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**IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION QUALITY: A VITAL
CONDITION FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN ACQUIRING
LIFE SKILLS**

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Abstract

This paper examines the formation problem of pupils' life skills in the context of addressing the challenge of improving the education quality. Analysis by academic and methodological literature showed that the mastering of life skills by schoolchildren is primarily connected with the reinforcement of practice-oriented education. The reinforcement of links between education and the modern-life realities, a fuller account of pupils' needs and demands brought about by the necessity of adapting to social reality and the overcoming of the overly academic element in school education are considered the most important ways of improving its quality. A necessary pedagogical condition for tackling the problem of formation of pupils' life skills is the recognition by teachers of the importance of the problem, an understanding of the result-achieving possibilities afforded by the subjects they teach and a grasp of the appropriate methodological tools and techniques. To identify aspects of training teachers in tackling this task, we conducted a survey of a sizeable group of teachers of history and social studies, as the latter directly addresses the question of modernity. The survey showed that the teachers were sufficiently able to identify the basic elements of the skill set associated with the "life skills" notion. In indicating the problems pupils have in appropriating these skills and the ways of overcoming them, the teachers limited themselves to judgments touching upon the situation in education and gave little emphasis to the possibilities afforded by, and the specific nature of, the subjects they teach.

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1. Introduction

The most important task for modern education is fostering the formation of life skills in pupils and the formation of the ability to think proactively and to overcome the difficulties involved in performing learning-based and real-life tasks. Renewal of education content with a view to improving its quality can serve as the foundation for developing vitally important skills in schoolchildren.

Researchers working in the field of education-quality improvement state the importance of assisting in the development of life skills, describing them as “the capacities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enables a person to deal effectively with the demands and difficulties of everyday life”. Life skills are understood to be psychosocial competencies and interpersonal communication skills, which help people to make informed decisions, to solve problems, to think critically and creatively, to interact effectively and to organise their lives in the most productive way possible.

2. Problem Statement

In the last few years, a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to studying the possible ways of improving education quality as an important way for schoolchildren to acquire vitally important skills (DuBrin, 2016; Lazebnikova & Erokhina, 2015; New Vision for Education..., 2014; The Bridge Effect, 2014).

According to a new view of education, in this rapidly developing world of high technology and information, pupils need to possess not only skills in their subject areas but also to master a whole range of skills such as critical thinking, expertise in acquiring new ways of solving learning-based problems, persistence, willingness to collaborate (communication skills) and curiosity.

It was within this context at the World Economic Forum that researchers pointed out the insufficient development of said life skills among schoolchildren and the necessity of finding a way of filling in these gaps (WHO, 2001).

Modern educational technology and pedagogical approaches may be effective in the teaching and development of these 21st-century skills. Educational technology including learning (education content renewal), formative assessment of learning outcomes and monitoring of learning outcomes at the level of the school, region and country in order to come to decisions regarding educational policy should be integrated in the educational curriculum.

The role of tool and resource for meeting the task at hand and developing the education system, according to researchers, could be taken up by personalised and adaptive learning content, syllabuses, open learning resources and the tools for teachers’ digital professional development (Lobanov, 2017; The Bridge Effect, 2014)

In their report “How to achieve stable high-quality education at schools”, the British academics Barber and Murshed (2008) believe that high-quality education is provided by the following three factors: 1) attracting talented people into teaching, 2) effective professional development, 3) attention paid to each individual pupil.

A range of international documents on education sets out the way its quality is to be improved and describes tools and procedures that enable the effectiveness of educational systems to be improved and the

needs of those passing through the educational process to be met. Questions of education quality occupy an important place in the shaping of national education systems.

In the Incheon Declaration “Education 2030: Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning” (Incheon Declaration, 2015), the skill sets upon which a quality education system have an influence are set out: improvement of literacy and numeracy, problem-solving ability, high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills, skills associated with value systems, behavioural attitudes, health preservation and decision-making.

Much significance is attached to the problems of quality improvement in Russian education. It is noted that procedures for assessing education quality in the Russian Federation are approaching international standards. It is also asserted that the education quality assessment system being established in Russia is already having a decisive effect upon the whole educational process and is providing objective evidence regarding its quality (Kryuchkova, 2017).

The concept of “education quality” in the Russian education system is defined in the federal law “On Education”: the quality of education is a complex characteristic of educational activity and training of the learner, expressing the degree of their compliance with federal state educational standards, educational standards, federal state requirements and (or) the needs of the individual or legal entity in whose interests educational activities are carried out, including the degree of achievement of planned results of the educational programme.

Analysis of approaches towards the concept of “education quality” finds itself the centre of attention of quite a number of researchers. The majority of them consider education quality as the compliance of real educational results with declared regulatory requirements (Osmolovskaya, 2006; Potashkin, 2017). A number of researchers understand “education quality” as a level that exceeds the normative (Andreev, 2012; Asmolov, 2008). Several academics examine this concept through the prism of the key parties to education (the individual, society and the state), considering the achievement of quality by the educational process to be when the requirements and expectations of these parties have been met.

3. Research Questions

One of the ways of improving education quality is to strengthen its practice-oriented character, something which is directly connected to the formation of life skills in pupils. The practice-oriented approach in the modern education system is envisaged as not only pupils’ developing specific skills in practical activity but also those aptitudes that will further pupils’ self-development and growth, their system for building relationships with other people and wider society, their ability to work independently as well as part of a team, their ability to look for new life chances and overcome all manner of real-life difficulties with a tenacity that allows them to find new social possibilities for renewing and restoring their real-life development paradigm.

A practice-oriented approach to learning enables pupils not only to increase their motivation to learn but also to recognise the importance of the link between theoretical and practical knowledge and consequently between a real-life education and the problems that real life may pose. It is important in this to be open to new ideas, to praise and to criticism, to demonstrate creativity and independence and to be proactive in promoting one’s own stance and life interests. In such a way, the practice-oriented approach

can be understood in modern education development as “the ability to be competent” allowing pupils to “mobilise received knowledge and experience” in practical situations where it is required to be demonstrated (Varenova, 2011).

4. Purpose of the Study

An important condition of pupils’ successfully gaining life skills is recognition by educators of the importance of this task as well as their choice of adequate means and methods for performing it. The aim of this research was to bring to light the attitude of history and social studies teachers to a range of problems that were to do with the formation of pupils’ life skills within the learning process. Among the questions posed: the teachers’ evaluation of the place and role of various elements of this competency; the ability of educators to establish a link between educational content and the proposed requirements; understanding of the problems that hinder reaching the required results.

5. Research Methods

The main research method became that of conducting a survey of educationalists. The survey comprised four questions.

1. In order of importance to social relations and practice, arrange and expand upon the life skills, which are set out below, in senior pupils:

- financial literacy;
- the ability to interact with social institutions (government bodies, healthcare, education etc.);
- the ability to undergo an interview and compile a CV;
- the capacity for critical thinking;
- critical analysis of information received from various sources (media, communication with those around you etc.);
- the capacity for interpersonal interaction;
- the capacity for making an independent decision upon the basis of acquired life experience;
- the capacity for carrying out tasks at the metadisciplinary and interdisciplinary level.

2. Appropriation of what disciplinary and metadisciplinary knowledge, skills and abilities affects the formation of life skills in schoolchildren from the perspective of your teaching subjects? Expand upon and arrange in order:

- the ability to work with historical documents;
- knowledge of social behaviour models in typical and critical situations;
- critical evaluation of various versions of events and points of view on them...

3. What in education content and methods hinders the development of life skills in schoolchildren?

4. Which are the most effective ways of achieving the above-mentioned life skills in schoolchildren?

114 history and social-studies teachers from the Moscow region were polled, of whom 59% were teachers with 20 to 30 years’ experience, 10% with over 40 years’ experience, with the remainder having worked for 10 to 20 years, which means that overall it is possible to talk about substantial education experience in those who took part in the survey. The majority of teachers polled work in mainstream

secondary schools (82), grammar schools (20), specialised vocational schools (8), colleges (3) and a private school (1) in such satellite towns as Sergiyev Posad, Mytishchi, Khimki, Krasnogorsk, Lytkaryno, Chernogolovka, Odintsovo, Shchyolkovo, Noginsk and others.

6. Findings

In conducting the survey, there were selected eight significant life skills in pupils to be arranged in order of importance to social relations and practice. In first place came the capacity for interpersonal interaction (38% of those polled). To second and third place most of those polled gave the capacity for making independent decisions based upon acquired life experience and the capacity for critical thinking. The other places were filled in the following manner: critical analysis of information received from various sources (media, communication with those around you etc.) filled the 4th, the ability to interact with social institutions filled the 5th, the capacity for carrying out tasks at the metadisciplinary and interdisciplinary level filled the 6th and financial literacy filled the 7th. Last place was awarded to the ability to undergo an interview and write a CV.

It can be said that the majority of educationalists rightly gave priority to the basic skills and abilities that lie at the heart of more specific elements of life skills. At the same time, study of educational practice shows that such areas as reinforcing metadisciplinary and integrativity in learning and financial awareness in pupils are also gaining ground at a continually increasing rate (Frantsuzova & Trubitsyna, 2016; Korosteleva, 2014; Kryuchkova, Korosteleva, & Frantsuzova, 2017; Lazebnikova, 2017; Osmolovskaya, 2006).

We note that the teachers who took part in our survey do not see such a life skill as being able to undergo an interview or compose a CV as being important, which speaks of both the insufficiently pragmatic focus of the social studies course in general and of the unpreparedness of the teachers themselves for teaching students how to appropriate such a skill. We observe that the significant art of self-presentation in modern life can be aided by essay writing, in which it is required to highlight the main essential points, as well as by taking part in project research aimed at developing the ability to present one's research in a lively and interesting way. Without doubt, such a life skill is needed for progress in both the teaching and learning environment, as it is often called upon to play an important part in resolving pupils' social problems in future life.

In response to the survey's second question, the teachers determined the relative importance of separate metadisciplinary skills to be like so: knowledge of social behavioural models in typical and critical situations came out in first place (65.7% of those polled), critical evaluation of various versions of events and points of view upon them and the ability to work with historical documents. We point out that the answers received correlate overall with the data received for the first survey question, i.e. they emphasise the importance of the capacity for interpersonal interaction put in first place by those surveyed.

To the question on what in education content and methods hinders the development of life skills in pupils, these were the most typical answers (listed in descending order):

- the overload in existing textbooks of theoretical material and the small number of individual creative works;

- reforms in education directed at lowering the quality of knowledge in pupils (amongst which was named the Unified State Exam acting as a formalising factor in education);
- a lack of teaching time given over to practical exercises and the absence of practical work as such;
- the predominance of the knowledge element in school subjects;
- the detached nature of the curriculum from reality;
- old methods of working with pupils;
- the proliferation of unnecessary, in the eyes of the teachers, subjects, e.g. Fundamentals of Life Safety and others;
- the teacher's workload regarding reports;
- the absence of social experience in pupils;
- the excessive regulation in the teaching process in general.

The teachers' responses give emphasis to overall problems and deficiencies in the teaching of a subject: lack of time, reports workload, excessive regulation in the teaching process etc. Among the reasons directly connected with formation of life skills of pupils, reference is made to overly academic teaching material and its insufficiently practical orientation. Teachers by no means always see the link between modern trends in reinforcing metadisciplinarity and integrativity of teaching and the forming of life skills. One of the instructional techniques for establishing such a link could be the carrying out of metadisciplinary exercises involving the description and nature of typical life situations. The first collections of such exercises have already been issued (Ambartsumova et al., 2018).

Consequently, also amongst the ways suggested towards a more successful solution to the task at hand, educators take up the following stances: to give more attention to practical work and the acquisition of practical skills for pupils, to perform as many practical exercises as possible (up to 35% of those polled) and to personalise the education system. After which are suggestions that are to do with increasing teaching time given to their subject and reducing teachers' accountability and class sizes.

7. Conclusion

The research conducted overall confirmed the timeliness of the reforms to the education system that have been initiated in favour of the forming of life skills in pupils as the foundation for their successful everyday functioning and self-development in a changing social environment. The modern teaching community understands the importance of pupils' developing life skills. Educators are consciously constructing a hierarchy of life skills from the fundamental to the more specific. However, teachers by no means always see the link between modern trends in reinforcing metadisciplinarity and integrativity of teaching and the formation of life skills. The research showed once more that the modern educational system lacks a practical element and that schools lack links with social institutions acting as tools for enabling the formation of life skills in pupils.

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