

## On the dichotomy of teacher-centred instruction and self-regulated learning in Russian didactics

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**Abstract:** The author describes the situation of didactics in Russia from a historical perspective. He develops his argumentation with respect to three comparative studies, relates the comparison to the history of Russian didactics since the 19th century, and includes an analysis of international influences on Russian didactics. The comparison focuses on the dichotomy of teacher-centred instruction and self-regulated learning. In the light of this dichotomy, Russian didacticists have stressed the importance of the ‘leading role’ of the teacher and of the ‘teacher’s personality’. The Russian didactic tradition may become interesting for future research from an international and even global perspective since teacher-centred instruction seems to be receiving a new, positive evaluation based on empirical studies.

**Keywords:** Comparative didactics · Direct instruction · History of Russian didactics · Leading role of the teacher · Student activity

### Über die Dichotomie von lehrerzentriertem Unterricht und selbstgesteuertem Lernen in der russischen Didaktik

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Autor beschreibt die Situation der Didaktik in Russland aus einer historischen Perspektive. Er entwickelt seine Argumentation in Bezug auf drei vergleichende Studien und bezieht dabei die Geschichte der russischen Didaktik seit dem 19. Jahrhundert mit ein. Der Beitrag enthält zudem eine Analyse der internationalen Einflüsse auf die russische Didaktik. Der Vergleich konzentriert sich auf die Dichotomie von lehrerzentriertem Unterricht und selbstgesteuertem Lernen. Im Lichte dieser Dichotomie haben russische Didaktiker die Bedeutung der „führenden Rolle“ der Lehrer und der „Lehrer-Persönlichkeit“ betont. Die russische didaktische Tradition ist vielleicht interessant für zukünftige Forschungen in internationaler oder sogar globaler Perspektive, da lehrerzentrierter Unterricht eine neue, positivere Beurteilung in empirischen Studien erfährt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Vergleichende Didaktik · Direkte Instruktion · Geschichte der russischen Didaktik · Führende Rolle der Lehrkraft · Schüleraktivität

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## 1 Introduction

The role of the teacher in the instructional process is one of the central topics in research on learning and instruction (cf. the current state of research into different aspects of teaching in Saha and Dworkin 2009). The teacher's contribution to the learning progress and to the personal development of the pupils can be described and explained differently in various models of academic knowledge about teaching. These models refer to contrasting theoretical traditions (e.g. the behaviouristic view of teaching as the transmission of knowledge or constructivist approaches) or they depend on different perspectives of academic disciplines (educational psychology, curriculum studies, philosophy of education etc.). Last but not least, there are national and cultural differences regarding the models of academic knowledge about teaching and the teachers' role in the instructional process (cf. Rakhkochkine 2012). According to Pepin "... the conceptual tools that teachers possess in order to deal with their work situation depend to a large extent on the cultural (and structural) traditions of the educational environment in which they are working" (Pepin 1999, p. 50). This article therefore focuses on the teachers' role within the last mentioned dimension of academic models of teaching, and with respect to the Russian national and cultural tradition. In this context, it also discusses the nationally and culturally framed traditions of academic disciplines and theoretical traditions.

A cursory look at publications on teaching and learning in Russia gives the impression of a long-standing tradition of teacher-centred instruction, partly in combination with authoritarian classroom management. Russian and international researchers see the dominance of whole-class instruction, the orientation of teaching to the competencies of the average pupil, a lack of differentiation and individual support, and inflexible commitment to text books (Bazhenova 1987; Shadrikov 1997; Uman 2007; Meyer 2010; Holmes et al. 1995). Meinert Meyer (2010) assumes that the described state of teacher-centred instruction must be related to a lack of dialectical thinking and a technological conception of instructional planning in Russian didactics. The vision of teaching as the transfer of knowledge from the one who knows to those who do not know seems to still be dominant in Russian schools, and in Russian didactics, in spite of the change of times (Uman 2007). Parallel to that, there is a wide range of didactic research and there are best practice examples that stress the importance of the teacher's personality for good instruction (Kuzmina 1971; Slatenin et al. 2004).

Researchers in the Soviet Union regarded American and English conceptions of open education, which were based on pupils' experience and independent inquiry, as inferior to the Soviet traditional, teacher-centred instructional practice (Rakhkochkine 2010a). In contrast, there are publications that value the innovative character of Russian didactic concepts established within the social constructivist approach following the ideas of Vygotsky<sup>1</sup> (Giest and Rückriem 2001; Kozulin et al. 2003). These works focus on the development of children beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills. Finally, it is worth noting that there are networks of researchers and schools in Russia that develop and implement various forms of collective instruction meant to reduce the dominance of teachers and promote collective educational experiences in multi-age groups of pupils (e.g. Assotsiatsiya... 2012).

There is no consensus in research publications on how to evaluate the instruction practice in Russian schools and the corresponding didactic research. That is why, from my point of view, two questions arise on the basis of this first, admittedly incomplete look at the publications on Russian didactics and its reception abroad:

- Is the vision of prevailing teacher-centred instruction in Russian schools supported by empirical evidence when compared with other national traditions of instruction?
- What are the possible explanations for the findings of empirical comparative research in the light of the Russian tradition of didactics and is it correct to uphold the monolithic picture of teacher-centred instruction in Russia or does it have to be differentiated in the light of didactic research in Russia?

These two questions provide the basis for developing the argument of this paper. First, the results of three comparative studies are presented. They provide an external view of instructional practices in Russian schools. Then, these results are discussed with reference to the specific national context of education in Russia and with reference to the Russian tradition of didactics. Finally, the paper intends to demonstrate that the *intersection* rather than the *dichotomy* of teacher-centred instruction and self-regulated learning is what characterises Russian didactics.

## 2 Comparative research on Russian classroom practice

Comparative educational research has been focused on the analysis of school systems, educational practice and educational policies. Comparative didactics has mostly been busy with the comparison of curricula of the Lehrplan style (administrative documents describing the content of education based on school subjects, distribution of classroom hours for subjects etc.), with the comparison of school books and the comparison of theoretical approaches to teaching and learning. Comparative research into the implementation of theoretical approaches in classrooms has been neglected for several reasons (access to the field, costs of research etc., cf. Alexander 2009, 923 f.). It is in particular true of classroom research in Russia; only in the late 1980s did Western researchers obtain easier access to the field (cf. Glowka et al. 1995, p. 5).

For the purpose of this article, three studies from a still very limited body of empirical comparative research were selected to demonstrate the role of the teacher in the classroom in Russia in an international comparison (Glowka et al. 1995; Alexander 2001; Wilson et al. 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Detlef Glowka conducted a comparative study in collaboration with Russian colleagues from the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (*Akademia Pedagogiceskikh nauk SSSR*) shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Glowka et al. 1995). The study investigated classroom practice in three secondary schools in Germany and three middle schools in Russia. The research team observed more than 160 lessons using videography and field notes, they surveyed teachers, pupils and their parents and conducted interviews with headmasters and teachers and group discussions with pupils. The analysis of the observations was carried out in mixed national teams. But the research teams reported impressive differences and commonalities from both the German and

Russian perspectives. The German researchers found the following characteristics of Russian classroom instruction:

- a strong leading role of teachers;
- a strict focus on subject matter;
- the orientation of objectives and content of instruction on the curriculum and with principles of instruction such as science orientation and the development of a world view (*nauchnost'* and *mirovozzrenie*);
- small instructional steps in the explanation of new subject matter;
- the indoctrination of values (reference to “eternal values” and to the “cultural heritage”, emotional involvement);
- the high pressure and high speed of instruction;
- the formalisation of pupil participation (short replies, brief presentations in a ritualised way); and
- feedback addressing the pupils as persons, and by that not only feedback in response to specific contributions of the pupils (cf. Glowka 1995, p. 222 ff.).

A few years later, Robin Alexander conducted his study on culture and pedagogy. He compared educational traditions and classroom practices in primary education in France, Russia, India, in the United States of America and in England (Alexander 2001). The main research tasks were “to identify national commonalities and contrasts in respect to various aspects of teaching and learning” and “to construct a framework and vocabulary for studying teaching in general and for documenting and explaining the particular differences which emerge in the practice of primary education both within the countries and between them” (Alexander 2001, p. 534). The design of the study is similar to that of Glowka et al.: Alexander documented classroom observations, interviews with teachers, headmasters and pupils, videography, photography, and a research diary (Alexander 2001, p. 276). He visited 30 schools in the five countries and observed about 160 lessons, of which 36 were chosen for a detailed analysis (Alexander 2001, p. 276). As his main research result, Alexander identified six versions of teaching that can be attributed to the national educational traditions of the participating countries (Alexander 2009, p. 935 f.):

- According to Alexander, *teaching as transmission* describes education “as a process of instructing children to absorb, replicate and apply basic information and skills” and is most typical of the classroom practices in India.
- In France, and partly in Russia and India, Alexander saw *teaching as initiation*. This version regards education “as the means of providing access to, and passing on from one generation to the next, the culture’s stock of high-status knowledge, for example in literature, the arts, humanities and the sciences”.
- Teaching as *negotiation* can be found in the United States where it “reflects the Deweyan idea that teachers and students jointly create knowledge and understanding in an ostensibly democratic learning community, rather than relate to one another as authoritative source of knowledge and its passive recipient”.
- What typifies the English and partly US classrooms is teaching as *facilitation*. These practices are guided by developmental, primarily Piagetian, principles. Teachers pay attention to individual differences, and adapt instruction to the different developmen-

tal levels of their pupils following the principle that the ‘readiness’ of the pupils is important for good instruction.

- In Russia alone, Alexander identified a version of teaching as *acceleration* based on the idea of Vygotsky that “education is planned and guided acculturation rather than facilitated ‘natural’ development, and indeed that the teacher seeks to outpace development rather than follow it”.
- Alexander found the sixth version of teaching in almost all cultures, especially in continental Europe including Russia. He calls it *teaching as technique*. This version of teaching seems to identify the basic process of teaching referring to principles of efficiency (e.g. economic use of time and space, graduated tasks, regular assessment and clear feedback etc.) without regard to the values of a national society.

In Russian classrooms, teachers seem to apply a specific form of direct instruction. Alexander observed that teaching in Russia:

... had a strong emphasis upon the acquisition of facts, principles, and rules, and some of these was narrowly and very instrumentally directed at memorization and recall. However, we saw how teachers’ collective pedagogical theorizing emphasized the scaffolding function of interrogatory classroom discourse, and how, in practice, teachers implemented this by working publicly on the understandings of individual children until their scaffolding process was complete. (Alexander 2001, p. 558)

Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after numerous reforms of curricula, Linda Wilson, Carolyn Andrew and John Below conducted a comparative study of teacher-pupil-interaction in maths lessons in Russia and England (Wilson et al. 2006). Their results are based on classroom observation and confirm an “episodic” step-by-step structure of the lessons in Russia as found by Alexander (2001, p. 301). They also confirm a collective ethos governing the classroom practices that can be characterised by a “sense of inclusiveness, solidarity and mutuality” (Hufton and Elliot 2000, p. 118) and can be traced back to the Soviet era. However, they also found that private interaction has increased in lessons conducted as whole-class instruction. The authors conclude that this is an effect of the “humanization” and differentiation in Russian education (Wilson et al. 2006, p. 433; cf. Shadrikov 1997). Wilson and colleagues wrote:

In Russian lessons, public interaction frequently consists of an interchange between the teacher and the individual pupils, conducted in declamatory style with the remainder of the class as an audience. In such situations, the teachers’ interaction with the individual is evaluative in nature, possibly with elements of instruction, whereas for the rest of the pupils it is clearly instructional. (Wilson et al. 2006, p. 433)

We may conclude from the three studies described above that classroom practice in Russia is indeed predominately teacher-centred. But it is embedded in a broader conception of classroom instruction which may be called social constructivism *sensu* Vygotsky. The three studies also show that teacher-centredness in Russia means something different

from the Western tradition of direct instruction. They presuppose the importance of the teacher's personality and the leading role of the teacher in the instructional process.

The three studies could not directly prove that Russian teachers and didacticists adhere to a concept of social constructivism. Their categories of observation were only to some extent suitable for capturing the epistemic beliefs and intentions of the observed teachers. On the surface, the Russian *instructional scripts* seem to be similar to those devised for direct instruction in Western countries, but a closer look at the instructional scripts allows the conclusion that there are considerable differences regarding the notion of goals and methods of instruction.

Summarising the description and evaluation of the three comparative studies, a positive answer can be given to the first research question: Teacher-centred instruction dominates the Russian classrooms. However, a deeper analysis of traditions and current developments of didactics in Russia is necessary to explain these findings.

### 3 The Russian didactic tradition

This part of my paper has two purposes: Firstly, it can be seen as a country report on the national Russian tradition of didactics<sup>3</sup>. From this point of view, it is an element for the synopsis and comparative review of the development in didactics in Europe. Secondly, it provides a historical framework for the analysis of controversial positions concerning the teacher's role in Russian present-day didactics.

In Russia, didactics is a generally accepted and well-recognised branch of educational science, and this holds for both general and domain-specific (or subject matter) didactics (*metodika prepodavaniya uchebnogo predmeta*).<sup>4</sup> There are quite a few research institutes and academic schools that focus their research on didactics. General didactics is one of several academic disciplines dealing with teaching and learning such as educational psychology, philosophy of education, and sociology of education. Courses in general and subject matter didactics are obligatory in teacher education.

What and how to teach has for centuries been an element of general discussions on education in theology, in philosophy, and in educational policy (cf. Sitarov 2008, p. 254 ff.). The process of establishing didactics as a scientific discipline began in the 19th century with Konstantin Ushinsky (1824–1871) who can be regarded as the founder of Russian didactics. He called for systematic instruction, for a curriculum that matches the interests, needs and abilities of children, and for the use of teaching materials linked with the children's everyday experience and their cultural background. Ushinsky stressed the strong interdependence of language development and cognitive development, but he also pointed out that language and cognitive development are hindered if there are not enough opportunities for sensual experience. That is why he promoted the concept of pupils' "activity" and of learning by observation and comparison.

Real progress came in the second half of the 19th century, when didactics was introduced into the curricula for teacher education.

The works of Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) on didactics influenced the Russian educationalists both with regard to scientific reflection and practical implementation (cf. Lordkipanidze 1970; Konstantinov et al. 1982). Next to Comenius' didactical writings, the educational works of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) had a strong impact on

the development of Russian didactics, despite different interpretations of his work in different periods (cf. Zajakin 2004). Substantial contributions to the development of didactics also came from theoretical works and school experiments by Leo Tolstoy and Sergey Rachinsky. These two authors can be regarded as founders of the experimental tradition in Russian didactics. They established and operated independent schools in which alternative concepts of instruction were developed and tested (cf. Kerr 2005, p. 109). Stanislav Shatsky then founded his first experimental school in 1905. However, in spite of these and other progressive pedagogical works, the mainstream of classroom practices was influenced by the Prussian tradition (Eklof 2005, p. 4).

The October Revolution of 1917 led to an experimental period of didactics and at the same time to an extensive politicisation of education. The Soviet educationalists rejected the pedagogy of the Tsarist school and arranged a rapid and massive change of the content of school education:

- They accepted new, experimental teaching methods.
- Grades, unified textbooks, traditional age groups were banned from school.
- New objectives for didactics were the promotion of the child's activity by inquiry (*poiskovyĭ metod*), and instruction beyond the conventional discipline boundaries.
- The content of instruction was organised around three main topics: nature, labour and society.
- Links between instruction in school and out-of-school labour activities were established.
- New organisational forms of instruction in projects and practical work were tested.
- Collective modes of instruction in "vertical" age groups were tried out (cf. Venderovskaya 1982).

Research on the theory of instruction was part of a new Soviet pedagogy and was represented by Shatsky, Krupskaya, Makarenko, Pinkevich and Blonsky. However, due to bad economic conditions, poorly educated teachers, the unsystematic character of instruction, and the one-sided preference of the methods of inquiry, the results of the experiments were mixed. In particular, the effects of reforms for 'mass education' remained behind the theoretical expectations and behind the new requirements of the economy.

In the Stalin era (end of the 1920s–1953), the political, economic and social changes affected the education system to a considerable extent. Most of the experimental schools were closed or reorganised, leading educationalists were banned or they lost their influence. The school system as a whole was centralised, and the implementation of uniform curricula, the standardisation of teaching practices, and the production of textbooks for the whole Soviet Union were the most essential elements of this centralisation process. The 'lesson' was proclaimed to be the main organisational form of instruction, teaching in projects was replaced by verbal (frontal) methods, the content of teaching was organised around subject matter divisions, and the secondary school curriculum became quite similar to that of the Tsarist high school (*gymnasiya*) (cf. Karpov and Lisovskaya 2005, p. 35; Venderovskaya 1982, p. 40 ff.).

The main theoretical challenge for didacticists in that time was the justification of this development and the establishment of an explicit Soviet tradition of didactics. This



was achieved inter alia by the formulation of principles for the selection of the content of curricula: the historical and the scientific character of the content of instruction had to be analysed. Communist ‘partiality’ (*partiĭnost’*) and the relationship between theory and practice in the Marxist-Leninist understanding had to be accepted as a frame for instruction. The formulation of principles of instruction followed. They related to:

- the systematic character of instruction;
- a consciousness of learning;
- the pupil’s activity; and
- illustrativeness (*printsip naglyadnosti*).

Most important, however, for everyday schooling was the general introduction of a standard lesson script. Each and every lesson had to follow the following four steps: oral testing of prior knowledge, presentation of new knowledge and skills, consolidation, and homework.

All of this was rigorously implemented in schools. However, a number of problems remained: the so-called scientific character of the formation of the content of instruction resulted in a didactically unadjusted ‘translation’ of the content of the relevant scientific disciplines into the school curriculum, the activity and the creativity of pupils were neglected, and an administrative order to follow the four-steps type of lesson organisation led to a deplorable formalism of teaching (Venderovskaya 1982, p. 44).

In the 1960s, 1970s and first half of the 1980s there were three main developments in the field of didactics in Russia:

- the influence of educational psychology on didactics increased;
- the ‘optimisation’ of the process of instruction (*optimizatsiia protsessa obucheniia*)<sup>5</sup> became the main objective of empirical research; and
- Soviet didacticians began to develop new foundations for identifying the content of general education.

Vygotsky’s ideas about teaching and learning were developed with respect to their theoretical integration into didactics and with respect to their practical application in teaching (curricula and didactics for the primary school based on the work of Zankov, developmental education based on the work of El’konin and Davydov, and programmed instruction based on Galperin’s theory of the stage-by-stage formation of mental actions and concepts). Based on this psychological research, new curricula, teaching procedures, and textbooks were developed and tested in experimental schools.

However, the impact of this research on mass education was less visible; perhaps with the exception of the reform of primary school curricula in the 1960s (cf. Schiff 1972). The research influenced the definition of the requirements for lesson planning: teachers had to reflect on how their teaching contributed to the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of pupils; they were expected to formulate ‘developmental goals’ for every instructional unit (Rakhkochkine 2010b).

By the end of the 1960s, the situation in Soviet schools was influenced by two important factors. The first was the growing number of pupils who did not succeed in schools. The second factor was the increased dynamics of the scientific and technical development and the explosion of scientific information which led to higher requirements in terms



of knowledge and skills to be acquired. The ‘optimisation’ of the pedagogical process was understood as realisation of the requirement to take up “... as one single whole the problem of raising the efficiency of teaching and that of preventing teachers’ and pupils’ overwork” (Babansky 1981, p. 143).

Given the fact that ability grouping was not in line with the Soviet ideology, the efficiency requirement had to be realised by employing so far unused didactic resources in schools and classrooms. The main topics of research in didactics in this period were:

- the classification of types of lessons and the development of criteria for effective lessons;
- research on the classification and effects of teaching methods;
- the didactic foundations of polytechnical education;
- the fostering of independent work by pupils and of their self-education;
- problem-oriented instruction and the promotion of pupils’ creativity; and
- the didactic integration of curricular and extracurricular activities and other organisational forms of teaching and learning in boarding schools and in schools with a prolonged school day.

It should not come as a surprise that Russian teachers opposed the formalism of traditional didactics and developed their own innovative methods. Sometimes it took years for them to gain official approval for their didactic innovations, but then their experience was disseminated all over the country in publications and in further qualification courses for teachers (cf. Gireva 1996; Kerr 2005; Venderovskaya 1982).

In the 1970s the leading educationalists at the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in Moscow began to develop theoretical foundations for the curriculum of general education. Researchers under the guidance of Kraevsky and Lerner developed a didactic theory in order to produce answers to two main critiques of the established curriculum:

- the curriculum was seen as based on mere “past and present experience”; and
- knowledge and skills were “not enough to promote students’ creative abilities and to develop their integrity” (Dmitriyev und Lerner 1990, p. 234).

The key idea of the curricular reform was that four components—knowledge, skills, creative experience and values—constitute social experience and that, as Dmitriyev and Lerner (1990, p. 235) put it, the content of education should be isomorphic to social experience.

In the 1980s the formerly progressive, but by then outdated established didactics was increasingly criticised for ‘losing the child’, for ‘dogmatism’ and ‘formalism’, and for a growing gap between theory and practice. The critique was part of the overall dissatisfaction with the state of the Soviet school and its pedagogy. It was thus no surprise that during *perestroika* didactics was influenced by a democratic movement of deeply committed teachers and educationalists who called for the ‘humanisation’ and ‘humanitarisation’ of education (cf. Bazhenova 1987). ‘Humanisation’ meant a new relationship of teachers, pupils and parents to foster a more personal approach to teaching and learning (cf. Dunstan 1995, p. 77 f.). ‘Humanitarisation’ stood for the demand of educationalists to increase the humanities in the curriculum, thereby providing a more balanced “poly-technical” education. Homes, Read and Voskresenskava characterise the development as follows:

The goal of humanization and humanitarization of the curriculum [...] was the reduction of technocratic attitudes and alienation. The whole process of education was to be humanized by taking into account the personal qualities of individual students and teachers. The individualization of the curriculum called for syllabi to be established for different levels that took into account the different experiences, achievements, interests, and aspirations of students. (Holmes et al. 1995, p. 184)

Didactic research was influenced by a liberal law of education that provided extensive autonomy to schools through the de-centralisation of education, but also through the poor economic situation of educational institutions. Schools were encouraged to develop their own profiles and to adjust their curricula to the regional and local situation and to the demands of the school market in order to attract more pupils. The tradition of research by innovative teachers developed into an instrument of professional development for teachers who were encouraged to design their own curricula for the subjects they taught (*avtorskaya programma*). However, the large majority of the badly paid teachers kept to the traditional way of schooling.

After 2000 there are notable trends towards re-centralisation with the help of the introduction of central examinations, the centralised authorisation of textbooks etc. Influenced by international studies on student assessment, the integration of competency orientation into the curriculum is a current challenge for Russian didacticians (Kraevsky and Khutorskoï 2008, p. 133 ff.). Arkady Uman (2007) assumes that the development of didactics in Russia has reached a new stage that allows different didactic approaches to be distinguished. Following him, most of the research in didactics in the Soviet and Russian tradition can be classified into three approaches:

- didactics of the learning environment (*sredovaya didaktika*);
- didactics from the point of view of pupil activity or pupil didactics (*didaktika uchashchegosya*); and
- didactics from the point of view of the teacher's activity or teacher didactics (*didaktika uchitelya*) (Uman 2007).

The *didactics of the learning environment* emphasises the orientation to the complex of teaching and learning arrangements as a whole. Its main category, 'learning environment', is understood as a 'super category' allowing lower-level categories to be adequately placed. These categories are: the process of instruction, the principles of instruction, methods, forms, differentiation, and assessment. At the heart of this approach lies—once again—the idea of a transfer of knowledge from the teacher to pupils. However, as Uman sees it in a relatively dogmatic way, that is not in accordance with the real capacities of teachers and pupils (Uman 2007, p. 9). This then comes closest to the traditional approach and, at the present time, it is the most elaborated one; it provides the framework for other didactic approaches.

*Pupil didactics* focuses on the learning activity of pupils. Below this main category one finds the following relevant lower categories: cognitive activation, motivation, individualisation, stage-by-stage formation of mental actions, and development. The approach can be traced back to Vygotsky's research on teaching and learning and is represented by the research work of Zankov, Davydov, El'konin, Galperin, Talyzina and others. Human-

istic conceptions of instruction such as personality-oriented education are closely linked to this approach.

*Teacher didactics* then is a theory focusing on institutionalised learning processes in the context of teachers' professional activities. The teachers' own didactic system becomes the main factor for the organisation of teaching and learning (Uman 2007). The approach is linked to the research on the professional development of teachers, reflective teaching, action research, the projection, modelling and construction of instruction, assessment, and learning support.

The three present-day types of didactic research can be used as a starting point for evaluating the Russian tradition of didactics as an element in the international research on learning and teaching. But one should know that didactics in Russia has always practised lending and borrowing, just like in other European countries. Even during the difficult times of partial self-isolation and the construction of ideological barriers to the exchange of ideas from Stalin's time till *perestroika*, Russian educationalists monitored international developments, in particular in the so-called capitalist or bourgeois countries.

Schriewer et al. (1998) showed that references to international research and experience in the educational sciences in Russia varied in terms of intensity and in terms of reference societies between the 1920s and the 1990s. Thus, one can find—as shown above—periods of experimentation and the more or less direct 'borrowing' of foreign didactic ideas. This is most obvious for the period after the October Revolution of 1917 and in the first years of *perestroika*. During these periods, a strong rejection of the former, discredited practices and time pressure to provide a rapid change produced a need for alternative models of instruction. The reforms were accompanied by deep social and economic transformations. However, even in those periods the international experience was more or less critically adapted to the local traditions and resources.

One example of borrowing from the first period after the October Revolution of 1917 is the implementation of the Dalton plan and of the project method in Russian schools and the further didactic development of these approaches towards collective forms of learning (*brigadno-zven'evoy metod*) (Venderovskaya 1982). An example from the *perestroika* period is the integration of the Western ideas of progressive education, of individualisation and the democratisation of education. They were given important roles in the struggle for the humanisation and democratisation of education.

Fortunately, today there is a growing corpus of studies that provide in-depth analyses of the processes of borrowing and re-contextualisation in didactics. Zajakin (2004) analysed how Herbart's ideas were interpreted by Russian educationalists. Mchitarjan (2000) reconstructed the reception of Dewey's ideas in Russian education before 1930. Rakhkochkine (2010a) reconstructed the critique of open education in Soviet comparative education in the 1970s–1990s.

Even though my description of the present-day situation of Russian didactics is limited to the main trends, a few results can be identified from a comparative point of view. The research shows the selective character of references to the international discourse by Russian didacticists and the ambivalent nature of the international influence on the Russian tradition of didactics. The current position of didactics in Russia is similar to the situation in Germany and in the Nordic countries. Didactics at Russian academies, universities and

colleges is comparatively strong, and this can be partly explained by the relatively weak position of educational psychology (Dmitriev 1997, p.253).

Another explanation of the strong position of didactics is a historical one. It refers to the argument of Hopmann and Riquarts (1995) and Kansanen (2002) that centralised school systems make a state curriculum possible and therefore foster the development of general models of instruction. As shown above, the Russian system of education became more and more centralised during the Soviet era (cf. Dmitriev 1997, p.267 ff.), and the didactic models remained closely linked with the curriculum. We can see that Russian didacticists proved to be reliable in producing the theoretical frame for more or less identical teaching across the whole country.

An additional argument in the explanation of the strong status of didactics in Russia refers to the principle of the unity of instruction and upbringing (*erziehender Unterricht*). Russian educationalists consider this principle—as formulated by Johann Friedrich Herbart—as one of the most distinctive features of didactics.

Given the strong ideological obligations of Russian schools during the Soviet era, didactics seemed to be better suited for the ideological reforms than educational psychology. Schools had to promote the communist ideology, linking cognitive development and instruction in subject matter with the goal of the upbringing of a socialist personality.

I hope to have given an answer to my second research question. I have shown why teacher-centred instruction dominates Russian classrooms. This result of my description of the Russian didactic tradition and its evaluation from the perspective of comparative didactics now allows me to characterise the specific quality of Russian didactics.

#### **4 The leading role of the teacher and self-regulated learning in Russian didactics**

The historical overview in part 3 of my paper shows several pendulumlike movements concerning the controversial discussions about the leading role of the teacher in the Russian school system. Whereas the leading role of the teacher was largely rejected and replaced by a concept of self-regulated collective learning in brigades in the 1920s, the role and authority of teachers were strengthened in the following three decades by uniform practices in classrooms and the general acceptance of the obligation for teachers to be role models for their pupils for the purposes of communist education. In the 1960s, with the growing influence of Vygotsky's ideas in educational research, the notion of teaching as the 'steering of learning activities' was developed in the Soviet educational psychology and was accepted by Russian didacticists (cf. Galperin and Talyzina 1972; Talyzina 1975).

Based on these ideas, Galperin and Talyzina developed their theory of the stage-by-stage formation of mental actions and its application to the classroom. Since instruction had to promote the 'all-sided development' of the personality, linking cognitive development and instruction in subject matter with the goal of the upbringing of a (socialist) personality, the teacher had to contribute to this goal by functioning as a role model for the pupils. Teachers are not only teachers of subject matter, they usually have the additional function of a class teacher and counsellor so they have to take over the leading role with regard to moral and character education.

Following Vygotsky, development can only be achieved when an adult, more experienced person helps pupils act in their zones of proximal development. Taking up this argumentation, Kozulin states that the symbolic tools of instruction are ineffective if there is no adult as a human mediator between the symbolic tools needed to understand the subject matter and the learner (cf. Kozulin 2003, p. 35).

Hartmut Giest and Joachim Lompscher (2003) summarise the influence of Vygotsky's thought on the concept of developmental teaching and suggest there is a dialectical relationship between the zone of actual development and the zone of proximal development. They shed light on why the leading role of the teacher and self-regulated learning must be regarded not as a dichotomy but as complementary, dialectical elements of teaching and learning. According to Giest and Lompscher (2003, p. 272), in the first phase of the learning process pupils are in the zone of actual development and the teacher provides an environment for a high degree of self-regulated learning. The teacher stimulates the emergence of cognitive conflicts in problem situations in which pupils experience things they do not know or cannot perform. Pupils are aware of these deficits and are motivated to learn; the learning goals appear as an orientation to the unknown. In the second phase, the teacher helps the pupils achieve their learning goals in the zone of proximal development by more or less direct instruction. The phase is critical in the process of teaching since the borderline between the traditional transfer of knowledge and the guidance by joint actions (orientation for learning actions, provision of learning means etc.) is very subtle. In the third phase, the zone of proximal development becomes a new zone of actual performance, and self-regulated learning becomes possible on a higher level of development (Giest and Lompscher 2003, p. 272).

The leading role of teacher was again challenged in Russia in the late 1980s and in the 1990s when different approaches to establishing truly cooperative forms of learning and reducing the dominance of the teacher were developed. One example of this is the conception of the collective form of teaching (*kollektivnyy sposob obucheniya*) (Dyachenko 1991; 1996). It is characterised by the involvement of all pupils in a mutual teaching process in flexible pairs (*pary smennogo sostava*). The responsibility of each pupil grows since he or she has to take care of the learning progress of his/her partner. Moreover, everything that happens in the small groups has a direct effect on the learning outcomes of the whole group. This leads to the greater responsibility of each pupil. Thus, the dialectic relationship between the leading role of one who knows and can and the self-regulated learning of the pupils is made visible.

## 5 Conclusion

This article has intended to highlight the need for further research concerning the social-constructivist understanding of the teacher's role *sensu* Vygotsky for the different forms of teaching and learning, not only for direct instruction but also for cooperative and self-regulated learning.

Empirical studies on classroom practices in Russia demonstrate a considerable degree of teacher-centred instruction compared with the classroom practices in selected Western countries. The Russian tradition of didactics stresses the essential

function of the teacher's personality and justifies the teacher's leading role in the instructional process. However, teacher-centredness in the Russian didactic tradition means something different from what is meant by teacher-centredness or direct instruction in the Western tradition. The history of Russian didactics shows that a dialectical relationship or intersection rather than a dichotomy of teacher-centred instruction and self-regulated learning characterises the instructional process. The Russian didactic tradition may gain relevance for future research on a European and even global level (see Hattie 2009). We have to assume that the teacher's personality and his leading role in the pupils' learning process have a considerable impact on pupils' learning outcomes.

From the point of view of comparative education, this article mainly has an idiographic character (cf. Hörner 1993). It describes and explains the leading role of the teacher with reference to Russian national and cultural traditions. The next possible and challenging step of research could be an explicit systematic comparison of the views of teachers' roles in different national and cultural traditions with reference to the epistemological and anthropological foundations, underlying assumptions about learning theories and institutional conditions, expected and actual effects etc. Further research is also needed to explore the compatibility of different national and cultural approaches for the development of theory and practices of didactics.

## Endnotes

- 1 The transliteration from Russian is based on the British Standard 2979:1958. Endings -й, -ий, -ый in personal names are simplified to -y; ы is transliterated as -y. The translations and publications of Russian educationalists in English were used when available.
- 2 The selection criteria were: representations of different stages of school reforms in Russia (the end of the Soviet era, mid-1990s and the beginning of the 2000s), a comparison between Russia and at least one Western country, a combination of theoretical analysis of didactics and empirical classroom research with respect to the role of teachers in the classroom.
- 3 This section of the article is based on a more detailed analysis by Rakhkochkine (2011). For further information about the development of didactics in Russia, cf. Danilov and Esipov 1957; Esipov 1967; Skatkin 1982; Babansky 1988; Slastenin et al. 2004; Sitarov 2008; Vendrovskaya 1982; Monoszon 1989; Rossiyskaya Akademiya Obrazovaniya 2009). For a more detailed description of the development of the education system and of current reforms in Russia, cf. Schmidt 2007.
- 4 The basic terms of didactics in Russia are: learning (*uchenie*), teaching (*prepodavanie*), instruction (as the unity of teaching and learning) (*obuchenie*, cf. Unterricht in German), education (*obrazovanie*), development (*razvitie*), upbringing (*vospitanie*, sometimes also translated as forming or character education, cf. Erziehung in German). The term "education" is often used in different meanings, with the definitions ranging from the formal qualification as the result of instruction to the most general category of educational science (cf. Kraevsky and Khutorskoï 2008, p. 30; Sitarov 2008, p. 7 ff.).

- 5 By the mid-1970s it had become obvious that Khrushchev's promise to build communism by 1980 could not be kept. The ideologist of the Communist Party introduced the term "developed socialism" to mark the intermediate stage between socialism and communism. Optimisation can be regarded as a corresponding term in education to describe the task of the policy of education and of educational science in this specific stage.

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