

# **TEACHERS, TEACHING AND LEARNING IN KYRGYZSTAN**

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## **Introduction**

Since the restoration of Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, there have been cardinal changes not only in political, economic and social affairs in the country, but also in education. Because processes of change in any area, including education, depend on changes in individuals - changes which take place only slowly - it is important for us to analyze previous experiences and previous systems very carefully. That is all the more important because many of the phenomena which we encounter today are the consequences of things which have been done in the past.

The most important element in any educational system is the teacher and his or her activities in the classroom. The teacher is the person who creates links between a student's movement toward the future, stability and expanded knowledge. If, therefore, we wish to understand a teacher as a critically important factor during a period of change not only in schools, but in society at large, we must analyze the situation with teachers, teaching and learning in Kyrgyzstan.

This article reviews the existing problems which teachers face. The author analyzes the existing situation, looks at possible developments in the future, discusses opportunities for more active teachers to engage in professional growth, and makes recommendations about how the situation can be improved.

The future of the country to a large extent depends on the level of education which exists in its population. Of importance are overall trends in the development of education, as well as the development of schools. In truth, we can say that the future of our country depends to a very great extent on that which happens in the classroom. There, the person who shapes and leads the process is the teacher.

The main concepts which underpin a society that is moving towards democracy today are freedom, responsibility, the ethics that are related to responsibility, creativity, cooperation, ambition, lifelong learning and one's daring to risk. It goes without understanding that only a free, creative, democratic and optimistic teacher can create a learning environment which will lead to the emergence of a critically thinking, creative, cooperative and responsible generation.

There have been great changes in the field of education over the last 10 years - new laws, standards, educational programs, textbooks, educational management structures, experience in schools and experience in the work of teachers. Sadly, the changes have occurred without the construction of a logical process for solving problems. The management of change must begin with an evaluation of previous experiences and the present-day situation. There must be an understanding of what must change, why it must change, who will implement the change and how the change will come about.

International projects are of great importance when it comes to the process of

change in education and the work of teachers. These are projects in which Kyrgyzstan's pedagogical universities, school leaders and teachers, school board employees, people from the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education and Science and methodology specialists have all been involved. Vertical and horizontal cooperation networks have been formed, and schools from many parts of Kyrgyzstan have been involved in various projects.

One part of these projects has involved research work about the essence of educational changes, the need for such changes and the prospects for further developments in this area. The main idea which has emerged from the research is that there is a need to develop conceptual guidelines about the goals and processes of change, as well as some philosophical concepts which relate to education. Indeed, processes of change are being obstructed by the lack of a systematic approach. Various things are happening in a fragmented way, and there is a lack of mutual communications and cooperation.

This article reflects thinking that has been developed over the course of the last several years as the author has engaged in project-based research work and has also worked with teachers in the context of various further education processes.

### **Problem**

Traditional views about the function of a teacher at school are no longer current when it comes to today's situation in the field of education. Students are now active partners in the process of education. They can undertake some responsibility for the learning process and the results which occur. In Kyrgyzstan, the fact that students are co-responsible for their own education has not been fully understood by students and their parents, by education specialists at various levels and even by teachers.

### **Changes in Education and Teachers**

The transfer from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system in education has been a hard and difficult process, and this has been especially true because people in the education process who grew up, studied and worked in a completely different environment must now be prepared to work under completely new circumstances, as well as to be the initiators of changes. Giving this situation, schools, teachers and the education, work and further education of teachers are of critical importance.

Changes in schools and teachers can have a wide variety of effects on changes in society, and vice versa.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan's educational system at this time is that there are a great many teachers who have been there for a long time, while young teachers, unfortunately, are few in number. This is a very serious problem, especially because modern thinking about education demands radically different actions by teachers than those which existed prior to the restoration of independence. Despite the importance of this issue, Kyrgyzstan has not developed an all-encompassing strategy about ways in which working teachers can change educational practices in schools. Neither has a system of support for the further education of teachers been set up.

Changes in the country have also brought along changes in educational laws, concepts, instructions and standards. These changes trickle down to students in the way that they have been understood by school principals and teachers. Much depends on the extent to which teachers are aware of how the changes can be implemented in practice. This has everything to do with what then happens in classrooms - teaching, learning of knowledge

and skills and emergence of values and convictions. The key element here is the readiness of a teacher to manage the educational process so that the essence of educational goals and content reach the student. Teachers must be prepared to create an educational environment in which students understand and accept new standards and values.

Kyrgyzstan's policy in terms of the development of the educational system declares that the main goal in education is to enable students to prepare for life and work in a democratic, free market society. Every element in the educational system must be in line with this goal. This means that the role and functions of teachers must change significantly. That, in turn, means that there have to be changes in the educational system, in the way in which teachers are educated and then trained throughout their careers, and in educational research.

### **The New Role and Professional Identity of the Teacher**

In order to create a situation in educational procedures where students can grow up to be able and successful professionals today and in the future, there must be changes to the entire educational process, including classroom practice. This means that teachers must learn new knowledge and skills - ones which are based on fairly different personal properties. The basis here is a move from teaching to learning. The word "teacher" comes to have a whole new meaning - the teacher is a person who encourages, who supports, who consults and who gives advice.

A teacher must be prepared for this new role, not only in the educational process but also - and this is equally important - in the development of the entire school. This means that students, too, must be ready to undertake a new and appropriate role in the educational process.

Experience which processes of change shows us that the following are the most important elements when educational processes become more democratic and when a country's society moves toward a unified European educational space:

In short, teachers must develop a different professional identity.

FROM	→	TO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching (the teacher offers information)</li> <li>• The quality of providing information</li> <li>• An authoritarian teacher</li> <li>• A teacher-centered and subject-centered educational process</li> <li>• Transfer of knowledge</li> <li>• Classes governed by individualism and competition in learning specific subjects and topics</li> <li>• Reproduction of information</li> <li>• Passive reception and execution</li> <li>• Taught helplessness</li> <li>• Inertia</li> </ul>	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning (a student who learns and manages his or her own work)</li> <li>• The quality of learning</li> <li>• A democratic teacher</li> <li>• A student-centered educational process</li> <li>• Active work by the student in obtaining knowledge and solving problems</li> <li>• A learning environment with cooperation, support and encouragement; a holistic approach</li> <li>• Critical thinking</li> <li>• Active participation and involvement</li> <li>• Initiative, creativity, independence, ambition</li> <li>• Movement, flexibility</li> </ul>

**The Basic Principles of Educational Policy in a Process of Change**

If the aforementioned changes are to be implemented, there must be support for the process from educational policy. This policy, in turn, must be based on several key principles.

First, there is the systemic approach, meaning that there must be an understanding of the fact that when radical changes occur, there must be qualitative changes in the entire system, not just in individual parts of that system.

Second, there is the holistic approach, which ensures that the relationship between causes, consequences and reactions are understood in all cases, and that each activity is seen as a part of a greater whole.

Third, there is the consideration of far-reaching prospects, which avoids a near-sighted view of elements in the educational system. This is of key importance, because education involves people, and people change slowly. Educational systems must be based on far-reaching goals and on coordinated and sensible activities.

The process of change in education is impossible if there is not ongoing communication among educational workers at all levels, as well as with the public at large. It is critically important that all of the partners in this process, especially those who have initiated the changes, understand how important communication is in reaching the necessary results.

If a country is trying to become democratic, then processes of change in the field of education require democratic management. This means that change can be proposed not only at the top, but also at the grassroots level. This cannot happen if all of the leaders of the educational process do not listen to what parents, students, school representatives and members of the public have to say about their needs. Only if the initiative of all people who work in the educational process is brought together to discuss new ideas does it become possible for these people to enrich one another and to create a situation in which all interested parties undertake a certain level of responsibility for the process and results of change.

Democratic changes in education will be possible if the entire educational process is based on the idea of a high level of professionalism. It means that democratization of the educational system and related processes requires changes in the way in which people deal with one another, the way in which vertical and horizontal contacts are developed, the way in which cooperation is put into place, and the way in which decentralization and centralization are balanced out. Democratic processes are to a large extent dependent on the ability of teachers to protect democracy by promoting the development of students who are free, creative and critical in their thinking. This means that there must be a great investment in accepting and shaping democratic values and convictions and in helping students to grow up as people who respect one another, who love freedom and who have a sense of civic responsibility.

No less important is integration in the broadest sense of the word - in the classroom, in school, at university, in adult education and in the public at large.

If educational problems are to be resolved, however, there must be appropriate research. The latest theories in the social sciences and psychology must be put to use, and there must be an understanding of how an environment which encourages people to pursue lifelong learning can be created. It is of key importance to understand concepts

and activities which have an effect on the democratic development of educational institutions. The sooner schools come to understand the importance of consultants in the educational system, the more irreversible the development of schools as organizations will become.

There must be closer links between trends in educational development on the one hand and activities in such areas as teacher training, further education and inter-school cooperation on the other hand. First and foremost, schools need a new generation of schoolteachers. There is an urgent need to decide on ways in which the teaching profession can once again be made attractive to young people. Here we are dealing with a political, social and financial problem:

1) Of importance here is the matter of whether politicians and the government consider education to be a priority. If it is a priority, then this must be reflected in laws and in decisions, including financial ones. Teachers need support, because they are not the only ones who are responsible for the quality of education. The government, Parliament, parents and students also have responsibilities in this area.

2) Young teachers must be convinced that the school is a place where they can express their creativity, self-expression and initiative, and that they will be supported by the school, by the educational community and by the government in these pursuits. This will help to increase the prestige of the profession, and it will reduce "burnout" among teachers.

3) Teacher salaries must be sufficient to underpin professional and personal welfare and growth.

### **The Essence of Change in Further Education of Teachers**

Educational programs for teachers must be in line with the functions and roles of teachers today and in the foreseeable future. These programs must create a situation in which teachers learn the necessary knowledge and skills and can shape the necessary level of competence. The educational programs must be flexible, and they must offer significant choices.

More attention must be devoted to the establishment of special programs for intercultural teachers - teachers who work in schools where children from various ethnic groups are students. These must be teachers who are open, knowledgeable and cognizant of various cultures. They can then foster mutual understanding, respect and cooperation.

The concept of lifelong learning-a concept which has become increasingly important in recent years - makes it clear that there is a particular need to train teachers for work with adults. Appropriate training programs must be instituted, and this is a process which must be financed by the state. Here we are talking about something which is far too important to rely on funding that is provided by the students themselves.

Because the management of educational processes differs significantly from management in industry or business, the people who manage the educational process require special training. This applies not only to school principals, but also to other managers at all levels, including the highest level.

Given the rapid transformations which are occurring in Kyrgyzstan's educational system at this time, further education for teachers is of critical importance. Changes are occurring not just in schools and not just in our country. Changes are taking place

throughout the world, and in every sector of human activity. Schools today must adapt to these changes, and they must also represent an alternative to various negative trends for which teachers did not have to prepare in previous times - drug addiction, street children, etc. Also of importance is the need to involve children with special needs in the work of ordinary schools.

As the goals of education change, so must the goals of further education for teachers change - the process, its content and its approach. Every teacher, no matter how long he or she has worked as a teacher, should become involved in a long term process of retraining, the primary aim of which is to prepare teachers to work in a democratic education system, to initiate changes, and to be the ones who actually shape this democratic system of education.

All of this will become possible if several critically important prerequisites are taken into account. First of all, we need educational specialists who are prepared to work with teachers as adults and who can shape the process of further education on the basis of adult education principles. Close links between theory and practice are of particular importance. The duration of training programs is also of concern. Further education today involves not just the learning of new knowledge, but also the shaping of new skills and competence. If this process is to be successful, there must often be a change in the way in which teachers think. There must be different approaches, values and personal properties.

Further education will be of benefit only if it is supplemented with personal and professional growth.

When it comes to content, there is a need to study the latest theories about communications skills. These must be introduced into the work of teachers.

Further education must also be a process in which decisions can be taken in a democratic way. Guidelines must be set out, but schools and teachers must be given an opportunity to take part in the organization of specific programs, keeping local needs in mind. All of this means that there is a need to offer and to make use of further education events in various places - at universities, at regional teacher training support centers and at schools. There are also new and varied opportunities for the kinds of events that are organized. In addition to traditional courses, there can be a variety of projects, school development programs, etc.

The fact that change is an eternal process means that further education for teachers must be lifelong in nature. Teachers are working in an emerging system of democratic education, and this is of benefit to a democratic society which is changing all the time. The nucleus in this process of change is the shift from teaching to learning. Content, program and methods are being changed, and new subjects of study are being introduced. Integration in the broadest sense of the word is what is being implemented here.

If further education for teachers is to be in line with the development of society, it is important to understand that at the center of this process is the school. Here we are dealing with teachers, school principals, students and parents, with their mutual relations, attitudes, values, levels of participation, motivations and responsibilities.

Further education for educational specialists must contain several components - professional competence, subject-based competence, personal development, various interests, attitudes and values, and the overall field of vision of the teacher.

The main aspects of improving these components include general guidelines such as a shift from authoritarian approaches and activities to democratic ones, keeping in mind the relevant goals, content, methods, attitudes, values and personal properties.

There must be changes in the way in which teachers think, act and teach. Teachers need a wide range of vision. They must understand changes in society and education, and they must comprehend the way in which the status of the student is changing in the educational system and in the educational process. Of great importance here are innovation, creativity, critical thinking, encouraging cooperation, disseminating positive experiences, experimentation, mutual enrichment, development of new skills (in drafting curricula, for example), self-evaluation, development of the school as an institution, and teamwork. No less important is the way in which the overall culture in the school emerges, and how this serves to promote change in the society which is around the school.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Situation with Teaching/Learning**

Further education for teachers, as a priority in the educational sector, requires proper conditions and a new approach to the system if changes are to occur on the ground, not just in various conceptual documents. First of all, each teacher must be given an opportunity to discuss his or her needs. The subjective and objective needs of a teacher must be brought together into an integrated whole before further education is provided. Each teacher must be able to take decisions in this area, helping in the development of education, expressing views and recommendations, and knowing that consideration will be given to those views and recommendations.

Secondly, every educational worker in Kyrgyzstan must be a truly free, flexible, democratic and creative person - one who can change and encourage change in others.

Third, a teacher must understand that he or she must undergo lifelong learning, participate in the taking of decisions, and take part in the establishment of further education programs.

Further education must lead to recertification, and this must be mandatory not only for teachers in schools, but also for the instructors and specialists who are involved in the further education process, as well as the civil servants who deal with educational issues at all levels, including ministries. There must be at least four different levels of certification, because we have a need for various kinds of instructors, consultants and methodologists at the regional level of schools and at the level of the ministry. This would enable teachers and school principals to pursue growth opportunities.

Salaries to people in the educational system must be related to their level of education and certification. The certification system must be shaped through the involvement of teachers, educational managers, parents, university specialists and people from the ministry.

New forms and methods must be sought out in teacher training - ones which are in line with present-day needs and situations. Various formal and informal programs must emerge. Educational workers must be encouraged to attend master's degree programs in education, and they must be given an opportunity to become certified for the teaching of other subjects of study. They must also be able to become authorized as teachers of adults, and they must take various problem-based courses on subjects such as student-centered teaching methods, cooperative learning, critical thinking, etc.

Educational workers in Kyrgyzstan have extensive opportunities to participate in various international cooperation projects, trips abroad to exchange experiences, and

projects which involve partner schools. If these are organized appropriately, they can also be seen as forms of further education.

Programs which are aimed at the development and improvement of schools must be seen as a form of further education for teachers at the schools themselves.

Each school must receive targeted financing from the state in order to choose the optimal and most needed form of further education. School directors must be able to take these decisions in accordance with the needs of their schools and their teachers.

In pursuit of these goals - all of which are critically importance when it comes to democratic processes not just in education, but in society at large - there is a need for distinct mechanisms of support:

- All of the institutions which are involved in education must cooperate in all horizontal and vertical directions. Theorists and working teachers must work together and engage in supportive collaboration on the basis of mutual trust.
- Formal decisions on innovations must be taken only after extensive debates in which all interested parties are involved.
- Functions concerning the specification of standards and qualification levels, as well as the certification of teachers, must be delegated to professional teacher organizations.

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