As has been pointed out, the main force that has been pushing for and developing work with smart children is teachers. Receiving ridiculous salaries, they usually

but consider themselves responsible according to their own conscience. There is no hierarchy of managers, at least in state schools. There is no working system of supervision, because all the formal supervisors who represent local authorities are really not qualified. That's why teachers really have remarkable freedom in their work.

In addition, relationships between teachers and pupils in Russian pedagogical tradition are very close. It gives teachers the possibility to encourage pupils even when the demands are very high and the study is intensive. Moreover, a teacher who is involved in his pupils' feelings often provides very effective psychological assistance just "along the way". Having no supervision, a teacher can afford to carry out some audacious actions, just by following his feelings about the situation.

In the teams of teachers with strong personalities, relationships are often informal and horizontally arranged—we could even say self-organised. For example, in School #192 (Moscow) teachers, if necessary, discuss and elaborate the politics regarding a particular pupil "along the way" in a cramped room where they drop in for ten minutes to have a cup of tea at break time. It means that the problems are solved as soon as they occur and only real problems are taken into consideration. In this school, with teachers of very high level, this horizontally-arranged system turns out to be extremely flexible and effective. However, it requires really dedicated teachers and really gifted teaching.

However, strong personalities have a downside. If a teacher loses the feeling of a situation, he can make a bad mistake. Some of the teachers can stamp a "black mark" on pupils who take over and highlight negative features of the teacher. Another problem is conflicts that arise within the team, sometimes leading to its split or degradation.

In private schools with strong management, the psychological and teaching tasks are usually separated. The drawbacks described above are reduced; however, the advantages are also reduced. Work in such schools is more mechanical than creative. Very often strong managers and psychologists overload teachers with paperwork and other mundane activities that provoke the teachers with a drive to escape, despite their



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caused very contradictory attitudes towards accelerated schools. Some of them were put into unbearable positions, whereas others were opened and supported. At this time, the first theoretical studies concerning gifted children were begun by Victoria Jurkevich.

A positive attitude to gifted children flourished in the late 1980s along with Perestrojka. It was a time of enormous possibilities. Many new schools were organised under the umbrella of the government and with government support. Some of them were academic in nature and organised by people with scientific backgrounds. But plenty of innovative and alternative schools also appeared. Many of them received the status of "experimental school". A new phenomenon—"authors' school", created by one or several teachers with their own methodological approaches—sprang up and obtained government support. Private schools, predominantly innovative, also arose.

However, consequently there was a downward trend in the government attitude. The authorities tended to interfere in the educational process

work due to their own interest, "for ideals" rather than for money, or have to combine different jobs. They predominantly have a very good scientific background. In schools established by universities, the university lecturers or researchers work as teachers. In any case, PhDs that combine teaching with scientific research are very common in accelerated classes. For example, the founder of the famous accelerated classes in chemistry at School #171 (Moscow), Sergey Berdonosov, is a successful teacher and researcher at the same time. His research has won state prizes and many of his former students now have PhDs or even DSc degrees. Another group of teachers who push for and develop work with gifted children are people who want to apply their excellent skills from a background in psychology. They are mostly responsible for the innovative schools, but even there one can find former scientists.

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earning relatively high salaries.

### Selection of pupils

The selection of pupils for accelerated schools is carried out by the board of teachers, sometimes with the assistance of psychologists. It is usually an assessment where the candidates solve some tasks and communicate with the members of the board.

The selection criteria depend on the school. While in some schools the criteria are rather formal and are claimed to check either giftedness or general background, in other schools they are quite informal. Actually, the teachers estimate whether they can teach this particular student effectively or not. The lack of formal criteria eliminates possible conflicts and mismatching in ways of thinking. Informal selection also allows not very smart children to study at the school if the teachers' board decides that it would be useful for such a pupil. However, informal criteria require good intuition and are only suitable for horizontally-arranged teacher teams. It is interesting that the percentage of failures seems to be similar both in schools with formal and informal criteria.

### What do gifted children study?

The curricula in accelerated schools depend on the school, but they have many similarities. Any state school has to provide a certain level of knowledge and skills for a number of subjects. The list of subjects is rather academic and is taught at most of the schools. However, the approaches can be very different—from classical to innovative. Classical approaches are used mostly in state schools with a scientific background, where the drawbacks of this approach are compensated for by the teachers personally. Private schools or the schools with a psychology background use innovative approaches, sometimes replacing classical lessons with other activities and "academic" subjects with "holistic", integrative", "developing" and so on.

Innovative schools such as Montessori, Rudolf Steiner or Elkoin-Davydov use their own programme. However, it is very difficult to match their curricula with the demands of tertiary institutions, and these schools exist mostly at a primary level, and, in some cases, intermediate.

Extracurricular activities are provided by the school outside of the compulsory learning timetable as well as by other institutions.

School-provided activities are determined by the school and usually depend on the preferences of the teachers. A very widespread form of activity is research, usually relatively simple. In addition to research, some schools organise expeditions to the countryside, sometimes to very wild places such as the Kola Peninsula or even Kamchatka. They claim to be devoted to the investigation of the environment; however, usually it is only an excuse to get pupils outdoors and allow them to exercise. Sports (except trekking and orienteering) are not very popular in accelerated schools.

Institutions for supplementary education provide the oldest form of extracurricular activities outside of the school—study groups, which are open to everybody. These courses supplement the school curriculum and deal with practical work, beginning with handicraft and ending with chemical synthesis. Apart from institutions for supplementary education, some universities also arrange such study groups, where the course usually supplements the school syllabus in particular subjects. Some study groups are also organised by schools for students of other schools.

Another form of extracurricular

in scientific work through Olympiads and many of the winners and participants have become famous scientists.

In the mid-1970s another very interesting organisational form was invented—summer schools. The first summer school was organised near Krasnoyarsk in 1974. These schools are for those "crazy" children who are not sick of studying and want to learn more, even during the holidays. Usually they are organised voluntarily by students and young lecturers of the universities and provide some additional courses to the school syllabus in a countryside camp. The courses and the form of teaching depend on the particular team. Usually university students teach high school students something they consider to be interesting. These schools are absolutely informal and have very few overlaps with the official system. The certificates, if provided, are usually drawn by hand and do not have any official significance.

Being informal and really having no power over the students, these schools are of a great challenge to everybody who teaches there, because success depends only on how well a teacher can get in touch with the students. Many university students who have survived these schools as teachers have then become good school teachers. One of the

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activity is Olympiads, where participants compete to find the solutions to different tasks within a limited time. The tasks compiled are deliberately very complicated, so they cannot all be solved within the time. Those who solve the most are the winners. It is a kind of intellectual sport and has both negative and positive aspects. However, it is the only officially recognised form of assessment, apart from official exams. Olympiads are organised by government and local educational authorities with the help of universities and have almost 60 years of history. Many students have become involved

teams which organised Krasnoyarsk Summer School was converted to a regular school team and their school "Univers" is now considered the best in Krasnoyarsk.

### Problems working with gifted children

The system described above, even though it can be considered adequate, still has not solved some essential problems. The first problem is the problem of small towns. While in Moscow there is a surplus of accelerated schools, children have choice and the teachers have the job of raising intelligence, in small

towns where there is no critical mass of teachers to establish accelerated or authors' schools, smart children have no adequate opportunities. This problem has partly been solved by boundary schools; however, their capacity is limited and does not meet the demand.

Another problem is junior schools. As a great deal of accelerated schools are organised by teachers with a strong scientific background who cannot work with juniors, there is a great shortage of primary and intermediate schools, even in Moscow.

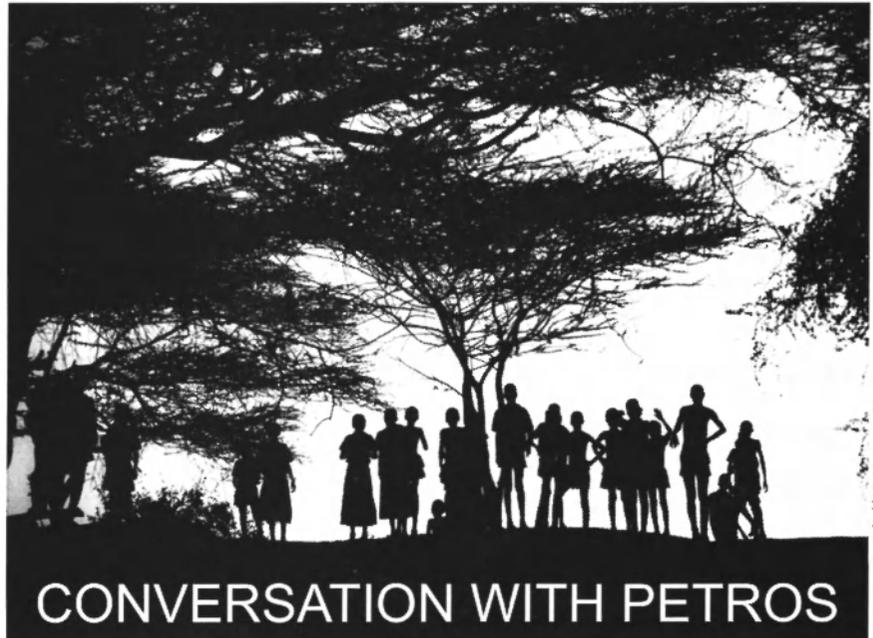
The problem of disabled pupils, and pupils with autism and dyslexia is also approached unsystematically, depending on the capabilities of the particular schools and teachers.

Working with gifted children in Russia has a very long history and is provided by a diversity of institutions, many of which are informal. In any case, it is a matter for the school rather than the system. It is the teacher who plays the key role in this work. The majority of teachers have backgrounds in science rather than psychology, however, their gift leads them to have great success in their relationships with pupils. This gift is usually essential, because the problems caused by the intensity of study are usually compensated for by very close personal relationships between teachers and pupils, as well as within teacher teams.

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**Denis Zhilin, PhD (Chemistry), is a Russian teacher with 10 years' experience. He visited NZ on a three-month course to learn English. Denis attended several Auckland Explorers events, as his professional interest in gifted education made him curious to explore how New Zealand treats its gifted children. The salary of full-time teachers in Russia is not high enough to live on—in most the regions it is about the living wage. Therefore, many teachers have to take on private students or work at several jobs. It is necessary to be passionate about teaching to teach in Russia. Zhila2000@mail.ru Denis would like his article to initiate discussion on the forum, particularly in relation to which information is interesting and useful and how the situation in Russia compares to the New Zealand situation.**

[www.giftedchildren.org.nz/forum](http://www.giftedchildren.org.nz/forum)



**P**etros has lived most of his life in a rural village in the heart of KwaZulu, Natal. His father died when he was quite young, leaving his mother with five children to rear and an income of approximately R90 (\$30) a month.

At primary school Petros was obviously exceptionally bright, with a memory that retained everything and a curiosity that longed to question and go beyond the rigid confines of a syllabus. In talking to his teachers he often raised questions for which they had no answers and indeed they had no books to which he could refer. But they recognised that he was exceptional, with a curiosity that was insatiable and yet a gentleness that has been part of his personality ever since.

They commented on his willingness to teach the other children, and since his class consisted of 80 pupils, the teachers were extremely grateful for his help in explaining to the children who were slower to learn, and, indeed, teachers claim that he did more teaching than they did!

At the end of the primary phase Petros fortunately won a scholarship to a residential school, partly because there was no high school in his area, but mainly because of the exceptionality that he was demonstrating.

At secondary school he continued to work with extreme diligence and perseverance and when he did not understand he would persist in his questioning until he had mastered the

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concepts and the material that he was studying. Again, the children in his class commented on his willingness to help them and he would spend many hours after the school day going through lessons with them until they understood.

In a third world underdeveloped country, classes are large, teachers are ill-qualified and books are in short supply. So Petros's access to reading was very limited and he would walk many miles to a small local library where he would consume everything that was available with a memory so retentive that even now he can recall some of his early reading.

He talks about one of his major frustrations, that of not being able to pursue knowledge until he felt saturated, not being able to ask questions or engage in debate. Most of his learning was solitary and since his mother had never had formal schooling, although she encouraged him, she was unable to cope with his searching mind.

I met Petros for the first time when he was in the third year of high school at a curriculum extension course where, within an hour, I perceived that he was obviously outstanding. He led the way in questioning, he pursued avenues that were new and exciting