

# Soviet, post-Soviet and neo-liberal: Governing Russian schools through quality assurance and evaluation

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*Policy Futures in Education*

2018, Vol. 16(4) 398–415

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DOI: 10.1177/1478210317743648

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## Abstract

This paper problematizes the dichotomy between neo-liberalism and socialism and the tendency to view the post-socialist condition as a process of convergence with ‘Western’ and ‘global’. It does so by analysing the development and implementation of a quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) policy in school education in the context of the Russian Federation. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian national QAE policy has changed greatly and currently resembles the agendas of transnational organizations in education. At the same time, the national policy and the political discourse on quality continue to draw on Soviet as well as post-Soviet legacies. Juxtaposing the case of Russian QAE policy with theoretical models of post-bureaucratic governance in education, the paper also questions clear-cut distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ governance regimes. The analysis in the paper is guided by two questions: 1) What has changed and what has remained unchanged in Russian education policy with the transition from the Soviet period to current state? and 2) How do different legacies and influences contribute to the QAE policy implemented at the local level? The brief inquiry into the history of Russian QAE policy focuses on three periods: post-war Soviet Russia, the transition period of the 1980–1990s and modern Russia. Recognizing the specific characteristics of each of the reviewed periods, the paper highlights complexities, contradictions and continuities within and between previous and present regimes of education governance in Russia. The analysis of the QAE policy implemented at the local level demonstrates the blending of diverse legacies, and the prevalence of Soviet-era practices in school governance.

## Keywords

Quality evaluation, school governance, post-socialism, Soviet, Russia

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## Introduction

In recent decades quality has become a core concept on the global educational agenda and in Russian education policy. The pursuit of quality serves as justification for multiple reform initiatives, and quality assurance has become a primary responsibility of the state in education. At the same time, the concept of quality itself is relative, linked to current educational aims (Burbules, 2004; Harvey and Green, 1993; Mortimore and Stone, 1991). National interpretations of quality are grounded primarily in historical trends, current national legislative frameworks, curricular content and specific national issues responding to local needs and problems, as well as being influenced by the quality frameworks of transnational organizations (Alexander, 2008). Investigation of the interpretations of educational quality in a certain context is a way to learn about the priorities and problems identified in education in that setting.

Changes in the interpretations of quality and ideas on how to ensure quality reflect more extensive changes in education governance. Scholars have proposed various theoretical models of governance to highlight the roles that policies concerning quality can play in the regulation of educational institutions. For example, Neave (1988, 1998) draws attention to the 'cultivation of quality' in higher education, and contrasts the 'state control' mode of regulation where evaluation of quality was reduced to administrative verification with the newer 'evaluative state' mode where evaluation functions as a steering instrument to mobilize universities to pursue self-improvement. Other researchers explore the mechanisms through which Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE), as a complex of policies for ensuring quality and accountability in education, enables continuous data production and constant comparison nationally and transnationally (see, e.g., Grek et al., 2009; Ozga, 2009; and other work by these authors). These scholars claim that QAE instruments create new forms of governance on both the macro- and micro-level, changing the political space in Europe and promoting the self-regulation of educational institutions. Maroy (2008) speaks about 'bureaucratic-professional' and 'post-bureaucratic' models of state governance, which differ in the ways they define and assure education quality.

While taking these theoretical models into account, in this article I assume a critical stance and aim to problematize the perception that distinct and entirely different governance models exist as historical realities, and that by implementing certain QAE instruments the state necessarily changes the mode of governance. I intend to highlight complexities, contradictions and continuities within and between previous and current regimes of education governance in Russia. This analysis is guided by two main research questions: 1) What has changed and what has remained unchanged in Russian school education policy with the transition from the Soviet period to the present state? and 2) How do different legacies and influences contribute to the QAE policy implemented at the local level? To answer these questions, I start with a brief inquiry into the history of QAE policy in Russia, and then proceed to analyse the conceptualizations of quality and the accounts of quality assurance practices in schools in a particular locality in present-day Russia. For the local-level analysis, I use more specific questions which are presented later in the article.

As a point of departure for the analysis of Russian QAE policy I take the 'regimes of governance' proposed by Maroy (2008), since they focus on the national-level policy in school education. In the 'bureaucratic-professional' regime the state assumes the main responsibility as guarantor of education quality, and aims at ensuring it by issuing rules and norms for all elements of the education system and controlling compliance with these.

Inspections and audits function as primary quality assurance instruments. At the same time, in the bureaucratic-professional model, teachers exercise a certain autonomy, as their competencies and careers are regulated primarily through professional unions (Maroy, 2008: 15–18). This is contrasted with ‘post-bureaucratic’ regimes of governance: the evaluative state model in which the state sets standards and then ensures compliance with them through evaluation, and the market model, to which competition and school choice are central (Maroy, 2008: 24). These more recent governance regimes are also conceptualized as new public management (NPM) (Hood, 1991). NPM principles in education governance imply that responsibility for the quality of outcomes is shifted to local ‘service providers’ (schools and teachers) that are guided by state standards, and instruments based on comparison, such as ‘best practices’ and rankings. The state motivates education providers to improve quality through quasi-market mechanisms, introducing per capita funding that empowers ‘consumer’ choice and fosters competition between schools. In this model, it is crucial that ‘consumers’ have information on the quality of the ‘providers’, which is accomplished by introducing external evaluation of schools’ quality and publicizing the results. Another NPM mechanism of guaranteeing the quality of education is by introducing performance-based funding and salaries for educational service providers, for which ‘objective’ evaluation of the quality of outcomes by the state is also essential.

These theoretical models offer important insights into the functions of QAE in education governance. However, research that utilizes these models often creates images of clear-cut distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ governance regimes. Some authors infer that NPM-istic shifts in governance signify the adoption of ‘global scripts’ (Meyer and Ramirez, 2000) or the imposition of neo-liberal mechanisms by external forces (e.g. Arnove, 2009). Seeking to develop a more complex understanding of the evolution of QAE policy in Russia, I draw inspiration from other studies of socialist and post-socialist contexts that argue against drawing a clear boundary between socialism and neo-liberalism, or viewing the post-socialist condition as a process of gradual but inevitable convergence with ‘Western’ and ‘global’. Iveta Silova (2010) claims that ‘the state of incompleteness and uncertainty is a key to understanding the post-socialist condition’ (Silova, 2010: 10), and this quality of post-socialism makes it particularly suitable for studies of divergence and difference within globalization processes. In a corresponding example of research, the study of performance audits in China, Andrew Kipnis (2008) demonstrates that familiar ‘neo-liberal’ practices of performance assessment and management in China draw on different ideological roots than those in the West. He further argues that ‘the global rise of audit cultures needs to be understood in a broad, anthropological, comparative framework, not one narrowly concerned with a critique of ideas that diffuse from the West’ (Kipnis, 2008: 286). Kipnis calls for detailed studies of local practices and contexts as particularly suitable for problematizing the dichotomy between neo-liberalism and socialism (Kipnis, 2008: 284–286). The present paper positions itself within this body of research.

## **The development of Russian QAE policy**

To make sense of the current Russian QAE policy in terms of its legacies we need to cast a glance at the education policy in Russia in the periods that are commonly viewed as having cardinal differences from one another: post-war Soviet Russia; the transition period starting from perestroika in the 1980s to the end of Boris Yeltsin’s presidential term in 1999; and present-day Russia. This section aims to highlight the differences between the education

policy of these periods, their core values and principles, but at the same time to demonstrate the complexity and continuities within and between these historical phases, acknowledging the partially artificial nature of such temporal divisions.

### *Soviet quality assurance: state provision and ideological control*

Education played a key role in the Soviet state's aspiration to build a society of egalitarianism and solidarity. Schools were to raise future citizens in the spirit of discipline and collectivity, and to provide them in an equitable way with knowledge, skills and the ideology necessary for their future contribution to the socialist economy and to the political project of communism. The 'Stalin school model' developed in the 1930s was characterized by colossal amounts of information students needed to digest, rigid discipline, ideological indoctrination and compulsory community service for students (Mayofis, 2015: 39). The state not only guaranteed the right to a free education and assumed the ultimate responsibility for education quality, but also sought to enforce this right and demanded that citizens make good use of the free education to develop themselves into efficient members of socialist society (Livschiz, 2006: 559). Every student had the obligation to study to the peak of his or her abilities, and was overseen by school workers and by the student organizations in which every student was enrolled from the first grade and the local organs of the Communist Party that had influence over parents at their workplaces. With student learning secured through these means, the focus of the state throughout the Soviet period was on training teachers, providing schools with sufficient inputs and developing curricular content in accordance with the current state needs (Kukulkin et al., 2015; West and Crighton, 1999).

The QAE policy that existed, with minor modifications, until the end of the Soviet period was developed in the 1940s (Livschiz, 2006). The decrees of 1944 'on the improvement of the quality of education in schools' introduced a five-tier grading system, examinations and symbolic rewards for outstanding results in studies ('silver' and 'gold' medals to school graduates). Until the changes in QAE policy in the 2000s, the grades of students and indicators tied to them, such as percentages of students successfully transitioning to the next school year or numbers of graduates awarded with medals, served as the main measures of quality (see, e.g., Bakker, 1999: 296). In order to ensure that this numerical data reflected the actual achievement of students, the decrees as well as official rhetorical texts of the 1940s prohibited the evaluation of school or teacher quality based on their students' grading, abolished the practice of socialist competition in education and condemned 'formalistic' grading that did not reflect the students' actual knowledge (Mayofis, 2015: 40–41). Regular inspections in schools controlled teachers 'objectivity' in the way they assigned marks:

The mark ... should reflect the true knowledge of students. When fighting the poor progress of students, one should not follow the path of lowering standards, as some teachers tend to do.

Only through raising standards can the quality of knowledge be improved. (From an article in the *Teacher's Newspaper*, 1948, quoted in Mayofis, 2015: 82)

Inspections, school reports and statistics represented the main quality control instruments during the Soviet period.

Despite the carefully sustained appearance of state control over every aspect of school life and constant progress and improvement of quality, Soviet education faced many challenges, and education policy addressed them in internally controversial ways (Byford and Jones,

2006). The post-war school worked under conditions of economic and social devastation, and state statistics registered massive dropouts and repetitions of study years (Livschiz, 2006; Mayofis, 2015). While the state lacked sufficient resources for intervention, the responsibility for these poor results was shifted to teachers, who were accused of ‘formalistic’ attitudes to teaching and of lacking the necessary pedagogical skills (Mayofis, 2015: 61–64). The development of this discourse made it possible to criticize the inflexibility and over-bureaucratization of the school system, and to call for an individualized, student-centred approach in teaching – amid a system built upon the principles of collectivism. The individualized approach as a pedagogy was promoted by collecting and studying the ‘experience of the best teachers’ (Mayofis, 2015). The fight against ‘formalistic attitudes’ also included a critique of rote learning and a requirement to teach students to apply knowledge to practical tasks, which was probably necessitated by the new demands of the Soviet economy and the military (Mayofis, 2015: 42–43). To alleviate the shortage of resources in schools, and to regulate access to higher education, tuition fees for grades 8–10 were in place from 1940 to 1956, despite the obvious contradiction of this with the proclaimed principle of free education for all. The size of the tuition fee constrained access to education for poorer families in cities, and almost completely restricted it in rural areas where residents received no monetary salaries (Korableva, 2009). The research on Soviet education indicates that structural inequalities in the provision of resources to schools were not random but consistent, and contributed to the reproduction of social boundaries and the existence of elites in the avowedly egalitarian Soviet society (Byford and Jones, 2006). These contradictions and the internal diversity enabled by them (see Kukulin et al., 2015) paved the way for transformations in Soviet education in later periods and a gradual partial convergence of Russian education policy with global trends. A student-centred, individualized approach to teaching inspired the development of ‘innovative pedagogies’ and enabled the ‘democratization and humanization’ of education discussed in the next section.

### *Transition: customized quality in autonomous schools*

In the 1980s, ideas about the tasks of the Soviet school system were greatly influenced by the political demands of perestroika and glasnost, which called for more freedom and truth in education as well as in other spheres of social and political life. Two collective actors played leading roles in introducing changes into education. One was the ‘innovative teachers’ (pedagogi-novatory) who advocated new teaching methods based on attention to the individual abilities and interests of students and evoking the creativity of teachers and students alike. Some of the most influential ‘innovators’ (e.g. Daniil Elkonin, Vasily Davydov, Leonid Zankov) were inspired by Lev Vygotsky’s theories of psychological development, which had been officially rejected since the 1930s. The methodology and teaching materials of the ‘innovators’ were disseminated through highly popular courses and seminars (Eidelman, 2007). The other agent of change was the Temporary Scientific Research Collective on Schools (VNIK) ‘Bazovaia shkola’ within the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences – a group of pedagogues who sought to implement a cardinal reform of Soviet education. The principles of the reform promulgated by this group included democratization, humanization, differentiation, openness, continuity and a developmental orientation of education. The leader of VNIK, Eduard Dneprov, became the first minister of education of post-Soviet Russia, and together with many of his colleagues from VNIK he developed the

new educational legislation based upon the aforementioned principles (Eidelman, 2007; Long and Long, 1999; Polyzoï and Dneprov, 2010).

The first decade of the post-Soviet period brought radical changes to education, which can be attributed to internal calls for change and a new vision of the mission of education, but also to the conditions of economic crisis and the severe underfunding of schools. Educational governance was decentralized, which meant that particular administrative and fiscal responsibilities were shifted to regional and local authorities, school-level management was granted more autonomy and schools gained more freedom to create their own curricula. The transition to a market economy enabled the reinterpretation of education as a service and led to the partial privatization and commercialization of the school sector. At the same time, schooling was reinterpreted as a communal enterprise that should involve students and parents, and serve the interests of civil society at large (Long and Long, 1999; Polyzoï and Dneprov, 2010).

The QAE policy was not specifically reformed in that period, but the concepts of education quality and quality evaluation practices in schools were influenced by the ongoing changes. New books on pedagogical management suggested that to ensure good management of a school its administration should define the desired educational outcomes on the basis of the identified needs and expectations of this school's customers (students, families, local community, society and the economy at large), and obtain information on whether these outcomes were achievable. Quality was reconceptualized as individually tailored and to be captured through descriptive rather than numerical indicators (Gurova et al., 2015). Evaluation of quality was understood primarily as self-assessment at the level of schools, teachers and students for immediate feedback and improvement. There was also a renewed interest in testing techniques. This interest was connected, on the one hand, to the rehabilitation of the Russian psychologists of childhood and psychometricians who were banned by the early Soviet leadership in the 1930s; and, on the other hand, by the new possibilities for the collection and processing of assessment data afforded by the development of information technologies (Piattoeva and Gurova, 2018).

International organizations such as the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and philanthropic foundations started working in Russia in the 1990s, and they recommended the reorganization of the QAE system in Russian education. They regarded the lack of standardized achievement testing that would provide commensurable statistics to the national level as a clear absence of monitoring and quality assurance policy (World Bank, 1995). At the same time, they praised the already ongoing reform efforts in Russian education policy as a whole, and attested to reformers' intentions in the following terms: 'These plans are all in the right direction and generally reflect where the priorities should be' (World Bank, 1995: xiii).

International actors offered three major sets of recommendations: 1) to introduce external quality evaluation mechanisms, primarily a standardized testing of learning achievement; 2) to involve diverse educational stakeholders in the quality assurance process; and 3) to develop new nation-wide education quality standards (Canning et al., 1999; OECD, 1998, 2007). In the 1990s, Russia also started to participate in international large-scale assessments of educational achievement. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) was undertaken in 1995 and 1999, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were added in the 2000s. These studies were of particular interest to Russian researchers of education because of their methodological aspects. Russian scholars were eager to learn

from participation in such studies in terms of both testing techniques and the sociological analysis of educational achievement (Gurova et al., 2015). While the results of Russian students in TIMSS and PIRLS were quite high, this was not the case in PISA. Low PISA scores gave rise to public and academic discussions about the underlying causes of this 'unsatisfactory' performance and contributed to the intention to develop self-made, national instruments for measuring learning achievement.

All these changes prepared the ground for a major reform of Russian QAE policy in education in the 2000s. It is important to bear in mind that it was a complex of internal and external influences that produced this reform, and to attribute it solely to the work of transnational organizations or to the will of particular personalities within the Ministry of Education would be an oversimplification.

### *QAE in modern Russia: a comprehensive system resembling global trends*

The differentiation unleashed in education and the economic crisis of the 1990s led to a rapid increase in educational inequalities that both resulted from and enhanced the overall social inequality (Kosaretsky et al., 2014). To remedy the negative effects of the radical decentralization of the 1990s and to ensure compliance with state requirements, the Ministry of Education developed 'state standards' for every level of education, and implemented procedures for the licencing, attestation and accreditation of educational institutions (Filippov, 2000). Alongside these input-based procedures, the outcome-based quality assurance tool of the national school-leaving examination (the Unified State Exam (USE) or GIA-11) was introduced in 2001. Its main goals were claimed to be greater equality through facilitating all school-leavers' access to higher education, and making the quality of school education greater, even across the country. By fostering compliance with the official school curricula, the USE facilitated the re-centralization of school education governance (Piattoeva, 2015). Another strong argument in favour of the USE concerned its role in producing 'impartial' and informed evidence for policy. As Tyumeneva (2013: xi) explains, given that there was no national large-scale assessment programme for '[s]ystem monitoring and accountability purposes, the USE has ended up being used to fill this gap', despite the fact that it was not initially designed to yield this kind of information. Having a system of standardized tests that also produces statistics on education quality was perceived, symbolically and practically, as a means of bringing Russia closer to 'modern' means of regulation.

Simultaneously with these discussions, the State Program for Education Development in 2013–2020 outlined a comprehensive system of education evaluation and quality control, comprising the regulation by the state of education activities, assessment of education achievement (GIA-9 and GIA-11, national examinations after grades 9 and 11, that can utilize different assessment techniques), procedures for independent quality evaluation and the participation of Russia in international studies (Government of Russia, 2012: 218). Currently, scores in national examinations serve as primary indicators of education quality in national and regional policy documents on quality assurance, school rankings and teacher performance evaluation (Piattoeva, 2015). Defining the required educational outcomes through the GIA, and then publicizing the results achieved by schools, became a means of enhancing the motivation of teachers, of school administration and of local and regional authorities to comply with state educational standards (the national curriculum) (Bochenkov, 2013).

Educational quality in the current policy documents is defined as the ‘preparedness of the learner’ in ‘conformance to federal state educational standards’ (Law on Education, 2013, as quoted in Minina, 2017: 184). Measurable learning results occupy the central position in the statements on quality, and multiple quality stakeholders including parents, teachers, education managers and employers are mentioned in this document (Minina, 2017). However, the setting of quality criteria is still portrayed as an exclusive prerogative of the state, which exercises quality control in input (through institutional accreditation and audit) and in output (through measurable outcomes) levels (Minina et al., 2018). Hence, the legal guise of a state with free-of-charge high-quality education has been rhetorically maintained. The main difference from the Soviet model is that the responsibility for providing quality in the classroom has shifted from the government to educational institutions (Minina, 2017: 186, 191-192).

While the recently introduced QAE instruments are analogous to those in Western societies, researchers characterize the context of their development and implementation as increasingly authoritarian. The USE was introduced in a top-down manner, as a means for accomplishing tasks prescribed by the government, and the multiple public and expert criticisms of this examination were scarcely noted. Thus, it has become a signature instrument of the ‘authoritarian modernization’ – the dominant reform paradigm in Russia since the beginning of President Vladimir Putin’s leadership in the 2000s (Starodubtsev, 2013: 52–54). The ‘mask of neoliberalism’ in fact facilitates the neoconservative turn in educational governance, which is a part of wider political processes of neo-authoritarian restoration in Russia (Minina, 2017: 193).

## **Intertwined legacies at the local level**

Studies of education reforms at the local and school level often reveal that the reform has only had a limited effect on everyday practices, that ‘new’ practices are intertwined with the ‘older’ ones or even that no significant changes have occurred in local educational governance (e.g. Hardy and Lewis, 2017; Selwyn, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). Historical studies of Soviet education also document the ambiguity and complexity of education policies and practices at the micro-level (Byford and Jones, 2006). In this section I present the observed practices of QAE and educational governance in one locality in Russia in order to discuss how the legacies of the different periods, that is, the Soviet era, the transition period and the current agenda, appear even more mixed at the local level than they are at the national policy level.

The study was conducted in the Republic of Chuvashia (population 1.3m), located approximately 650 km away from Moscow. Chuvashia is representative of a middle-sized and middle-income region with about half of its population of non-Russian ethnicity. The region has a well-developed system of QAE that received positive reviews from external evaluators and is often presented as a ‘best practice’ at training sessions for QAE professionals. The education reforms implemented in the republic were guided by a World Bank project (2001–2006). The specific case from Chuvashia examined in this research is the city of Cheboksary (0.5m inhabitants), the capital of the republic and the place where all the regional QAE initiatives originate. The term ‘local’ is used in this article broadly for all subnational levels, whereas the terms ‘regional’ (meaning ‘within the Republic of Chuvashia’), ‘municipal’ (‘within the city of Cheboksary’) and ‘school’ are applied to provide more specific identifications within the realm of ‘local’.



The research material analysed for this article includes observation notes, interviews and local policy documents. School-level data was collected in two public schools in the same city district, educating children from lower- and middle-income families. A total of 25 interviews were conducted in schools (apart from the aforementioned schools, the heads of a further three schools were interviewed), along with 10-week observations of lessons, staff meetings and examinations. Also, seven interviews were conducted with representatives of municipal and regional educational authorities, complemented by observations of three municipal-level meetings for teachers and school administrators. For this article I analysed the local actors' ideas of quality and QAE that were voiced in the interviews, meetings or in informal conversations (documented in observation notes). The analysis was guided by the following questions: (1) How do local actors define the quality of education? (2) How is the quality of education evaluated by local education authorities and inside schools? (3) What are the main procedures connected to QAE? In the interviews respondents were asked these specific questions. I also noted the ways in which teachers and administrators presented their schools, how they answered other questions and what messages the representatives of education authorities communicated to school staff in local meetings. The results of the analysis demonstrate the ways in which different historical legacies and recent influences coexist in local practices and discourses, and how they affect the governance of schools.

### *Defining and measuring quality: emphasis on conditions, student achievement and upbringing*

The QAE policy of Chuvashia is outlined in the "Decree on the republican system of evaluation of the quality of education in the Republic of Chuvashia" (Ministry of education and youth policy of the Republic of Chuvashia, 2007) that establishes the 'Regional system of evaluation of education quality' and is reinforced by other decrees addressing more specific issues, such as teacher portfolio or evaluation of school administrators. The Decree gives the following definition of quality:

Quality of education is a characteristic that reflects the level of correspondence between educational results actually achieved and the conditions of the educational process, on the one hand, and state requirements and standards, social expectations and personal needs on the other. (Ministry of education and youth policy of the Republic of Chuvashia, 2007: 2)

The Decree continues to specify exactly what the educational results should be, and how they should be measured. It outlines an elaborate system of desired outcomes in education, grouped into four broad categories: the quality of educational results; the quality of conditions and resources; the socioeconomic context; and the effectiveness of the utilization of resources. For each desired outcome it provides numerical indicators in terms of which it is to be measured; the number of indicators totals 80.

This key regional document on QAE demonstrates an attempt to create an all-encompassing definition of quality, and to take into account and assign a numerical value to every factor that influences educational processes and outcomes to better enable the collection and processing of data for governance. However, observations and interviews at the municipal and school level revealed that local authorities use only some of these

indicators (and the factors that they represent). This was also mentioned by one of our interviewees when responding to an interview question about regional authorities:

There are very many indicators, and it is hard to guess in advance which of them will be inquired about. Here we are of a different opinion to [the experts who developed the system of indicators]. They are theoreticians, but in practice it is hard to work with so many indicators. They have not kept pace with the needs of the people. [The authorities] wish for a convenient system: six indicators rather than eighty. The education system needs simple solutions rather than new ones.

Interviewees in the locality identified fewer than 10 main indicators by which local education authorities judge school quality. Some of these indicators refer to conditions of the education process (equipment and infrastructure of the school; teacher qualifications; number of students per class; teacher/student ratio). Others relate to the educational achievements of students (grade-point average of students; average scores of students and number of failures in national examinations (GIA); number of prizes won in subject Olympiads and educational contests). Still others evaluate the non-educational impact of the school (number of students with criminal records; participation of the school in regional and municipal social events). School administrators, when presenting their schools, emphasized the same characteristics: numbers of students and teachers, school facilities, teacher qualifications, participation of students in contests and projects, scores in national examinations. A common indicator of school quality in the self-presentation was also the 'demand' from local families – school workers proudly pointed out that many students preferred their institution to neighbouring schools. When asked about the meaning of education quality, school workers talked primarily about 'preparing for life' as an alternative to academic achievement:

For me, the quality of education is when our school-leaver knows how to live in society. It is of primary importance to me. You can prepare the child theoretically, and he leaves with this big package of knowledge, but if he cannot apply this knowledge in practice, to find his place . . . [then the quality of education has not been good].

Also, all interviewees from schools said that there should be no universal scale for school quality assessment. Instead, each school should be evaluated against its own goals and conditions of work.

At the time when the observation was conducted, municipal educational authorities placed particular emphasis on the process of upbringing. An interviewee holding a senior position in the local education administration body described the everyday work of her organization as supervision of patriotic education, crime prevention activities, sports and health education and future career guidance. School administrators responsible for 'vospitanie' (upbringing) were dealing with an overwhelming number of documents that required the participation of the school in diverse activities in these spheres (competitions, performances, visits to other organizations, pupil conferences, guest lectures, etc.). Virtually every day throughout the observation period schools were supposed to either organize some upbringing activity for students, or to send students and sometimes also parents to participate in a city-organized activity.

### *Governing schools through QAE procedures*

According to the Decree on the evaluation of the quality of education, the regional system of evaluation performs several functions, including the licencing and accreditation of schools, attestation and awarding qualifications to teachers and school administrators and the evaluation of student performance (in national examinations and evaluation of policy implementation). It should also provide research-based policy recommendations to policymakers, and inform different stakeholders, including parents, the media and ‘society’, about the quality of education in the region and its different municipalities (Ministry of education and youth policy of the Republic of Chuvashia, 2007: 4–6). These functions are not performed by any single organization, but by a complex network of different organizations, each of them being responsible for a certain group of educational outcomes and collecting different streams of data. These organizations, forms of data collection and the actions applied to schools based on this data are presented in Appendix 1.

At the school level, preparing and submitting reports and statistical information for supervising organizations is an everyday activity. A secretary at one of the schools complained that in her work the number of requests for data had doubled over the last three years. A deputy head mentioned that preparing the QAE documentation has recently grown into a major responsibility that consumes more than half of the working time, and that hiring employees to deal solely with this task has become a common practice in schools of the region. In municipal-level meetings, the importance of documenting activities is regularly stressed. As one school-level interviewee formulated, documentation seems more important than actually organizing the activity:

We have prepared so many reports, analyses of events organized, and for every event we submit documents to different authorities. . . . It feels as if it is not important whether you have actually done the activity, the main thing is to report to five organizations. I would understand if it were for some major event, but, for virtually every small campaign [mesyachnik], these heaps of reports are too much.

This quote also demonstrates that the term ‘analysing’ is used interchangeably with ‘reporting’, which reflects the handling of analytical information in the locality observed. As many of the interviewees noted, in schools and in administrative institutions alike, the current education authorities in the locality do not utilize the gathered data for analytical purposes. Collection of data is needed primarily to ensure accountability, so that at every level administrators can immediately answer requests from the higher level, or prove their compliance with state requirements in case of an unexpected audit. Constant preparedness for audits and compliance with regulations is of key importance, for both schools and authorities. A school administrator reported:

If our institution somehow violates some norms, we may lose our accreditation, we may lose our licence. Hence all these monitoring studies, self-evaluation reports, all these different reports [exist] – all this is just so that the institution works as it should work by law. Do you understand? It is very serious.

With data collection and reporting serving accountability purposes, face-to-face meetings and inspections still, as in the Soviet times, constitute a major instrument of quality control

and management in the locality. An interviewee from a city education authority explained how she and her colleagues ‘always try to go out and see’ what happens in the school, or meet with school administrators on their own premises, and prefer this way of identifying problems to generating reports or data collection. Lower than expected indicators of pupil achievement, such as average GIA scores or grades, give reason for an additional meeting or inspection, and are, therefore, not treated as sufficient information for decision-making per se.

We go for... well, previously we called it inspections, it was a long time ago, when we were inspectors, meaning that we had control and supervision functions. Now we don't have those, so we go to educational institutions in order to offer methodological help. Why? We take some topic within our remit, for example, specializations in education. We make a plan, inform the management, go out and observe, from normative documents to lessons. We diagnose problems in some schools, and then, of course, [organize] a seminar for principals. ... Now there are slightly fewer inspections [that we ourselves undertake]. Supervision authorities visit [schools] quite often. But before they visit I have already assigned a specialist for this task; she goes in advance and, together with the school, checks all the documents. [She] also observes lessons, because sometimes there are [federal] tests in different subjects. She, so to say, prepares schools for these inspections.

Notably, school workers complained about the lack of assistance from the authorities. In both schools as well as at municipal-level meetings, school administrators deplored that they bear the consequences of misinterpreting state regulations, yet the supervising authorities do not provide any clarification on how to implement them. Instead, as the school staff reported, authorities would wait for the results of federal inspections, and then suggest that schools ‘exchange experiences’ and that those who successfully passed inspections ‘disseminate best practices’.

At the school level, more quality assurance procedures were observed. Apart from observations of lessons by school management (‘internal school quality control’) that have remained in practice since the Soviet times, and the preparation of numerous reports in response to external requests, school staff engage in many other evaluation activities. Teachers regularly prepare self-assessment reports based on which performance-related part of a salary is calculated, and compose personal portfolios for teacher attestation procedures. Every school should present an annual self-evaluation report on its website. Additional evaluation activities are connected to preparing students for national examinations. Since examination results bear high stakes for students, parents, teachers and administrators, schools organize preliminary tests of ‘preparedness for GIA’ (by their own means or by ordering materials from external commercial providers). And schools also conduct analyses of students’ typical mistakes in GIA. The results of these analyses are discussed in staff meetings and serve as a basis for improving teaching.

## Discussion

The current inquiry into the history of QAE policy in Russia and the local enactment of this policy have been evoked by a critical attitude towards labelling certain practices as distinctively ‘socialist’ or ‘neo-liberal’. Neo-liberalism, like socialism, lacks coherency and constancy across its articulations in diverse times and places (Collier, 2011: 250), and hence it is not

productive to apply any of these concepts in a blanket way. Rather than reducing the understanding of socialist and post-socialist spaces to simple dichotomies, their multiple and complex histories should be acknowledged (Silova et al., 2017). When reviewing micro-level studies of Soviet education, Byford and Jones (2006) conclude: 'The messy, arbitrary and contingent process of policy formation, and the unpredictable way in which policies were translated into practices, invariably introduced contradictions, confusions and uncertainties that undermined any straightforward idea of educational "paradigms" as historical realities' (p. 423).

This study highlights the complexities of post-Soviet reality by demonstrating how education policy in every period reviewed is more mixed than might be assumed if one simply compares it to theoretical models of education governance. For example, the Soviet education policy resembles what Maroy (2008) describes as the bureaucratic-professional model of governance, in which the state defines the functions, roles and specific competencies required of everyone in the system, and controls compliance with these rules through inspections and audits. However, the reality of policy development and policy implementation in the Soviet Union was far more complicated. For instance, the diversification of education, attention to the needs of individual students, interest in testing techniques, inequalities in the distribution of resources and learning from foreign sources were already in place in the Soviet era (Kukulín et al., 2015). The Russian education policy of the first decade of the post-Soviet transition in many respects resembled another model – the NPM paradigm in governance. The financial and executive autonomy of schools, their orientation towards 'customer' needs and accountability to the public, management by results and data-based management – all these policies implemented in Russia in the 1990s look as if they have been copied from the 'global scripts' (Meyer and Ramirez, 2000). However, these developments had different roots in Russia than in the Western democracies that implemented NPM in the 1970s. In England and New Zealand, which are often referred to as the birthplaces and the 'classic cases' of NPM, the transition to this governance paradigm was presented as a remedy for the shortcomings of traditional bureaucracy and a way of reducing the burden on taxpayers (Hood, 1991; see also Barzelay, 2001; Diefenbach, 2009). In Russia in the 1990s similar ideas and practices developed primarily as a breakaway from the Soviet past and as a result of an abrupt transition to market economy (for a more detailed discussion, see Gurova et al., 2015).

Attention to the context of policy development helps to problematize the identification of certain current policies as purely 'neo-liberal'. We see, for example, that the economically driven call for the applicability of knowledge does not appear only in market economies, but was also in place during the Soviet time, and that holding teachers accountable for the poor performance of their pupils while ignoring the socio-economic context is an understanding that can be found in very different political systems. In the current QAE setting in Russia that utilizes apparently 'Western' instruments, one can discern the same principles as in Soviet education policy. The new, 'soft' technology of governance through measurements, comparison and 'best practices', public league tables and incentives tied to high performance, have all added to rather than replaced the traditional 'hard' instruments of control (Piattoeva, 2015), and serve the purpose of reinstating the centralized regulation of educational activities. Equality of access to education has remained a major principle, at least in the political rhetoric, and serves as justification for the introduction of new quality assurance procedures.

The local case analysis presented in this paper demonstrates how the local conceptualizations of quality and the QAE policies enacted are loaded with legacies of different periods to an even greater extent than are policies at the national level. Definitions of educational quality in the local policy documents attempt to take account of the conditions, processes and results of schooling, and at the same time connect the idea of quality to state standards, wider societal expectations and individual student needs. Each element constituting quality is translated into a set of measurable indicators. Formats of data collection, procedures applied to schools based on this data and organizations exercising quality evaluation and assurance are manifold. Local policymakers, it seems, wanted to retain the traditional concepts of quality and instruments of QAE, and at the same time introduce new ideas, actors and procedures that can be connected to the transition period and to the recommendations of transnational organizations (one of which, the World Bank, was engaged in the development of the new QAE system in the region).

In the practices of educational governance in the locality, this attempt to account for everything has resulted mainly in the increased bureaucratization of school work. Schools bear the full responsibility for guaranteeing quality, and must, therefore, implement all quality assurance procedures that have been introduced during different periods. Instead of a transition to 'post-bureaucratic' governance, a 'hyper-bureaucratic' regime has emerged at the local level (Maroy, 2008).

At the same time, in the governance practices of local educational authorities, the recently introduced QAE instruments appear to be 'imitated' rather than genuinely implemented. Not all the performance data collected are used for analysis and decision-making, but mostly for purposes of accountability, understood as due reporting to higher authorities. The instruments of QAE that are actually used by local education authorities are still the same as those that were in place in the Soviet period: inspections, reports and metrics (now including national examination scores) that may indicate the existence of a problem and serve as a justification for additional inspections. Among all components of quality, municipal authorities pay particular attention to upbringing, which can be viewed as a legacy of the Soviet period, but is also linked by some authors to the restoration of authoritarianism in Russia (e.g. Rapoport, 2009). Highlighting the blending of diverse legacies in QAE policy at both the national and local level, and the prevalence of traditional practices in school governance, this paper contributes to the development of a more nuanced understanding of 'post-socialist' and 'neo-liberal' transformations in Russia and globally.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Nelli Piattoeva, Tuomas Takala and the anonymous reviewers who provided constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Academy of Finland grant

273874 for the research project “Transnational Dynamics of Quality Assurance Policies and Evaluation in Brazil, China and Russia” 2014–17.

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**Appendix 1.** Organizations performing quality evaluation and control at the regional and municipal level. Sources: regional policy documents and ministerial reports on the system of quality evaluation.

Organization	What they exclusively evaluate or control	Forms of data collection	Actions based on data
Regional Obradzor (regional Service for the Supervision in Education, subordinate to Rosobrazdor; The Federal Service for the Supervision of Education and Science) CNOT (regional Centre for New Education Technologies, subordinate to the regional Ministry of Education) Institute of Education of the Republic of Chuvashia Non-educational regional and municipal organizations, over 20	Compliance with national regulations in education  GIA (national exams) scores; national surveys and tests connected to particular reforms; international tests; monitoring of professional paths of graduates Attestation of teachers  Compliance with laws within own area of competence	Inspections of school documents  Statistics, test and exam results  Visiting lessons, teacher's portfolio Inspections (of school documents and building), statistical data (reported by schools)	Licensing and accreditation fines, orders  Analytical reports, seminars, rankings  Promoting teachers to higher 'categories' Fines, orders
Municipal Department of Education of the City of Cheboksary	Activities related to upbringing (patriotism, health, sports, crime prevention) and public participation (parents' involvement in school and public life of the city – participation in elections, sports/patriotic/etc., events)	Reports, competitions, meetings with school administrations and parents, parent/teacher complaints	Based on own data and data aggregated from other organizations (primarily Centre for the Monitoring and Development of Education, CMIRO) – staffing and funding decisions about schools' performance-based salaries of head teachers
CMIRO	GIA scores; national surveys and tests connected to particular reforms; all-Russia subject Olympiads Supervision of families and children with criminal record	Statistics, test and exam results  Reports, meetings with school administration	Analytical reports and guidelines, seminars and training  Reports to the city Department of Education
Police (prevention of juvenile crime)			