Exchange programs for educators: American and Russian perspectives

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International exchange and training programs play a significant role in the development of international cooperation between educators from different nations. More and more teachers and school administrators participate in exchange programs and implement new curricular and instructional practices in their institutions. This paper presents findings of a phenomenological interpretive case study of the impact of international exchange programs for educators on their participants’ pedagogical practices, social status and professional careers. The study was conducted in 2005 in the US and Russia. Through observations and in-depth interviews with 35 informants, the author compares the perception of exchange programs and their outcomes for American and Russian alumni. The findings demonstrate differences and similarities in participants’ perspectives on their roles in international programs and on the application of program outcomes.

Keywords: international education; exchange programs; teachers

Introduction

Exchange programs give researchers a unique opportunity to compare almost similar phenomena in environments with almost similar sets of variables. Unlike comparisons of social, educational, cultural, political or any other societal phenomena in environments that might be fundamentally different and thus set their own rules to determine and condition those phenomena, exchange programs, although conducted in different cultural and political contexts, are initially determined by a set of comparable regulations. If a researcher studies, for example, the development of economic curriculum in country X and country Y, he or she should immediately consider that all variables that influence this development might be absolutely different: countries X and Y might pursue different objectives in economic education, historically their economies and economic education curricula could have developed differently, let alone the cultural and political aspects of these processes. An exchange program, in contrast, even if conducted in countries X and Y, will be conditioned by fairly similar goals, development histories, criteria for the selection of participants or agendas.

Gains associated with exchange

Regular exchanges between the US and Russia, or rather the Soviet Union at that time, started after the signing of a long-titled ‘Agreement between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields’, commonly known as the Lacy–Zarubin agreement in January 1958. It should be noted that exchanges in various spheres between the two countries occurred before 1958 but those were isolated cases. The Lacy–Zarubin agreement was mutually beneficial for both countries: the US obtained a better channel to advance its policy in promoting evolutionary political changes in the
Soviet Union, increasing people’s knowledge of the outside world, encouraging freedom of thought, stimulating the desire for more consumer goods, and promoting nationalism within the satellites of the USSR in an effort to encourage separation from Moscow (Richmond 1987). The Soviet Union, in its turn, gained an opportunity to obtain new technologies and to gain access to scientific research in the west (Thomson and Laves 1963; Byrnes 1976; Richmond 1987). Other Soviet objectives were the desire to gain international recognition, meet the demand for foreign travel among Soviet intelligentsia and authorities (used in many cases as a privilege) and, last but not the least, exchanges were a means to earn hard currency (Richmond 1987, 2003).

Dramatic changes in Europe in the late 1980s and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave a natural strong impulse to a whole series of projects and programs aimed at changing, or in some cases developing anew, a system of civic and economic education in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Civic education, in whatever form it existed in the countries of the former Soviet block, encountered numerous curricular and financial problems, multiplied by its dependence on the sociopolitical situation. In this chaotic situation, the western, particularly American, experience in the organization of civic and economic education was desired (Patrick 1994a, b; Quigley and Hoar 1997).

Since 1995, with the help of the American government and private funds, a number of projects on civic and economic education were started:

- Civitas: An International Civic Education Exchange Program (Quigley and Hoar 1997)
- Education for Democratic Citizenship: A Framework (Bachmueller 1997)
- Comparative Lessons for Democracy project (Shinew and Fisher 1997)
- Civic education projects in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and projects in Poland
- Civic education programs in Hungary, Czech Republic, Russia and the Ukraine.

The primary focus of these programs was schoolteachers and college instructors who taught civics- and economics-related subjects. The role of teachers in exchange and other international programs and the impact of those programs on teachers can hardly be overestimated. Burn (1980) wrote about the multiplier impact, assuming the international program experience affects what teachers teach and how they teach. Wilson (1984) recorded a dramatic influence of international trips evidenced by self-reports of teachers from Kentucky and Indiana. According to their reports, after short-term international programs, teachers taught more accurately, authoritatively, creatively, enthusiastically and with more understanding about places they had visited. They were generally committed to passing on their knowledge to students and the community and also extended themselves to people of different cultural backgrounds.

Direct interactions and contacts with different cultures, political or educational systems and representatives of these cultures: (a) improve teaching about the visited places; (b) engender educators’ responsibilities for passing on the experience, for opening windows to the world for others; and (c) encourage them to engage in more cross-cultural encounters (Wilson 1984, 1986). Such contacts also help educators understand what it feels like to be an outsider. Merryfield (2000) has pointed out the dissonance between identity and the meaning that can occur during encounters with another culture. According to this author, ‘the lived experiences become, in retrospect, milestones in the development of a consciousness of multiple realities’ (p. 440). This recognition has led many educators to realize that the multiple realities that exist in a community or country also exist globally. Or as Wilson briefly characterized teachers who experienced multiple contacts with foreign cultures, ‘They know more’ (1983, 78).

Despite the obstacles that educators encounter in international education and in exchange programs (Begler 1993; Schukar 1993; Tye and Tye 1993; Merryfield 2000), teachers remain the key component to continuing success in international education (Leestma 1973; Burn 1990; Larsen 2004).
A critical look at gains

There are observations that are more critical of the benefits of exchange programs in education. By identifying political, cultural and educational obstacles some scholars challenge the success of the ‘West as Expert model’ (Burton 1997, 219) and call into question the effectiveness and value of international exchanges for educators. Using a dependency theory framework, Burton and Robinson (1999) argue that ‘the exportation of educational ideas from more economically developed to less economically developed countries promotes the expansion of the Western economic and political system’ (p. 25). In the authors’ opinion, the system contains pedagogical ideas and practices that contradict traditional pedagogical beliefs in Eastern Europe. Some authors (Muckle and Prozorov 1996; Stones 1996; Burton 1997; Burton and Robinson 1999) contend that cultural differences are unsurpassable in social interaction in the course of international programs. Misunderstanding can of course result in mistrust and justifiable suspicion on both sides. Muckle and Prozorov (1996) reported more than a little protest in the Russian educational press against western attempts to impose various pedagogical practices on Russian educators. They cite teachers who are ‘profoundly disturbed by the intellectual level of the projects’ proposed by their western colleagues (p. 36). Although it remains questionable whether this protest was caused by real mistrust or by a more complex and less acknowledgeable feeling of hurt pride (Rapoport 2006), some teachers and teacher educators from Eastern Europe ‘have been healthily critical of the carpet baggery of western educationists peddling pedagogical snake oil’ (Stones 1996, 5).

No doubt, participants in international programs observe foreign schools, systems of education, pedagogical practices and traditions through the prism of their own culture, political views and social practices. Nevertheless, it is more important to understand whether this exposure to differences impedes the process of educational collaboration or, on the contrary, encourages educators to reflect critically on their own established practices, expand their worldview, and develop multiple perspectives and multiple loyalties (Merryfield 1998). Culture is a code we learn and share, and learning and sharing require communication that, in turn, ‘requires coding and symbols that must be learned and shared’ (Jandt 2004, 29). Since the early 1960s, when researchers became increasingly interested in the effects of overseas technical assistance, the Peace Corps program, immigrant acculturation, cross-cultural training and foreign student advising (Wilson 1986; Brislin and Yoshida 1994; Wiseman 2002), intercultural communication competence and related constructs (e.g. effectiveness or success) have been the focus of much research. Wiseman (2002) defines intercultural competence as a construct that involves ‘knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures’ (p. 208). Besides knowledge and skills, Byram, Nichols and Davis (2001) also include attitudes as a component of intercultural competence, arguing that the ‘foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of intercultural speaker and mediator’ (p. 5).

Intercultural communication is a very important component of international education and a key aspect in any international exchange program. Obviously, success or failure of international programs often depend on the intercultural competence of guests and hosts and also on their ability to communicate effectively. Zsiray, Parsegova and Eltseva (2001) reported how, despite curricular and cultural differences, mutual understanding and the ability to communicate helped a group of American students and teachers find friends in one Russian school. Bergelson (2003) studied Russian basic cultural values and workplace communication styles from the point of view of patterns that determine specific features of cross-cultural communication in Russia. She argued that a number of problems in communication with Russian speakers are caused by wrongly interpreted principle of politeness. Wilson (1986) reported how effective intercultural communication and experience in interaction with other cultures helped returnee Peace Corps volunteers to
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become effective social studies teachers. Quashiga and Wilson (2001) demonstrated in their talk the importance for educators to respect other cultures and to be involved in productive intercultural communication processes. Hahn (2001) focused her attention on the significance of an effective and fruitful interaction between American social studies teachers and their counterparts in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Only through means of intercultural communication could American teachers transfer best practices in citizenship and democratic education to their European colleagues.

Empirical study

The views of American and Russian participants in international exchange and training programs in civic education relating to program outcomes and their roles in those programs were examined. The study also looked at the experiences of participants during their respective programs and discusses the possible reasons for those interpretations.

The data for this study were collected in the course of a project that explored the impact of international exchange and training programs on pedagogical practices. The data were collected by means of in-depth ‘life history’-type interviews in the US and Russia. The findings are presented and discussed in comparative perspective around the emerged themes, so that the reader can distinguish specific aspects in the views and opinions of American and Russian participants.

Method

In 2005, 26 Russian and 9 American educators, who had participated in various international exchange and training programs, were interviewed in the course of a descriptive interpretive phenomenological case study with the purpose to research the impact of international exchange and training programs for educators on curricular and pedagogical practices. The informants, who were selected through purposeful convenience sampling, were interviewed at six different locations in the US and Russia during conferences, seminars and workshops. The interview instrument was developed in the course of a pilot study and consisted of a pool of 12 open-ended questions. Semi-structured ‘life history’ type interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews with American informants were transcribed verbatim; the interviews with Russian informants were translated and transcribed. The accuracy of translation was assured by back translation and member checking.

The collected data were processed with the help of the inductive analysis method when the data were organized into categories, patterns and themes, most of which emerged from the data, rather than being imposed on the data prior to their collection (Patton 1980; McMillan and Schumacher 2001).

Findings

The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that American and Russian educators generally agreed on the positive impact of various aspects of international exchange and training programs. American and Russian informants were unanimous in stating that international programs: (a) gave participants an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills in both content and methodology; (b) helped to overcome or remove a number of negative stereotypes or old prejudices; (c) required wide dissemination among colleagues; and also (d) needed support from teachers and the administration to sustain over time.

However, in spite of unanimous support for international programs and their positive effect, the interpretations of program outcomes and the opinions about the roles of program participants
differed between American and Russian informants. Differences were observable both in approaches to international and training programs as well as in the assessment and description of their results.

**Program is an award**

A number of Russian informants saw their participation in international exchange programs as an award. They usually admitted this when they were asked how they got into a program and if they were aware of program objectives. Lori felt ‘privileged to participate in exchange programs.’ Henna ‘was happy to be invited to the program’. Jessica said, ‘I was unbelievably lucky because I participated twice in exchange programs’. If an exchange program is a prize or an award, it is not at all surprising that people expect some dishonesty and manipulation in the process of getting into the program. Tammy was among those who questioned to what extent the distribution of placements in exchange programs was impartial; she did not even want to apply because she was sure that all placements had been decided upon long before the application process.

Several Russian informants admitted they had had a very vague idea about the objectives of their programs. Program goals were described in very general and obscure terms: ‘to learn more about American education’, ‘to experience American democracy in action’ or ‘to observe classes in history and civics’. Many never asked about more specific goals. Obviously, why would one bother finding out about the program objectives if the program is an award?

Unlike many Russian informants, American informants did not perceive their participation in exchange programs as an award or prize. When Joshua was asked if he could refuse to participate, he replied, ‘I suppose the first time when I was approached I was a first year teacher and my opportunity to say “No” was limited by … the head of my department requested that I participate.’ Rupert, despite his interest in the program, did not immediately accept the invitation to participate. He changed his mind only when he realized he could leave his family because ‘they were large enough and wouldn’t put too much burden’ on his wife.

**Professional promotion**

Russian informants directly connected their participation in international programs with their upward professional mobility and job change that followed soon after their return to Russia. Moreover, almost all Russian participants reported that participation in international programs was beneficial to their social status. Several informants said they were able to start new educational centers in their regions and became directors of those centers, two informants were promoted to positions in local Departments of Education, one informant became a principal, one became Department Head, and one was invited to teach at a local university. It still remains questionable whether all these promotions occurred due to informants’ participation in international programs; certainly, in most cases a combination of factors had an impact. However, at least four informants directly connected changes in their professional careers with their participation in programs. One informant mentioned that she could hardly work in her school after what she had seen during her program in the US. Two informants said they started their centers because that was the best way to maintain the legacy of their international programs.

In contrast with reported professional and social upward mobility among Russian participants, not a single American participant reported dramatic changes in his or her professional career, although they all agreed that international experience ‘looks good on your resume’ and could potentially contribute to promotion.

Why does participation in international programs prove beneficial for alumni’s careers? The answer lies on the surface: it is because they acquired new knowledge and experiences. No doubt,
new knowledge and experiences are important factors that by themselves contribute to professional and social growth of international program alumni. But why does it only apply to Russian participants and never or almost never to American participants? There might be several explanations. To understand them, one has to look more closely at some historical and political aspects of the Russian system of management in education as well as the whole process of participant selection.

According to an old bureaucratic tradition that dates back to the Soviet times when contacts with foreign countries were scarce, every business trip abroad was evidence of belonging to some special cadre. Thus, the very fact that a teacher went abroad on a business trip and not to a nearby Soviet satellite, but to the US, singled out this individual. It is not at all surprising that many informants considered their participation in international programs as either a reward or an award. Almost all Russian informants told me that they had been invited to participate in their programs. This invitation was naturally seen as a reward. It was also an award because many saw it as a step in career growth.

There is also another social phenomenon that helps understand professional or other forms of upward social mobility among Russian educators. Unlike in the US, where school principals, for example, have special qualifications and licenses, Russian school administrators or educational authorities are former teachers who were promoted to their present managerial positions. Sometimes promotion is merit based, sometimes it is the result of political or bureaucratic processes. A business trip abroad has always been a signal for promotion. It also explains jealousy on the part of colleagues, something reported by many informants. Therefore, one could observe a combination of at least two factors that were conducive to professional changes among alumni: acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the fact of a selective foreign business trip.

It seems to me that the ‘reward–award phenomenon’ serves as an encouragement for program alumni. They perceive the fact of being selected or in their words, ‘invited’ to an international program as a sign of support, in most cases justifiable support. This support, regardless of whether it is real or imaginary, inspires them to be proactive in the pursuit of their professional careers. What is equally important is that, after promotion, program alumni tended to continue to support and advance the ideas and outcomes of their programs.

Dissemination of the new information and skills obtained during programs

All informants supported the idea that dissemination and implementation of newly obtained information, knowledge and skills were key factors that determined the success of any international exchange or training program. To what extent the new knowledge and skills reached other educators and students was much more significant than the personal success of program alumni or positive appraisal of officials, many interviewees contended. Dissemination and implementation are two components of a multiplier impact that some researchers (Burn 1980; Wilson 1984) consider the essence of international exchanges for educators.

The informants disseminated the new information at teacher conferences, professional development seminars and workshops, local, regional and national conferences, teacher–parent conferences, through publications in professional papers and journals, and by organizing regional centers of civic education or participating in the work of existing centers. The comparison of data from Russian and American program participants about information dissemination demonstrates that:

- American alumni less frequently presented or disseminated their information outside their schools or school corporations
- although American program alumni were less satisfied with the opportunities to disseminate information, they, at the same time, did not focus on it in interviews
Although both American and Russian program participants considered the dissemination of information important, Russian participants felt more obligated to deliver their information to more educators, whereas American participants were more determined to use it in their classrooms, in their courses and in their communities. Presumably, when a Russian alumna(us) attempts to deliver her or his information to more colleagues, she or he thinks, ‘I was fortunate to make this trip and my colleagues hardly have a chance to see what I saw. It is my duty to share my experience with them’, whereas an American alumna(us) might think, ‘The program was fascinating, I was lucky to make this trip, but so can any of my colleagues if they want to.’

Another issue to keep in mind is that most if not all exchange and training programs for educators between the US and Russia are funded by the American side.

Though American participants did not focus on the limited opportunities to discuss their experiences, they did express a lower level of satisfaction than their Russian counterparts. Our other study (Rapoport 2007) showed that 57% of American respondents were dissatisfied with the opportunities that they either used themselves or were provided with by others to present about their programs. In the Russian sample only one-third of respondents expressed such dissatisfaction.

**Curricular and cultural information**

Almost all Russian informants reported that, in the course of their international programs, they expected to obtain (and eventually obtained) information about new educational methods, approaches and techniques in their respective subject areas, information about new curricula and new content in their subject areas, as well as information about the culture and history of the host country. Thus, Russian participants in international programs were interested in obtaining both curricular and cultural information. American informants reported that they were more focused on cultural and historical information about the host countries rather than curricular information. The knowledge they acquired in the course of their programs proved very helpful in teaching courses about the countries that they visited, in better understanding culture, some political and economic aspects of host countries, the basic structure of education systems in those countries, and promoting interest in international connections among their students and colleagues. Hence, Americans and Russians initially set different agendas – why?

It seems that part of the answer lies in the understanding of preparation and training of Russian and American teachers and in their functions or roles in their respective systems of education. Traditionally, teaching methods courses in Russia (regardless of how up-to-date or obsolete they are) take place centrally in pre-service teacher preparation and in the in-service teacher professional development process. For example, many Russian teacher-training colleges require two semesters of instruction in subject methods courses and two semesters of general teaching methods courses. Additionally, a methods component is always present in such mandatory courses such as educational psychology or history of education. Instruction in teaching methods is also provided for in-service teachers through a system of methods groups in schools, local establishments (universities and institutes) of professional development for in-service teachers, and/or regular seminars organized by local Departments of Education. Also, every classroom teacher in Russia annually gives at least several so-called ‘open lessons’ whose main focus is how he or she teaches or, in other words, which techniques, methods and strategies the teacher uses, and how students respond to them. American teachers in most instances do not experience such ‘teaching methods pressure’. They have more flexibility in arranging their own syllabi owing to the absence of a national curriculum and also owing to a more concentrated course schedule.
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(every day, five days a week) in American schools. An additional aspect of this phenomenon is the role that Russian and American teachers play in their schools and system of education in general. All American informants reported that they were classroom teachers. None of the Russian informants was a classroom teacher only. Most of them were also administrators or instructors in educational centers where they instructed their fellow teachers how to teach.

Another phenomenon observed during interviews and meetings is the growing confidence of Russian educators that foreign educators are more often interested in borrowing teaching techniques and methods that they have observed in Russia. The research demonstrates, however, that this is only partly true. The perception that there is foreign interest in obtaining or borrowing Russian teaching methods is very popular among educators. Several informants in this study also made such comments. Having worked for twenty years in Russian education, I am genuinely confident that Russian education, as well as any system of education, has a lot to offer in terms of curricular composition, school management or teaching methods. However, I have not noticed this interest among American informants in the course of this study, although some modest interest in one teaching technique was expressed.

It seems to me that the ‘wishful thinking’ observed among some Russian informants is the result of two trends. First, it is the strong conviction among many Russians, as well as Russian educators, that the Russian system of education is one of the best in the world, even if the evidence does not support such beliefs. Second, it is the genuine desire of Russian educators to be involved in a real process of exchange, to be equally useful in educational exchanges. Russian educators intuitively understand that their system of education, century-long traditions and experiences do have much to offer, although not necessarily related to, for example, methods of classroom instruction. This dilemma sometimes resulted in something contrary to what was expected. One of the American informants sounded outraged when referring to some scripted lessons observed in Russia. My American colleagues and I have also witnessed staged scripted lessons during visits to Russian schools. For instance, in some history classes, students spoke in English, although teachers did not understand a word of English. Situations like this are organizational drawbacks of exchange programs.

**Opinions about administrative support**

Speculations and discussions with respect to administrative support of exchange or training programs and, even more importantly, of their outcomes emerged fairly often in the interviews with Russian informants. Whether they talked about professional promotion or dissemination of the obtained information or relations with colleagues and administration, the topic of administrative support was always present. It became particularly apparent when Russian informants were asked about measures to keep international programs sustainable. All Russian informants unanimously stated that administrative support was critical for the sustainability and longevity of international programs and their outcomes. Many Russian educators reported that they had full administrative support for their programs, their personal efforts in implementing program outcomes, and in promoting the principal ideas of their program. If Russian informants were critical of the way a program was administered, the criticism was mild. Henna, for example, said that her school administration did not ‘stand in her way’ because they did not want to look retrograde. Irene, when asked about the attitude of her school administration to her program, sighed and simply reported that ‘the administration permitted [the trip] because it was during the school year and I had to get permission from the principal’. Lori expected her supervisors to be less flexible, and she was happy they allowed her to go and they also expressed interest in civic education.

American informants reported administrative support of their participation in international programs and efforts to apply new knowledge and experiences in their practices too. Rupert
believed that his school administration supported his participation because they saw it as ‘a good thing’. In fact, both American and the majority of Russian informants unanimously confirmed a sufficient level of administrative support. However, the reasons for this support were described differently. American informants considered it odd that their Principals or School Boards might question supporting such endeavors. Schools and school districts invested in their programs in the form of substitute teacher payment and they expected an exchange experience to be translated into a contribution to the school curricula or to participation in community events.

In the Russian case, as many informants explained, it was the matter of prestige to have one’s school involved in an international project. Participation in international programs does not usually require financial commitments from Russian schools: all expenses are normally paid for by either the US Government or American private funds, and Russian schools do not have a system of substitute teachers – teachers who are absent are substituted by anybody who is free at that time, or students can even stay in class without a teacher. However, owing to the exclusiveness and competitiveness of international programs, every participating Russian school becomes well known in their school districts, which can include 30–40 schools with 50,000–80,000 students each, as well as in their communities at large. Several Russian participants complained that, although their principals supported their participation in international programs, they did not feel adequately supported in the implementation or dissemination of the program materials.

**Conclusion**

International exchange programs provide educators with unique opportunities to learn directly about new cultures and educational systems. Exposure to the new and unfamiliar requires cultural sensitivity, understanding and broadmindedness. In an era of almost universal globalization, education still remains one of the most culturally determined spheres of human activity deeply rooted in the traditions of existing systems. Data collected from interviews with American and Russian participants in international exchange and training programs demonstrated that there were differences in the understanding and perception of various phenomena that participants experienced in the course of their programs. The way in which the informants interpreted their exchange experiences was closely related to the context they were familiar with. This interpretation of the unfamiliar through familiar ‘codes and symbols’ (Jandt 2004) eventually played a crucial role in the overall acceptance of the results of international programs. It is not at all surprising that, despite all the observed and reported differences, all informants in this study, as well as all participants in previous studies of international programs (Rapoport 2006), agreed that their programs were useful and successful. International exchange program developers and organizers should be aware of this situation and consider measures that might help program participants use familiar ‘codes and symbols’ for adequate interpretation of unfamiliar social or educational phenomena.

**Notes on contributors**

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