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Educational Policy Regarding Learning Difficulties and Equity in Education in the Russian Federation during the Post-Soviet Period

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The article examines the educational policy on the issues like learning difficulties, disadvantaged students, equity in education in Russia during the post-Soviet period. We analyzed the relevant changes and proposed solutions in the legislation and strategic documents at different stages in the period from 1992 to 2022. Nowadays there prospects of keeping the topic on the agenda of educational policy in the current conditions are discussed.

Keywords: educational policy; learning difficulties; disadvantaged students; equality of educational opportunities; equity.

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Образовательная политика Российской Федерации постсоветского периода в отношении трудностей в обучении и равенства образовательных возможностей

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В статье рассматривается образовательная политика России постсоветского периода в отношении проблемы трудностей в обучении, образовательной неуспешности, равенства образовательных возможностей в общем образовании. Анализируются место данных вопросов в законодательстве и стратегических документах на разных этапах в период с 1992 по 2022 годы, изменения в актуальности задач и содержании предлагавшихся решений. Обсуждаются перспективы сохранения темы в повестке образовательной политики в текущих условиях.

Ключевые слова: образовательная политика; трудности в обучении; образовательная неуспешность; равенство образовательных возможностей; справедливость.

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Introduction

All countries strive to improve quality of education, stating this as the main goal of education policy. In the discussion of ways to achieve this goal and the interpretation of the very concept of 'quality education' today, the task of realising the educational potential of every student is brought to the fore. The unavailability of high-quality education is no longer considered in terms of the impossibility of inclusion in the educational process or the restrictions on access

to educational resources. Rather, it is now regarded as the presence of students experiencing difficulties in mastering educational programmes (i.e. students with learning difficulties or who are underperforming).

In modern approaches, educational failure and learning difficulties are associated with the presence of certain circumstances that prevent the realisation of a child's potential. An important concept in this regard is the concept of 'equity' in education [38]. Fair education systems are those that en-

sure that the realisation of educational potential is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status and special educational needs [38]. The possibility of achieving equally high academic results among students from different groups (social, ethnic, etc.) is becoming a key criterion for an effective education system in the modern world [38].

Accordingly, the policy of ensuring quality education for all focuses on groups of students who may be at risk of failure or face difficulties in mastering educational programs, providing institutional mechanisms and policy measures to ensure equity [4; 35; 38; 39].

In this article, we answer the question of how the topics of children's learning difficulties, educational failure and educational equity have been addressed in the national policy on general and extracurricular education in the Russian Federation over the past 30 years.

Several aspects of the policy in the field of educational inequality and quality management in post-Soviet Russia were examined in some studies on the transformation of Russian education in the post-Soviet period [9; 30; 34; 36; 40]. However, these issues were not directly discussed in this formulation and were not applied to the specified historical period.

Method

We studied education policy in Russia at the state level in the post-Soviet period (since 1992) using institutional and historical approaches as well as methods of critical political analysis [41].

We analysed the key documents of education policy, including legal acts and strategic planning documents, among others, spanning the period from 1992 to 2022. The sources were selected using the Consultant Plus and Garant reference legal systems.

The documents were analysed in accordance with their chronological sequence for the presentation and nature of the disclosure of topics of learning difficulties, educational failure and educational equity. Each document was searched for words, phrases and sentences that reflect these topics. Then the differences and continuity in the disclosure of topics between the documents was identified.

We were interested in the following questions:

- (1) How were the issues of learning difficulties, educational failure and equal opportunities for children to receive a quality education presented in the education policy of the period under review?
- (2) What categories of children were identified as risk groups for limiting access to quality education and educational failure?
- (3) What systemic mechanisms and measures have been used to prevent and correct learning difficulties, reduce the risk of educational failure and ensure equal opportunities for quality education?

Results

In state education policy of the 1990s, which focused on issues of de-ideologisation, variability and autonomy, issues of educational success and equality of educational opportunities were in the periphery of attention. In the second half of the 1990s, the task of 'improving the quality of education' was formulated. However, the focus was not on the differences in availability of quality education or the problems with achieving a certain level of quality, but on ensuring a 'new quality' that meets the changing needs of citizens and society, primarily through updating its content [13].

Measures to overcome learning difficulties are primarily related to psychological, pedagogical, medical and social assistance to children, as reflected in the Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 867 of 31.07.1998 'On the Approval of Model Regulation on an Educational Institution for Children in Need of Psychological, Pedagogical and Medical and Social Assistance' and the Decree of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation No. 636 of 22.10.1999 'On the Approval of the Regulations on the Service of Practical Psychology in the System of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation'. This topic remains important throughout the entire period under review.

The presence of barriers to access quality education and differences/gaps in the quality of education for specific categories of children, including those related to socio-economic differentiation and place of residence, has been acknowledged in education policy documents since the beginning of the 21st century, with an increasing emphasis on addressing the problem [17]. Accordingly, the task of ensuring equal opportunities for obtaining a full-fledged education, regardless of the material wealth of the family, place of residence, nationality and state of health, is formulated as one of the most significant in the Concept of the Modernization of Education Until 2010, the first Federal Target Program (FTP) for the development of education and the 'Education' national project [28]. To achieve these goals, measures such as improving the material conditions of children's education, developing school transport in rural schools, creating an accessible educational environment and offering distance education for children with disabilities were proposed [17; 21].

The next stage of state policy began in the early 2010s. Its vectors are set by the national educational initiative 'Our New School', which literally contains the 'credo' of an inclusive school: 'A new school is a school for everyone' [11]. The FTP for 2011—2015 identified 'unequal access to quality education, which is one of the factors that exacerbate current social inequal-

ity', and 'the level of access to education in accordance with modern standards for all categories of citizens, regardless of their place of residence, social, property and health status' as key target indicators of the program [18]. The composition of measures used in the FTP and the project for the modernisation of regional general education systems remains generally the same (i.e. the development of infrastructure, transport support, distance learning and school libraries with special attention to rural schools, children with disabilities and disabled people) [16].

The most important event of this stage and the entire period under review was the adoption in 2012 of the new federal law 'On Education in the Russian Federation'. This law spelled out in more detail the powers and mechanisms for ensuring universal access to education. It also made significant steps to institutionalise special rights and special conditions for the education of children with disabilities, as well as for students experiencing difficulties in development, social adaptation and the mastering of basic general education programmes.

In 2012, the problem of schools with low achievement associated with social characteristics of the student body appeared. for the first time, as a focal point in state education policy [3; 23; 31]. Measures at the regional level to support schools operating in difficult social contexts and with low educational achievement are being launched slowly but consistently [19; 20; 29]. Another manifestation of the topic takes place in the period of 2016 2020 within the formed discourse of strengthening the role of education in the development of human capital, recognising the importance of each child's success for a country with a limited population [2; 5]. The peak of development in this area was a federal project aimed at schools with low educational outcomes, implemented from 2020 to 2022 [10].

By 2020, the line under consideration is represented in the evaluation of educational management bodies, methodological services, organisations of extracurricular activities and after-school education sectors [7; 15; 25]. The task of assisting children with learning difficulties is becoming central and thoroughly elaborated in new documents regulating the work of structures and specialists in the service of practical psychology in education [8; 24; 26].

During the entire period under review, the composition of risk groups of restricted access to quality education experiences the following changes: children from rural and remote territories, children of minority and indigenous peoples, children with disabilities, children from low-income and socially disadvantaged families, children in difficult life situations, orphans and children without parental care. However, at no stage does the policy cover all groups nor does it include children from migrant families. The dominant discourse is mostly negative in nature [12].

The policy on children with disabilities, children with special educational needs and children from rural areas is most consistent and institutionalised. To a lesser extent, this likewise applies to children from low-income families. The group of indigenous children included in the policy in the early 2000s was no longer considered a target group for the policy. There is a weakening focus on considering the cultural and linguistic characteristics of children that affect their educational achievements.

The very idea of the diversity of categories of children and their needs in education and the importance of its inclusion in education policy is inconsistently articulated in policy documents. Pointing out the different needs and interests of children is widespread, but conceptually, the topic of diversity is not initially integrated into the Russian education policy agenda. Moreover, at this stage, it is increasingly interpreted in a

negative way as an element of globalisation politics.

The educational inclusion framework is used in a narrow interpretation only for the category of children with disabilities. The modern framework of inclusion, which focuses not on the integration of individual groups but on providing access to high-quality education for every child by taking into account their individual characteristics, has not received official recognition.

Projects and programs did not include measures aimed at supporting vulnerable groups with learning difficulties to overcome difficulties and achieve high educational achievements, for example, assistance in preschool education, remedial education, extended education and 'second chance' programmes.

As for the main directions of institutionalisation of mechanisms for ensuring equal opportunities to obtain high-quality education, the institutionalisation of adaptive educational programs and the approval of the Federal State Educational Standard for Students with disabilities should be noted in terms of educational standards for disabled children [32].

In the area of teacher training and professional development, the Federal Standard of Higher Education- the Bachelor's Degree in Teacher Education does not include detailed requirements for preparing a teacher to work with students in the classroom, taking into account differences in opportunities and diversity. Rather, we formulate general expectations regarding the teacher's ability to use the technologies necessary for personalised learning, including for students with special educational needs, in their professional activities. In turn, the 'Teacher' Professional Standard guite clearly focuses on the use of special approaches and technologies 'in order to include all students in the educational process'. This encompasses those with special educational needs, such as those for whom Russian is not their native language, with disabilities, socially vulnerable, in difficult life situations, migrant children, orphaned children, children with behavioural deviations and children with addictions [22]. However, this standard does not include programs involving teachers in rural schools ('Zemsky Uchitel' and regional initiatives). Systematic measures to support teachers working with children at risk of educational failure and learning difficulties were not implemented, despite the fact that this topic was outlined in the Presidential Decree of 2012 [31].

The financing system of educational organisations includes specific features related to small rural and remote schools, children with disabilities and schools for indigenous children. However, it does not reflect aspects such as the social composition of schools, the social and cultural characteristics of students and the level of deprivation of territories, among many others, all of which are generally recognised in the world [39; 42].

In the quality assessment system, the introduction of the Unified State Exam at a certain stage became an important tool for ensuring equal opportunities for higher education and supporting educational mobility, but it had contradictory consequences in terms of ensuring the quality of education of vulnerable groups and addressing the gaps in educational achievements of students from different social groups at the school level.

In terms of the school stratification system and educational tracks, the Russian education system began in the 1990s by increasing the level of segregation and selection but then moved towards reducing these elements in the system (free school choice, types of schools, e.g. gymnasiums, lyceums, etc.) without using positive discrimination mechanisms.

The weak point of education policy throughout the entire period under review remains the lack of data reflecting differences in the quality of education for different groups of students. At the previous stage, a significant incentive to pay attention to the problem of educational failure and the differences in the quality of education was Russia's participation in international comparative studies of the quality of education and an analysis of the results. These studies primarily focused on the proportion of children who do not reach the basic level of functional literacy, as well as on differences in the quality of education and socio-economic status [1; 14].

In the context of the Russian Federation's withdrawal from international studies of the quality of education, it is important to maintain a focus on groups of students and schools with low results in complex social contexts in the current quality assessment system. An essential condition for keeping the topic on the agenda of education policy is the inclusion of data and indicators of the socio-economic status of students in the structure of the national quality assessment system. In the presentation of data from the national and regional monitoring of the quality of education, there are no sections of analysis by student category, which allow us to conclude that differences in educational outcomes are related to the characteristics of these groups.

Currently, Russia is experiencing a change in the vector of education policy from global world standards towards a sovereign educational system and a nationally oriented policy. At the same time, the process of constructing original national performance standards, success rates and evaluation criteria has not yet been completed. 'The entry of the Russian Federation into the top ten countries of the world in terms of the quality of general education' is retained as a target for the 'Education' national project.

The 'School of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation' concept, approved in 2022, is considered as a mechanism for implementing the basic principle of the Russian education system. Formulated

by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, the principle states: 'Access to quality education for every child in accordance with their interests and abilities, and regardless of where they live — in a city or village, in Moscow or any other region of the country, regardless of where they study-in a public school or a private one, and, of course, regardless of the social status and income of their parents' [6].

Differences in the quality of education in the Concept are associated with heterogeneous approaches to the organisation of the educational environment, the different levels of professional competence of teachers, a variety of software, educational and methodological support, and a shortage of individual groups of teaching staff. In addition, the key solution is seen as 'the formation of a single educational space, which schools in accordance with the unified requirements for the content of training, educational work, career guidance and development of children with different needs and interests, towards the environmental conditions of child development and teacher's work' [6]. Promotion of unified textbooks and the federal educational program are also justified as measures to ensure equal opportunities for students. This approach, in our view, focuses on equalising access to resources rather than on equality to achieve high-quality educational outcomes. Achieving the uniformity of conditions, in our opinion, should be combined with attention to the diversity of students in the classrooms, which requires a differentiation of conditions and the use of various methods and content.

Conclusion

Ensuring equal opportunities for quality education and reducing the proportion of children who have difficulties in mastering educational programs are recognised worldwide as the leading goals of general education policy.

We conducted an analysis of education policies of post-Soviet Russia in relation to the problem of learning difficulties, educational failure and equity in education.

Our analysis focused on federal policy allowed us to draw conclusions about the common norms and trends of the country. Nonetheless, such a focus also has a limitation, since the main powers in the field of basic general and additional education are transferred to the regional and municipal levels, where you can find features that go beyond the national vectors. We also focused on goal setting and policy institutionalisation but did not consider the practice of applying legislation, implementing plans and specific measures, and implementing specific solutions and did not provide data on their impact and effectiveness. We consider these subjects as prospects for continuing our research.

The analysis showed that the task of ensuring access to quality education in post-Soviet education policy, regardless of social status and place of residence, has been set since the beginning of the 21st century and occupies a significant place at all subsequent stages. The most consistent and large-scale policy was implemented in relation to children with disabilities and children from rural areas. Since 2013, the policy has focused on students from families with a low socio-economic status and the schools where they are concentrated, but the institutionalisation of this area has not been completed. The initially higher level of attention towards indigenous students has decreased. The educational opportunities of children from migrant families have not become the target group for support.

The institutionalisation process of the mechanisms for ensuring equal opportunities to obtain quality education was launched, but it did not cover all significant sectors with the necessary depth (curriculum, financing, staff policy, the quality assessment system and the psychological, medical and social support systems).

Throughout this period of time, the policy was dominated by a 'weak interpretation' of the concept of the equality of educational opportunities and equity in education, that is, the possibility of access to resources, by taking into account the characteristics of student groups [33]. Despite the fact that the issue of gaps in the level of educational achievements of different student groups is addressed in one way or another, the tasks and measures for preventing its occurrence and reducing it are practically not formulated. Measures to overcome learning difficulties are primarily associated with psychological, pedagogical and medical and social assistance to children, and in recent years, with methodological support from teachers. Social risk factors for learning difficulties and educational failure remain unaddressed. The problem of learning difficulties continues to be considered as localised at the school level, where teachers and parents shift responsibility towards each other. This perspective does not recognise its impact on the system as a whole and the socio-cultural contexts of its functioning. Thus, a balance of responsibility should be built between authorities and management at all levels.

In our opinion, promoting a 'strong interpretation' of equal educational opportunities (i.e. achieving high results for all) makes the concept of fair education a promising task and meets the national interests of the country, including its traditions, both cultural and pedagogical.

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