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To cite this article: Olena Aydarova (2015) Global Discourses and Local Responses: A Dialogic Perspective on Educational Reforms in the Russian Federation, *European Education*, 47:4, 331-345, DOI: [10.1080/10564934.2015.1107375](https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2015.1107375)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2015.1107375>



Published online: 07 Dec 2015.



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Global Discourses and Local Responses: A Dialogic Perspective on Educational Reforms in the Russian Federation

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In the past twenty years, Russian education has undergone transformations under the influence of global discourses. In this ethnographic study, I draw on Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogue to examine how actors respond to these transformations. The purpose of my study is threefold: to document the emic perspectives on the changes, to reconstruct the implicit knowledge embedded in teacher education institutions, and to use that knowledge to challenge assumptions carried by global discourses. This study offers a new perspective on contradictions that global reforms evoke and calls for ground-up research that will use local categories to challenge global neoliberalism.

Russian educational institutions, like their counterparts across the postsocialist world, underwent bouts of reforms each time various international organizations, development agencies, or transnational agreements (Gounko, 2008) delivered their "policy packages" (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). The Bologna process that Russia joined in 2003 brought in new educational ideologies, orienting the system toward competencies, outcomes, and customer satisfaction. Among other things, international influences introduced neoliberal principles through the movement of Western trends into the postsocialist space of the Russian Federation (Gounko, 2008; Timoshenko, 2011). Prior research into these matters, however, has maintained a macro-level perspective: it has traced the changes without giving salience to the categories that structure experiences and interpretations of people on the ground. To address this gap, I seek to reconstruct participants' emic perspectives and describe the values embedded in Russian institutions, as they become visible to participants when global discourses enter their life-worlds. In presenting participants' perspectives, I want to underscore ways in which the focus on global forces can sometimes overlook national and local scripts.

While this paper follows the tradition of anthropological research in education (Anderson-Levitt, 2003), it shifts the focus and the frame of reference: instead of presenting globally circulated discourses as the norm, I employ local responses as a critique of globally circulated policy prescriptions. In this conceptual shift, I heed Gounko and Smale's (2007) observations:

While it can be easy to identify the influences imposed by the global agencies through the conditions of their loans, "policy directions" and "recommendations," it would be more difficult to detect and resist the influences imbedded in conceptions of education that seem so ordinary that

we take them for granted. Indeed, the analytical frameworks and discourses disseminated by the World Bank and the OECD seem so obvious and commonsensical that we often accept them without critical scrutiny. (p. 545)

Following this observation, I document participants' experiences with global ideas, products, and policies in order to challenge the common sense packaged in reforms promoted by international agencies. In other words, the goal of this inquiry is to draw attention to the cracks in global discourses that participants' narratives and experiences can reveal.

This paper is based on ethnographic research that I conducted at a foreign language department in a pedagogical university in Russia. I draw on Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogue to problematize and denaturalize the common sense of global discourses. To this end, I provide the analysis of multivocal ethnographic data that juxtaposes perspectives on learning, teacher–student relationships, and education expressed by international agencies, teacher educators, and their students. Throughout the paper, I show that the presence of global ideas, policies, and products creates contradictions and foregrounds the values embedded in local contexts: it affords opportunities to bring forward the implicit knowledge, which might not have had an outlet for articulation had not global forces drawn them into a dialogue. I argue that this implicit knowledge can serve as a critical mirror to challenge global ideologies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Among many studies examining globalization and educational transfer (Phillips & Ochs, 2003; Rappleye, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006), Anderson-Levitt's (2003) reference to cultural dialogue underscores the complexity, multidirectionality, and multidimensionality of interactions between the global forces and the local contexts. To extend the notion of cultural dialogue and to examine local actors' role in it, I turn to Bakhtin's notions of *dialogism* (Holquist, 2002). Dialogue in Bakhtin's (1981) theory is an existential condition that connects speakers and their addressees through various forms of utterances. These utterances can be exchanges between people present within the same social context; they also can be texts that connect authors and their audiences across various social, political, economic, and historic panes. To participate in a dialogue, participants do not have to enter similar spaces; they may not even know about each other's existence. But an utterance of one can be a response to an utterance produced by the other, even if the two are separated in time and space. Examined through the lens of this theory, international reports, national policies, or textbooks constitute utterances that draw participants into a dialogue, despite the fact that these responses may remain unheard by the authors of those reports, policies, or textbooks.

Bakhtin's writing on dialogue allows us to conceptualize globalization as a struggle with *another's* word, or alien discourse. In the original Russian, *another's* word (*chuzhoe slovo*) represents the foreignness and the externality, the influence from without, not within. The role of another's word is no longer simply to inform, provide directions, or outline rules; instead it seeks to "determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as authoritative discourse, and an internally persuasive discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Through a dialogue with this word, we not only incorporate some of the alien discourse, but also define ourselves through it and seek ways to resist it.

Bakhtin (1981) describes *authoritative discourse* as binding, static, and unchanging. It is “independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally,” but “with its authority already fused to it” (p. 342). *Internally persuasive discourse*, on the other hand, is not recognized in the society and has no authoritative backing. It “is tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word,’ ‘half-ours and half-someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). This distinction between two types of discourses is helpful for conceptualizing relationships that participants enter when international reports as “another’s authoritative word”—semantically dead and demanding complete acceptance—enter their life-worlds. It also underscores that global discourses come with power fused to them, but that which participants find convincing may not have social acceptance even in their social contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This ethnographic study is based on the vertical case study approach developed by Vavrus and Barlett (2009), which calls for comparisons that involve three contextual levels: local, national, and international. At the core of vertical case studies is the sociocultural approach to policy (Sutton & Levinson, 2001), which focuses on how local actors make sense of the policy as they appropriate it. In my analysis, I put the documents from international organizations into a dialogic relationship with actors at the local level, acknowledging that this dialogue is mediated through the national policies that I discuss in the section on global discourses below. Thus, different levels of this study are populated by different actors: international organizations, such as the OECD, the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, and finally teacher educators and students at a pedagogical university in central Russia. The differences between global and local discourses lie in the scales of their circulation and their reach: while OECD reports and Bologna Declaration principles are circulated internationally, faculty members’ and students’ perspectives on the changes are rarely recognized even at the level of national decision-making.

To collect perspectives of the latter group, I conducted a 3 month long (May–June 2011; June 2012) ethnographic study at a pedagogical university in central Russia. The university was established in the 1930s as a state higher education institution dedicated to teacher preparation. Over 15,000 students attend the university, most of whom are ethnically Russian. The university boasts neither the privileges of some of Russia’s highly ranked institutions nor the prestige of a highly desirable location close to Russia’s policy-making hub in the capital. I chose this site because of its distance from Russia’s decision-making centers and its average ranking nationally. This position seemed to reveal interpretations common among many institutions of higher education dispersed across the Russian Federation. At the university, I spent most of my time at the foreign language department as a site that resides on the cusp between the local and the global where extensive contacts with the outside world make the struggles with global discourses most salient and visible. Similarly to other Russian higher education institutions, the university has undergone transitions between different standards and curriculum models, along with several other centrally designed funding and quality assurance reforms.

During my fieldwork, I conducted about thirty classroom observations, ten interviews with faculty and administrators, and five focus groups with students. My field notes include detailed narratives of events and interactions, as well as observations about daily life at the department. I also collected artifacts: program documents, class syllabi, textbooks, class handouts, and

photographs. To trace the policy antecedents of the transformations I encountered in the local context, I collected national and international documents that dealt with Russian educational reforms from 1991 to the present day.

Data from notes, interviews, and focus groups were transcribed and together with policy documents and international reports were uploaded into *Atlas.ti*. I looked for emergent themes when I was collecting data and used open coding in analyzing the documents in my database (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). After two rounds of coding, I chose the themes that were most salient in the field notes, interviews, and focus group transcripts and examined how those themes were treated in national and international documents. The juxtaposition of these themes revealed differences in values and systems of belief that operated at different levels of discursive practices.

GLOBAL DISCOURSES AND NATIONAL POLICIES

In the dialogues on educational change in the Russian Federation, several voices were most salient through the 1990s when the conceptual and ideological foundations for the current waves of reform were identified—those of international organizations and national-level experts in the policy-making networks. For example, in 1998, the OECD conducted a study that underscored the need for a change in Russia's K-12 schooling and teacher preparation. Among other elements, the report welcomed Russian policy makers' "emphasis on individual development and self-realization" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998, p. 165) and suggested that Russian education system needed "'new' curricula and standards" (p. 104) along with new textbooks to match those. These elements later became incorporated into the Concept of Educational Modernization (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2002)—the document that still defines the foundation of new educational ideology in Russia by promoting choice and individualization of education.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (1999) study showed that the Russian higher education system fell short of international standards. According to that report, Russian higher education needed to be reformed based on internationally recognized practices to allow greater flexibility, choice, and competence-based work preparation. The report's authors noted that students had excessive workloads (36 hours a week), the relationships between teachers and students were intensely hierarchical, and the modes of instruction were seen as outdated because they relied heavily on teachers' lectures and student memorization of these lectures. Among the problems described in the report were textbooks so outdated that they hampered students' learning. The use of new textbooks and instructional materials was encouraged to improve the quality of educational provision. The report also contained recommendations that institutions should allow students to choose classes and decrease the number of contact hours as "high course loads [are seen] to be detrimental to learning, because they leave students little time to think and reflect" (OECD, 1999, p. 131).

Both reports identified Russian policy makers as actors that desired to see change in the system and treated the recommendations as solutions to problems around which consensus was allegedly established. While the OECD analyses may not have had political power to enact change in the Russian space, these negative evaluations were reported in national newspapers and subsequently many of their recommendations were dispersed across a range of educational reforms.

The introduction of the Bologna process in 2003 was one of the key mechanisms for transferring the ideologies promoted by the OECD reports (such as “new is better than old,” “international models are more efficient than national ones,” and “choice and decreased workloads are beneficial for learning”) into Russian educational policies and subsequently into institutions. The introduction of the Bologna process was voluntary and became connected with Russia’s attempt to build political alliances with Europe (see Pursiainen & Medvedev, 2005). Despite nationwide contestations, the Ministry of Education issued the directive for the implementation of the Bologna process in 2005. Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of authoritative discourse, as semantically dead and failing to be convincing but demanding one’s allegiance, is a fitting description of this policy. Only four pages long, with no attempts to clarify, justify, or win the skeptics over to its side, it lays out six steps that mirror the six principles of the Bologna Declaration. Peppered through it are English abbreviations such as ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and NQF (National Qualifications Framework). These borrowings are so fresh and foreign that there is no time or attempt to appropriate and own them.

Several months later, the Ministry of Education issued the *Federal Program of Educational Development for 2006–2010* (Government of the Russian Federation, 2005). The program identified four priorities: improvement of the contents and technology of education, development of the quality assurance of educational services, increasing the effectiveness of educational management, and improvement of economic mechanisms in higher education. The program rested on the claim that these priority areas would ensure a higher quality of Russian education, which in turn could guarantee Russia’s international competitiveness and its integration into the global space. Risks of not implementing the reforms included failure to remain participants in the Bologna Process or inability to join the World Trade Organization. Subsequently, amid multiple contestations, in 2011 the last Russian universities transferred to the two-tier model of higher education (bachelor’s and master’s degrees), implemented credit system, and adopted competence-based approach promoted by the Bologna process.

In earlier works, I analyzed curricular transformations (Aydarova, 2014) and the struggles that ensued from the introduction of the Bologna process (Aydarova, 2015). Here I will focus on local participants’ responses to global discourses introduced by international reports and subsequent national policies. In the following section I present three elements that constitute responses to the ideologies promoted by the OECD reports: that new international materials are not always better than the old national textbooks; that choice may be detrimental to student learning; and that university education should provide more than job preparation. This ethnographic account is meant to challenge some of the assumptions that have become the “common sense” of global discourses.

DISCOURSES IN LOCAL CONTEXTS: THE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY IN CENTRAL RUSSIA

During my first research visit to the pedagogical university in 2011, I joined the monthly a two-and-a-half-hour department meeting. Among the many items on the agenda were the reports of conference attendance and presentations. First to speak was a methodological council member in charge of implementing the Bologna process tenets at the department. She started her presentation about attending her first international conference in Istanbul by saying, “How would they ever catch up with us?” (*Kuda im vsem do nas?*) (Field notes, May 31, 2011). She paused as she

looked around the room, creating a moment of silence filled with faculty members' camaraderie and understanding. This moment became emblematic of the contact zone (Bakhtin, 1981) between global discourses and nationally established practices and revealed faculty members' as well as students' critical engagement with the authoritative discourses of international agendas and national reforms. This zone of contact created the space for comparing the foreign, or alien, conceptions of education and the national, or fatherland's (*otechestvennye*), pedagogical approaches. In what follows, I present a multivocal text of three themes that demonstrate local responses to international organizations' reports and transnational processes: textbooks and what they reveal about conceptions of learning; disciplines by choice and what they reveal about teacher–student relationships; and contact hours and what they reveal about purposes of education.

Textbooks and Conceptions of Learning: Is the New Better Than the Old?

After spending several days at the site, I found myself continually immersed into conversations about the textbook that constituted the core of the foreign language teacher education program. Commonly referred to by the name of its Russian lead editor, Arakin, it was originally published around 1974 with current reprints by the Humanities Publishing Center VLADOS dating from 2001. Faculty referred to it as one of the “national” or “traditional” textbooks and often described it as being “ahead of the entire planet,” having “everything in it” with all of it “tied together well.” One faculty whispered to me that she was doing “illegal teaching” because she was not “following the book”; another one explained that even if she found another textbook to use in her classes, “students would suffer” because graduation exam questions are based on this textbook. Attempts to substitute it with a newer textbook resulted in a deadlock: the Ministry of Education stamp of approval on its front page made it the most legitimate candidate for use in the program; ambivalent or not particularly enthusiastic responses to textbooks published by international publishing houses eliminated other possibilities.

During a focus group, third-year students shared an insightful observation on how textbooks become chosen and why Arakin textbook remains the core of the program.

S3: The authors of modern textbooks may not have enough authority (*avtoritet*).

S2: Yeah, authoritative textbooks (*avtoritetnye*) are more popular.

S3: They are usually old.

S2: Tested by time.

I: What does “authority” mean? What kind of textbook becomes authoritative?

S2: The one that has been used for a long time. As long as we have had this department that long students have been learning English by Arakin.

S1: With true facts, with supported scientific foundation, with fame if not around the world, then across Russia. (Focus Group 3, June 14, 2011)

This excerpt illustrates that students noticed the department's proclivity to trust the old, tested, and tried; they pointed out that the textbook published in 1974 was worthy of respect because of its authoritativeness. It also reveals students' understanding of how their education is shaped by their instructors' understandings and institutional traditions. A Russian proverb

says, “Everything new is well-forgotten old.” If new is well-forgotten old, then why chase after newness? Why bother with innovation or creativity? After all, only those textbooks are worthwhile that have withstood the test of time.

Textbooks published by international presses, on the other hand, fell short both because they failed the test of time and because they did not meet faculty members’ expectations. In casual conversations over tea and sweets, some instructors expressed dissatisfaction with them, claiming that new international textbooks are full of “fluff and mush” (Rus. *razmaznya*) and that they consist of “mostly pictures.” As one of the young instructors explained, clenching her fist as she was saying it, “They lack the Russian might.” Another young instructor, Marina Antonovna¹ noted, “Of course, they are bright and colorful and artistic, with many pictures in them. But they have very few texts.” Even though most often these textbooks were called “authentic” (because they are written by native speakers and have “authentic” foreign language), they were in most cases perceived as deficient. From the faculty’s perspective, large numbers of pictures in them were meant to attract the learner as a customer whereas large numbers of texts in “traditional” textbooks were supposed to inform the learner as a growing intellectual. The only person who adhered to a different position—acknowledging his belief that “authentic” textbooks were of higher quality—found a different job and left the university.

Contrasts in perceptions of “traditional” and “authentic” textbooks revealed the first underlying tension: most faculty believed that learning is hard work and should not be reframed as fun. The serious gravity of the educational endeavor is not for the light-hearted: if one wants entertainment, one should get it somewhere else. The commitment to the conception of learning as a laborious endeavor emerged through Marina Antonovna’s response to the new teaching approaches that foreign textbooks were based on: “the most important thing is not to go overboard. The most basic (*osnovnye*) things, memorization (*zubrezhka*) and exercises should not be moved to second place.” Later, when I asked about the meaning of going overboard, she added:

Marina Antonovna: Not to go overboard with entertaining (*razvlekalovki*)... into projects or make-believe (*vydumki*). What I noticed about these new textbooks, beautiful and fabulous textbooks, is that for the most part they are entertaining. It is nice, but not as the main stuff. It should not be this way...

I: What could happen if a teacher got into entertaining?

Marina Antonovna: In my opinion, students will suffer. They will get less practice. It might be fun and interesting for them, but it will not provide them with practice. It will not be beneficial. They need practice I think it is boring, but in any case, it is necessary Can’t forget about the role of routine.” (Field notes, June 6, 2011)

The Russian idiom for getting a higher education—“to gnaw on the granite of science” (*gryzt’ granit nauki*)—reveals this common conception of learning as hard work that potentially eliminates pleasure and entertainment. It also points to an aspect of educational ideology that goes into the construction and evaluation of a “national” textbook: texts play the central role because they carry the authoritative knowledge students must gain to grow spiritually and intellectually. In addition, exercises, no matter how boring or nonengaging, should constitute the core of the textbook because they provide practice that students need to excel. The mismatch between local perspectives and global discourses crystallizes in perspectives on foreign

¹All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect participants’ anonymity.

textbooks: because they appear to entertain through engaging activities or colorful illustrations, they fail to serve as sources of rich information and provide regular, consistent, and regimented practice of language skills. Consequently, only those portions of international textbooks that had many exercises were occasionally used as supplemental materials.

If we return to Arakin's textbook, but this time attend to students' perspectives, we'll notice criticisms for how outdated and old-fashioned it is:

S2: If Arakin had modern texts, interesting and able to motivate us, for reading, because sometimes you just sit and ...

S6: (interrupts) You know what annoys me the most? You know tomorrow is the new unit, there will be a text, phrasal verbs, or word combinations, then vocabulary notes, the exercises for the text ...

(Other students chime in and list other activities. Many agree with the negative assessment.)

S6: Then there will be "answer the questions." Everything is all the same. And you just sit and there is absolutely no interest, such stupid exercises ...

S1: From year to year, it is the same thing. (Focus Group 1, June 8, 2011)

Students associated routine with boredom and a lack of motivation for learning. Occasionally during classes, I saw a couple of them doze off and was tempted to follow suit. Variability and alternations is what students would have liked to see. But even in this conception of change, they expressed a desire for modern but nevertheless texts. While many of the students critiqued Arakin's book, they implicitly accepted the conception of learning as hard work based on work with texts and exercises.

More than once the conversation of removing the outdated textbook by Arakin—a powerful symbol of conservatism for all involved—encountered the dilemma of how to get a new textbook that would be conceptually dense and pedagogically well-thought-out. It must also bear the Ministry of Education's stamp of approval. Based on the tradition inherited from the socialist past, this is required for a textbook's use in state educational institutions and serves as a quality guarantee. The business of getting a stamp of approval is rumored to be quite shady, but despite that, this approval process tends to preserve and reinforce the conceptions of learning as hard work when the central power endorses and institutionalizes national textbooks that reflect this ideology. The emphasis on the new as superior to the old promoted by international organizations often does not hold in this context because of the values embedded in local institutions.

Teacher-Student Relationships: Equality or Authority?

The calls for greater opportunities for students to choose their classes evoked responses that revealed how relationships between faculty members and students were negotiated in educational institutions. New educational policies state that students should have more opportunities to choose which classes they want to take. *State Educational Standards of 2000* allocated 70% of courses to the required disciplines category and only 15% to disciplines by choice (or (s)electives). In contrast, the *Federal State Educational Standards of 2009*, which ensued from the laws on Bologna process implementation, allocated about 47% of the disciplines to be (s)electives and only 24% to be required courses (Aydarova, 2014). This constitutes an attempt to dismantle

a system of prescribed and predetermined curricula in which groups of students take the same classes together in order to create a system of individual learning trajectories and greater freedom of choice. Yet my interviews with administrators and faculty at this site and at other locations across Russia, revealed a common response: “These are disciplines of *the Dean’s Office* choice” (*distsiplina po vyboru dekanata*). This means that it is not the students who choose classes in which to enroll but rather the dean’s office assigns students to disciplines by choice. Knowing full well that this is not what “disciplines by choice” should be, some educators justified this by saying that universities simply did not have enough resources to accommodate students’ choices. Others noted that creating individual schedules was a logistical nightmare for the scheduling offices, which had to create schedules manually for lack of necessary software.

A more subtle explanation emerged from my interviews, observations, and informal chats at this pedagogical university. During a department meeting, many faculty members were concerned that they would not get full teaching loads if students were given freedom to choose classes. One instructor asked about a previously required discipline becoming a (s)elective in the new curriculum, wondering what would happen if students did not sign up for that class. The department head replied, “They will. By force, they will” (Field notes, May 31, 2011). This reply echoed a popular aphorism that originated from a 1970s Soviet cartoon, in which a vulture is trying to teach an ostrich how to fly and gently urges him, “If you don’t know how to, we will teach you; if you don’t want to, we will force you.” The head’s response pointed to a creative use of the legacy of the socialist past: humorous critiques of power abuses created during the Soviet era are now used to justify the use of power to direct students toward disciplines that they should have the freedom to choose themselves.

Students were aware of their powerlessness and the fact that they do not have control even over the contents of their (s)electives.

S6: In reality, even disciplines by choice are chosen for us.

I: Really?

S3: We get only psychology. Why wouldn’t they let us have business English?

S7: Maybe because there is no one to teach it?

S6: Alina Borisovna said that it is not profitable to have two people in one class by choice, one person in another class by choice. The teachers are thinly spread out then. It is simpler for them to have one discipline and turn everyone into one herd and they all come and the teacher teaches it and leaves.

I: So, on paper you have disciplines by choice. But in reality ...

S7: There is nothing to choose. (Focus Group 1, June 8, 2011)

What is interesting about this excerpt is the student’s use of the word “herd” to describe how they end up taking disciplines not of their own choosing. In contrast to the institutional designation for them, they want to have the ability to choose and have even figured out which classes they would like to take. Other students shared that they were disappointed not to have choice: “choice is better; when there is no choice it is harder” (Focus Group 3, June 14, 2011). Born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have been exposed to more capitalist influences than their instructors and are more likely to approach their education as consumers who want to have freedom of choice.

Apart from logistical limitations, students are not given the freedom to choose classes because in a highly hierarchical environment, the power and authority rests with the instructor, not with the student. Allowing students to choose redistributes power and diminishes instructors' authority over students. This redistribution of power runs contrary to the constructions of the good teacher or educator embedded in the local context. A good instructor is the one who "kicks the students" (not literally, of course), "orders them around," "finds ways to force them," "keeps them in fear and in trembling," and "pushes students." What emerges out of this construction is the underlying belief that human beings are lazy and sometimes education has to be done against their will. The justification for this forceful process of teaching is seen in the words, "They will come back to thank me later." This position assumes that the teacher knows something that students do not, including what is good for them now and what they will need for their future.

This construction of the teacher aligns with the construction of a student as immature. There is little faith that students can have the knowledge of what they have to know or which classes will help them; even if they knew what is best, it is not certain that they would make rational decisions that will benefit them in the long run. For example, during an interview, Liubov' Vladimirovna wondered if students would just sign up for the classes whose contents they had already mastered to make sure that they get good grades. Anna Sergeevna shared a concern that students would choose classes based on the popularity of the instructor, or rather the instructor's low expectations, so that they would have a chance to get an easy high grade. There was little faith in a student being a rational, well-informed consumer who knows what is best and chooses to follow the path that is more likely to be beneficial beyond an immediate return of getting a high grade.

While students recognized that hierarchies exist and were not pleased when they encountered assumptions of their immaturity, they often supported the existing arrangements. They tended to acknowledge that even though the teacher–student relationship could benefit from more friendliness, knowledge transmission and educational attainment—the main goal of this relationship—precluded the possibility of egalitarianism.

S2: Maybe there are some stereotypes that a teacher stands above, but now everything is going in the opposite direction that a teacher and a student ...

S5: That a teacher should be a friend ...

S2 ... I think [that these relationships] should be friendly. But apparently, everything is going toward these stereotypes.

I: So, traditionally a teacher is above the student?

S5: In principle, it is right. There should be no buddy–buddy relationships (*panebratstvo*) We did not come here to learn life, but to receive knowledge (Focus Group 1, June 8, 2011)

Overall, the contestations around student choice and teacher–student relationships revealed that faculty's postsocialist preferences for guarantees do not match the students' desire for choice, promoted by international organizations. Hierarchies and unequal distribution of power embedded in Russian universities do not align well with the liberal democratic values entailed in choice promoted by the Bologna process. It is important to note, however, that even though implicit knowledge described above may appear problematic, research on educational quality in educational contexts showed that the less choice students have, the more coherent is the

education they receive (Cummings, 2003). When students have choice, they tend to abuse it, so that they could take an easier class or get a higher grade (Cusick, 1983). While hierarchical relationship structures can be quite problematic, neoliberal casualization of knowledge (Mirowski, 2009), on which theories of students' independence and freedom of choice are built, as well as dismantling of educators' authority in educational institutions can have negative consequences for individuals, institutions, and societies at large (Ward, 2012). Despite their seeming outdated feel, Russian educators' responses to international organizations' propositions raise important questions about the changes in teacher–student relationships and in educational trajectories promoted by global discourses.

Conceptions of Education: Work Preparation or Spiritual Growth?

In this last section, I will explore how the reduction in contact hours made visible faculty members' and students' understandings of the purposes of education. Whereas about 50% of the 2000 curriculum plan for 8,434 academic hours was dedicated to contact hours with an instructor, only one-third of the 2011 curriculum plan, consisting of 8,905 academic hours, translated into actual contact hours with an instructor (Aydarova, 2014). The rest was allocated for students' independent work. Following the suggestions of international organizations and the Bologna process requirements, students' workloads were drastically reduced. Lament over the reduced hours was one of the most common topics that I encountered in informal conversations and interviews. Faculty constantly worried about how to deal with the loss of class time and wondered about how to cover the same amount of information in reduced hours. Their dedication to "preserving the content" led to the creation of ingenious techniques. One creative way to deal with the loss of hours was to let the content of one discipline spill into another that did not have prescribed content. As Valentina Antonovna explained during an interview

During the first and the second years, there are very few hours for the practice of oral and written language and so to increase the number of hours, another subject will be used for that. It is called the English language, foreign language We were thinking for a long time, what is this foreign language? It turned out that it is the university's core course. All majors study a foreign language and it is a core course. And so, we can take it and develop it in our own field. And so because there are not enough hours for the practice course, we are going to study it during the English language hours. (Interview, June 8, 2011)

Another approach involved reducing the amount of content, but that happened only through many arguments, negotiations, and much teeth-grinding. During a department meeting, I observed a 1 hour auction, albeit without a gavel, during which the adjustment of topics for the reduced hours of the bachelor's program took place. The person in charge of redesigning the curriculum called out the semester, the number of hours used before, the number of hours allocated in the new program, and the topics that used to be covered. The group called out alternative numbers or proposed reconfigurations of topics. Through a negotiation of the group, they kept basically the same topics that they always taught in that class. Instead of creating new ways or designing a new program, they simply combined some topics together and shuffled others around.

A more idiosyncratic approach taken up by a foreign literature instructor revealed deep commitments to the value of hours in education. Ol'ga Dmitrievna, who had taught at the

department for fifty years, described the reduction in the number of hours allocated for British and American literature from 100 hours fifteen years ago to 90 hours in the 2000s, to 30 hours most recently. Not willing to give up the course content—“Thirty hours! How can you? Two such rich literatures!”—she typed up her lectures, downloaded them on a CD, and assigned the ones she could not cover during class time as homework for her students. When I came to observe her classes, students pulled out “tickets” (*biletty*) with questions based on the lectures assigned for home reading on such topics as romanticism in American literature or the conditions for the emergence of critical realism in the United States. Students had several minutes to rehearse their responses, were called to sit on the chair facing the rest of the class, and spoke for 10 or 15 minutes each about the answers to the questions. Ol’ga Dmitrievna explained her practice by emphasizing how important reading is “for the edification of the soul.” Because young people have less time and possibly no desire to read on their own, she saw her responsibility as a teacher educator to expose her students to as much literature and art as she could fit in her time with them. “Let them listen, at least something will be in the air,” she explained (Field notes, May 30, 2011).

The sense of loss over reduced hours (to which I was privy when I saw the schedules displayed on the walls of the departments and unintentionally compared them to the schedule I had when I was a student at a Ukrainian university) and the lament over how to deal with it reveals two aspects of how education is perceived at the national and local level. One is the understanding that education should expand a students’ intellectual horizon (*krugozor*). For many faculty members, what sets a person with higher education apart is not simply the degree they have obtained but the breadth of their knowledge and the width of their intellectual horizon. The second aspect deals with the belief in the power of encyclopedic education to edify the soul and to raise students’ cultural and spiritual level. As I shared my preliminary observations about the role of education in increasing students’ breadth of knowledge and their cultural level, Anna Sergeevna, a middle-aged faculty member who regretted curricular changes as much as anyone else, responded:

The West is founded on greater pragmatism. What should we take from there that would be good for Russia? Because with the pragmatism, we lose the depth Russia has always been strong in its spiritual values The Western world is materialistic. But Russia has always been distinct because of its spirituality. (Interview, Anna Sergeevna, June 20, 2011)

The traditional conception of higher education as more than pragmatically narrow professional preparation runs deep in Russian educational literature. For example, in response to the Bologna reforms, Sazonova (2006) wrote, “the essential nature of the system of higher education is that it shapes a special creative environment whose sociocultural importance consists of *the reproduction of knowledge and spiritual values ...*” (emphasis added, p. 76). This connection between education and cultural and spiritual development is often missing in Western assessments of Russian educational approaches.

The desire for a broad and deep education, however, was not uniformly held across different groups. During focus groups, some students openly admitted simply pursuing a credential—the goal that became crystallized in the derogatory term for a higher education degree, *korochka*. A colloquial name for a diploma synonymous with the word for a dry crust of bread, the notion of *korochka* embodied a degree devoid of significance, content, or value. What mattered to those students was the possession of a piece of paper that would give them

an opportunity to find a job; such students often evaluated classes they were taking based on their “usefulness” to prepare them for a profession. This instrumental attitude had an impact on the interactions between students and teachers when students demanded higher grades while putting the least amount of effort and when they performed in classes just enough to get by. Answering questions or preparing reports just “for a check mark” (*dlia galochki*), “earning grades,” or “wearing out the seat of their pants” was how students referred to their classwork (Aydarova, 2015).

But even though some students’ perspectives on education heavily resembled credentialism much discussed in educational literature in the US (Collins, 1979; Fallows, 1985; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1987), many others spoke highly of the faculty that instilled in them the desire to know more or made them realize that “it was embarrassing not to know” aspects of history, art, literature, or current events.

- S5. During our Practice of Oral Language course we discovered that there is Manet and Monet.
 S1. Even if it is not useful, still ...
 S2. What do you mean it is not useful? Of course, it is.
 S3. You are told you need to know this. And you get a desire, you want, you understand that it is necessary to know this so that you can simply be ... [S4 interrupts]
 S4. We have such an amazing opportunity to explore the world not only through our native language but also through the languages we are learning. That has such tremendous potential! We can keep up with times. With Anna Sergeevna we discover what is happening in the world. We don’t watch TV, we don’t watch news. We only find out about events if our friends tell us. [But with her, we can keep up with the world] (Focus Group 5, June 7, 2012)

The ideal of an educated person with a broad intellectual horizon was attractive for students even when they displayed a very pragmatic and instrumentalist orientation toward their university education. Attraction to this ideal made some of them lament the loss of hours as well—it made them realize that they are missing out on the opportunity to reach a higher intellectual level.

When the OECD report stated that students’ heavy workloads should be reduced, it pushed for a change that redefined higher education towards more narrow professional preparation. This redefinition evoked a strong response in the educational community—a desire to preserve education that seeks to elevate students’ spiritual and intellectual levels. Policymakers appropriated elements of globally-circulated discourse, but it ran against the national and local belief in higher education not simply as professional training but fundamental, systematic, and encyclopedic preparation of a person. This led to both creative adaptations and prolonged lamentations over the loss of hours. It behooves us to consider national and local actors’ internally persuasive discourses that continue to place more significance on education as a spiritual and cultural endeavor because when hours are reduced more can be potentially lost than simply some content elements.

CONCLUSION

This paper reconstructed a dialogue between global and local actors about textbooks, choice, and hours that revealed different value orientations toward learning, teacher–student

relationships, and purposes of education. The dialogue between the global and the local is significant in foregrounding the emic perspectives that became visible because of the introduction of globally circulated policies and in revealing the struggles that the ensuing transformations produced. Educational reforms become a site of contestations, conflicts, and contradictions in which local discourses of preserving nationally and locally established practices appear to be more persuasive than global discourses of colonizing the future through standardization and homogenization. These conflicts and contestations do not simply reflect resistance to global discourses (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004); rather, they reveal alternative ideologies that can be helpful for reexamining globally circulated normative assumptions about education. Approaching these struggles from the dialogic perspective changes the point of reference that is commonly adopted in international research. Instead of assuming that participants' explanations stem from outdated or backward positions, this paper argues that these explanations provide resources for liberation from the global discourses' hegemonic hold. The struggles documented here afford opportunities for "a liberation from [global discourses] by turning [them] into an object" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348) of critical analysis and exploration. National and local approaches to education provide resources for challenging the taken-for-granted "common sense" of international reports and raise important questions about the way learning processes are constructed, teacher–student relationships are negotiated, and multiple dimensions of education are balanced.

Future research could use the categories that guide the practices on the ground to formulate questions and agendas for research that can challenge global neoliberal logic promoted by international organizations. While this study followed a critical ethnographic tradition, future research could draw on the principles of participatory action research. This would allow the findings to be liberating both for participants and for researchers by breaking the mold of the "common sense" of international organizations, Western theoretical frameworks, and other categories that international scholars often take for granted.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was carried out with the help of College of Education 2011 Summer Research Development Fellowship and College of Education 2012 Summer Research Fellowship from Michigan State University. I would like to thank Peter Youngs and Lynn Paine for their support in carrying out this project as well as Jeremy Rappleye and Bevin Roue for helpful feedback on the earlier drafts of this paper. I am also deeply grateful to Iveta Silova for her tireless care in the editing stages and to the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on this manuscript.

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