

How Russia deals with deaf children

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Deaf education in Russia goes back to 1806 when the first school for the deaf was opened at Pavlovsk near St Petersburg. It followed the French tradition and used various forms of signing. The number of schools in the Russian Empire grew, with a Moscow school opened in 1860 by a deaf artist and supported by a famous art collector Pavel Tretyakov. By 1932 the Soviet Union could boast 145 schools, 116 schools both day and boarding, as well as foster homes located in the territory of the Russian Federation. As in most other countries, the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was marked by the radical turn towards oralism. However, the all-Russian ToD conference in 1938 condemned the oralist approach to education and called upon the return of signing in schools. Soon Joseph Stalin accused sign language of being "not even a substitute for language" which ensured the removal of signing from the classroom. Twists of history including the perestroika time (1985-91) did not bring major changes in the deaf educational system.

The vast majority of deaf (and hard-of-hearing) children are educated in special schools, which are traditionally divided into schools for the deaf and schools for hard-of-hearing children. Most of these schools have boarding provisions for the children who live far from the campus. According to Ministry of Education data, in 2004 there are 184 special schools and 76 kindergartens which are not compulsory but provide education for children of 3-7 years of age (some have nursery groups for children aged 18-48 months; some schools open pre-schools groups). Moscow accounts for ten schools and nine kindergartens. Usually one school enrolls from 150 to 250 children but figures can vary depending on the region. Educational methods applied with hard-of-hearing children are strictly oral with fingerspelling allowed with older children.

Teachers of deaf children can use fingerspelling in primary school, while in secondary school some forms of signing can be used as additional means of instruction depending on the teachers' or school administration's preference. Schools for the deaf can also turn to signing during after-classes activities. Both kindergartens and schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children employ specially developed programmes which are intended to be strictly followed throughout the country. Recent programmes allow slightly more flexibility but, in general, basic secondary education (equal to GCSE) is covered in 11-12 years compared to nine

years for hearing children. Some schools for hard-of-hearing children give full secondary education, otherwise further education provision in colleges is available in big towns but on a very modest scale in the provinces. The main educational goal even in the 21st century is speech development focusing mainly on oral skills together with reading and writing skills. Speech training is often a focus of attention in other school subjects. Speech therapy sessions are organized in groups and individually for three hours a week and for two hours with Year 9 and above.

It goes without saying that both deaf and hard-of-hearing children use sign language between themselves outside classes either openly or secretly depending on the general attitude of the school administration or the form teacher.

Classes at schools for the deaf usually consist of six children whereas classes for hard-of-hearing children can enrol up to twelve children. Teachers work on their own without class assistants (teachers in primary school are in charge of reading, maths, Russian and applied skills with art and PE taken by other teachers), in secondary school the teaching is subject-based. Children can stay at school till 5pm while most of the classes end at 2pm. Special educational assistants look after them and nurses stay with the children who are in dormitories. In Soviet times teachers and educational assistants in special schools earned 25% more compared to the average school teacher salary but this is no longer the case.

Teachers' salaries are very low. Eighteen teaching hours a week give a monthly salary of 90 US\$ in the provinces with an average minimum salary of 100\$. In Moscow teachers earn a little more but even working in two positions as both a teacher and educational assistant (an 8am to 6pm job) they earn less than cleaners in banks or commercial offices.

ToD training started in 1897 with two-year courses. Now there are two main ways to become qualified Teachers of the Deaf. The most typical one is to join a five-year university course in surdopedagogy (the Russian term for deaf education) in the faculties of special education. The main universities in big towns have them. For people with university level education it is also possible to take a one-year course in deaf education. However, many provincial schools have to employ teachers with general pedagogical education or a degree in general special education. There is no formal or informal

union of Russian ToDs, and the only journal which deals with issues of special education theory and practice in general is 'Defectology'. This title reflecting the old terminology which is still widely used ('deaf and dumb children' can be still heard in the provinces).

With rare exceptions work with families is not organised: neither schools nor form teachers have special sessions with parents except group meetings, which are often highly unsatisfactory for all parties concerned. Kindergartens limit their work with families to week-end homework.

There have, in recent years, been some alternative approaches to deaf education, mainly in Moscow. Within the state system Professor Emilia Leongard has developed a system which does have its adherents and is widely covered in the official journal of the All-Russian Federation of the Deaf (known by its Russian initials as VOG). The system is based on oral education principles and integration. There are a few integrated schools and kindergartens mainly for hard-of-hearing children which use this approach.

Outside the state system the Moscow Bilingual School for the Deaf opened in 1992 and is now entering its 13th year. The main idea behind its establishment was to challenge both the general educational approach (rigid formal training) and the traditional oralist system in deaf education. The founder of the school was Professor Galina Zaitseva who was inspired by the joint project with the University of Bristol on sign language teaching and research. Located within a state school, the bilingual school currently has three classes with up to six pupils in each class. More than half the teachers and classroom assistants are deaf. The School has a Kindergarten feeder school and itself feeds a Further Education college. Both School and Kindergarten come under the aegis of the Moscow Centre for Deaf Studies and Bilingual Education (www.cds.deafnet.ru) Among its pedagogical activities the Centre has tried to remedy the drastic shortage of teaching materials for training ToDs and interpreters. The Centre has very close links with the Moscow City Pedagogical University where the Centre's staff is in charge of new content in ToD training courses. The new curriculum includes different alternative approaches to deaf education, Russian as a second language for deaf children, pre-school education, linguistic disciplines, Russian Sign Language (RSL) during all five years of education, Deaf Culture and History, etc. In addition to hearing students there are twenty deaf students (including three bilingual school

graduates, all of them are college graduates). The first thirteen will become qualified ToDs in a year.

The Centre for Deaf Studies and Bilingual Education is still the only organisation in Russia which provides for the teaching of Russian Sign Language. To date the Centre has produced a 40-lesson RSL course, a video RSL course, a CD-ROM RSL dictionary and a videocassette of fairytales for deaf children. It has established 'parents' schools' - consultations and training sessions with the parents of deaf children of different age groups and free RSL courses for the parents. In association with the Finnish Association for the Deaf, the Centre has developed links with schools in the former Soviet Union, notably Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kirgizia and Tadjikstan. Links with the West are maintained through two support groups, 'Signs of Russia' (www.signsofrussia.org.uk) and the Moscow Bilingual Deaf School Association (www.dmpursglove.freereserve.co.uk).

In Russia sign language has still not been accorded the status of an official minority language. However, there are some grounds for hoping that official attitudes to sign language have become less hostile and the All-Russian Federation of the Deaf, its Moscow branch and the Centre are currently working on drawing up a new law which would accord official recognition to Russian Sign Language. The first hearing in the State Duma a year ago rejected the new legislative act but this was merely the beginning of a long process.

The Moscow Bilingual School for the Deaf is still the only bilingual school in the Russian Federation, although there is a deaf kindergarten in Lipetsk, in Southern Russia, which utilises an British approach with some of its groups. In the former Soviet Union there is a greater willingness to be flexible, as is demonstrated in deaf schools in Erevan (Armenia), Panevejis (Lithuania) and Minsk (Belarus). Within the state system of special education the policy of inclusion could lead to the closure of deaf schools before proper provision is made for the educational needs of deaf children. The threat is not imminent, but we are all too aware of its existence. The Russian deaf community is not, of course, immune, from the many problems which have beset Russia since the collapse of communism in 1991, but in this, and over many other issues, it is increasingly making its presence felt.

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