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Raising the Quality of the Teaching of Literature

Young people in Russia are reading less as they get older, and the teaching of literature in Russia is in crisis. This situation calls for a change in teaching methods in Russia.

Under the conditions of the sociocultural situation in Russia today, the teaching of literature is going through a crisis. The students are no longer reading as much and are no longer motivated to acquaint themselves with literature of high artistic quality. A survey by the Iurii Levada Analytical Center revealed an opinion that is prevalent among residents of large cities: “the older the youngsters get the less they read” [1]. Many adolescents are not able to express their thoughts either orally or in writing; they find it difficult to do work on their own with various sources of knowledge. The accelerating pace of life is increasing the distance between school students and the Russian classics—works that, during their golden age, represented more than just literature, since they enabled so many book lovers to think about moral, social, family, philosophical, and even economic problems. Today it is more difficult to read the works of the classics, because the language they were written in is becoming

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archaic and incomprehensible to today's youngsters, and requires numerous historical and cultural commentaries.

When it comes to the arts, the situation in society is not favorable. What is most common now are postmodernist products, and there are practically no realistic works that could provide school students with the ability to address the present day and its problems. Adolescent and young adult literature has almost gone out of use in this country, and the works of the latest writers in that field come out in small press runs and do not make it into the schools.

The influence of educational institutions on the personality of an adolescent is not able to compete with TV and other mass media. It is more and more difficult for the schools to shape positive qualities of personality such as patriotism, the desire to become highly educated, and fidelity to high family traditions. The revision of the former socialist ideology, the ideological vacuum that has come into being and is replete with mass pop culture, have led to the deformation of a civic consciousness that is connected with vital axiological qualities such as a sense of duty, responsibility, and honor.

We will not be discussing the obvious need to bring new, highly moral and qualified young teachers into the schools, to increase the number of libraries and renovate the holdings of school libraries, to publish the books that schools need, and to ban the publication of "cheat sheets." Let us look at the documents that regulate the teaching of literature in the schools. The overloaded character of the invariant portion of standards for literature and school programs has strengthened the reproductive character of teaching. One leading methodologist in Russia aptly called the study of literature in the schools "just a jog through information." The experiment of adopting the unified state examination for literature revealed the weakness of students' knowledge of literature and the low level of their personal maturity, and, as forms of the exam are upgraded on a regular basis, these unsatisfactory results are repeated. There is no correspondence between the amount of material to be learned and the educational standard on literature and amount of school time allocated to the study of literature in the basic syllabus.

What if all these issues were removed in the near future? After

all, the solutions are right there on the surface. But that would only mitigate the crisis. What is needed is a search for effective ways to improve the teaching of literature, with the aim of strengthening the beneficial effect of good-quality literature on the personality. The only way to do this is to make use of didactic principles of individually oriented instruction in the methodology of teaching literature; a number of fundamental studies concerning this have come out in the past few years, by I.S. Iakimanskaia, E.V. Bondarevskaja, S.V. Kul'nevich, and others.

Present-day psychology and didactics have demonstrated that the once firmly entrenched authoritarian approach to instruction is unsound; it has been displaced by pedagogical collaboration, in which the teacher and the student together make their way to the result, in a manner that both of them consider important and congenial. The teacher not only presents the information, he predicts the activity of the student and organizes and directs that activity. In this way, the student is no longer the object of the instruction but its subject.

It is possible to develop skills of independent learning and productive interaction only when the teacher perceives his class as one body of people who are not alike and organizes the process of their learning in accordance with each of his students, where each student in the literature lesson enters into complex relations with the world and with other people, changes them, and becomes changed. The schools have moved away from random, occasional consideration of the characteristics of students' personalities, and now deal with the need to put together individual learning programs that enable the level of preparation of each student to be determined.

Practical experience has shown that the process of differentiation goes on most successfully in the group form of instruction, which makes it possible to take account of the individual characteristics, helps to organize collective cognitive activity, facilitates mutual enrichment of those in the group, activates processes of learning and cognition, fosters interaction, facilitates the exchange of means of action, and enables the students to achieve mutual understanding in joint activity and engage in reflection, encouraging them to evaluate and adjust their own actions.

Differentiation of the process of instruction in the schools is based on a number of *psychological and pedagogical premises*. In the process of the instruction it is necessary to take account of the characteristics of age-phase mental development and the psychological processes going on in students' consciousness: their thinking (reproductive, creative); their memory (voluntary, involuntary), in particular their ability to recognize, recall, memorize, and reproduce; their attention (the ability to concentrate on the subject being studied); their imagination (recreative, creative); their willpower (the ability to achieve goals); their emotions; and so on.

Present-day theories of instruction are based on psychological principles in which the human mind is viewed as activity and as the result of activity. In this way, the consciousness of the individual is not only manifested but also formed in the process of external activity. It is not possible to transmit knowledge about the world without direct participation in the active work of mastering that knowledge and developing practical skills. This has been confirmed in the works of the twentieth century's most prominent psychologists L.S. Vygotskii, S.O. Rubinshtein, and A.N. Leont'ev, who showed that the development of the personality depends "both on the genetic programs and on the system of activity in which the individual is involved" [2, p. 185], and that the individual has within himself not just particular innate specific abilities but "the ability to form these abilities" [3, p. 208].

In the process of the development of the individual qualities of school students it is important both to study the properties of mind and innate abilities that they have inherited and to create the conditions necessary to shape them. Vygotskii found that student's thinking develops if the teacher has set up a special program of action for him. Subsequent assignments have to be "in the zone of the student's immediate development," while the instruction itself "has to run ahead of development" [4, p. 447]. Transition to the new means of action in the teaching and learning process facilitates the development of the youngsters' thinking. It is only by way of instruction that has been organized specially, instruction oriented toward the independent search for knowledge under the conditions that are optimal for each one, instead of toward simple reproduc-

tion of the knowledge, that is capable of developing the students' thinking and speaking.

It is obvious that in the process of the differentiation of instruction, a vital role is played by the need to take account of the quality of personalities and the abilities of the youngsters. The schools, and the entire system of instruction and upbringing, have to set up the kinds of optimal conditions that will develop these abilities. For a long time, the schools were oriented toward the "average" student, and collective instruction was considered fundamental. The focus was on the particular qualities that were common to all of the youngsters. What is more important today are the aspects that make every child different, in order to be able to teach each one how to find solutions on his own and to evaluate different facts and phenomena.

What is needed today in order to improve the quality of the teaching of literature are the following: collaboration between teacher and the students, dialogue, a process of cognition that is of an active, creative character, support for the individual development of the youngster, instilling in him an urge to make decisions and to choose the content and means of learning. And in order to organize the process of differentiation of the instruction and model individual ways to master knowledge and abilities, it is essential to choose properly and combine optimally didactic methods that take account of the different levels of learning and cognitive activity, of qualities of personality and abilities. To organize individual and group work in class effectively, it is essential to determine the learning abilities of the students, whose level of mental development depends on gradually raising the level of complexity of the material to be learned.

In today's schools the customary practice is to make a distinction between what is called external differentiation (with respect to the content of the education), which is utilized at the third level of the instruction, and internal differentiation (with respect to the level of the students' development), which is applicable in both the basic grades and the upper grades. In the upper grades, where profile instruction is organized, *selective differentiation* (the assignment to classes of different profile is made by the educational institution) is

introduced, and *elective differentiation* (the choice of school course is decided by the student). In the case of selective differentiation, the mastery of the minimum content of the education on the basic level is, as a rule, acquired in classes of heterogeneous composition; on the profile level this takes place in classes of homogenous composition. In the case of elective differentiation, school courses chosen by students serve both to raise the basic level of their mastery of literature to the profile level and to deepen the profile level of their mastery of literature.

In order for differentiated instruction to be successful, it is vital, as well, to take account of the specific character of the subject. The principles of individualization and differentiation of education, as formulated by psychologists and educators, are not being taken into account and applied in the teaching of literature. This is probably because in the methodology of the teaching of literature, literary criticism predominates over didactics, even in the applied version used in the schools. It is clear, however, that the teachers of literature who achieve the best results are those who take maximum account of the characteristics of the personality and literary development of each student.

The necessity of the differentiated approach to instruction in classes of literature has been pointed out by researcher V.F. Chertov. It is his belief that among the most immediate prospects in the development of the method for teaching this subject, the priority should go to “the humanization of the process of teaching and upbringing, differentiation of the instruction, integration of the school subjects and specific methods, bringing the level of the teaching closer to the level of today’s science and culture, creating new technologies of class lessons and variable programs, intensifying the methods of teaching literature, and looking for new forms of instruction” [5, p. 6].

A study of practices in the schools shows that the teacher has to take systematic account of the developmental, personality, psychological, and pedagogical characteristics of the students and to have an understanding of literary and methodological aspects of the problem. The strength of literature’s influence on the individual is determined, first and foremost, by the depth and

wholeness of his perception, which depend both on age and on level of preparation.

To implement differentiation in the instruction of literature it is essential to study the developmental characteristics of the reader's perception, inasmuch as the process of raising this level is not possible without taking account of individuality. The age-phase periods of reader's perception are linked to the overall psychological development of the personality, and they are bracketed in the ages of ten to eleven, twelve to fourteen, and fifteen to seventeen. However, there is no direct functional relation between the general periods of students' development and their literary development; very often, they do not coincide in relation to the arts. The key activity of students between the ages of ten and eleven is directed primarily toward the development of their intellectual and cognitive abilities. What begins to interest a preadolescent student are not facts and phenomena themselves but rather their essence, cause and effect, and mutual dependency. It is a period of a naively realistic attitude toward literature, a time when the reader perceives literature to be one aspect of actual reality. Youngsters of ten and eleven are just beginning to appreciate the material of the literary art, the poetic function of the word, its artistic provisionality; they are just beginning to pay attention to the details and the expressive and depictive means of language. Youngsters of this age typically have a freshness, a directness of perception, expressed in vivid and emotional impressions.

In adolescence, readers of twelve to fourteen come to be motivated to read in ways that become gradually differentiated as time goes on. In this age period, their interest in poetry diminishes a great deal, while they become more strongly attracted to literature of adventure and suspense; this is linked to the age-phase periodization of their main types of activity. At this stage it is important to develop the ability to make esthetic judgments, to kindle their interest in interpretations of the text, and to develop forms of differentiated instruction.

The literary development of students in the upper grades, between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, and their emotional experience, are formed in interaction with the arts, where the arts are imbued

with humanistic content. It becomes important to develop their ability to think in images, to understand the ideas of the authors, to appreciate poetic diction, and to discern the functions of theoretical literary techniques. However, special perspective abilities that are vital for literary development can be effective only in synthesis with the overall intellectual development of the upper-grade student as he comes to acquire the ability to understand the essential quality of the form of the work and understand the provisionality of the art.

Also essential for successfully differentiated instruction are *the basics of literary criticism*. To appreciate the meaning of the text, the reader must make an analysis of its form, to discern its structure, to recognize the techniques and means by which the content is instilled. The reader's perception depends not only on his character, experience in life, and level of preparation, and the work's ideational and esthetic nature, but also on the significance of its literary content. For this reason, the differentiated teaching of literature must be conducted using exemplary Russian classics.

A work of literature requires a potential of perception, which comes to be acquired in the process of reading. The level of a student's appreciation of a text depends on his reflection as a reader, his innate ability to understand a fictional text. In school it is necessary to improve the process of reflection, which serves as the basis for interpretations that are conditioned by the student's personality type. Differentiation of the teaching of literature becomes a derivative of the study and development of his qualities as a reader.

For the purpose of developing students' interest in reading, expanding their cultural horizon, and shaping their taste, it is essential that the following actions become systematic: appreciation and imaginative analysis of the text, logical analysis, esthetic evaluation, and shifts in the emotional sphere of the personality that take place under the influence of the reading. For the purpose of differentiated instruction, it is essential to take account of these characteristics, since the literary development of the students takes place at different rates.

In the process of teaching during which the focus of the attention is on teaching how to understand the imaginative nature of the work of literature, it is vital to take account of the students' psychological

and pedagogical characteristics. For the purpose of differentiated teaching of literature it is essential to consider students' type of thinking activity (logical, imaginative, or mixed) and possession of particular *emotional and artistic qualities of personality* [6]. Among those, the following are the most important:

- a creative imagination, a sense of fantasy and vivid, figurative perception;

- an ability to hear the world of sounds and to appreciate the colors of the text;

- an emotional keenness and sensitive appreciation of figurative speech;

- the ability to grasp the logic by which an incident of life becomes an incidence of art;

- the ability to discern the dynamics of the creative process of the writer;

- the ability to discover the writer's attitude toward his characters and events, to see the position of the author;

- the ability to discern the meaning of the structural elements of the text (the plot and composition, the multiple meanings of artistic detail and how it is linked to the problems of the text, the depictive and expressive means of artistic diction, and so on);

- skills of comparative analysis of the text.

For the purpose of detecting and developing these abilities it is possible to use both special diagnostics and particular learning assignments.

Also coming to be a foundation for differentiation in the system of teaching literature is the level of the complexity of the literary events and the terms of literary criticism that the students have to learn. One of the most important principles in the teaching of literature, in differentiated instruction, has to do with understanding the process of the functioning of literature. The depth of the interpretation of a text depends on the type of reader and on the era in which the work is interpreted.

In order to develop the students' active recreative involvement and independence, the teacher of literature has to set up teaching situations that serve to develop their literary taste and their ability to interpret texts of various kinds and genres. Also important is a

differentiated structure that relates to the type and genre nature of the work of literature.

In analyzing an epos, differentiated assignments can be oriented toward the study of the event-based (or plot-based) underpinning of the work, toward determining the purpose of the coincidence (or lack thereof) between plot and story, toward listing the characteristics of the protagonists of different types in the system of images and determining the relations between protagonists and events, and toward discerning the purpose of the descriptions, dialogues, and monologues as well as the role of the image of the author (the narrator) or an episode in the work, the characteristics of plot and composition. Greater complexity is afforded by assignments to study the inner world of some individual and the specific way that he is brought to life in a work of fiction.

When it comes to studying a lyric work, differentiated assignments are needed to determine the mood of the verse and the dynamics of poetic intonations and to discern the genre's role of meaning and composition, the figurative order of the verse, and also the connection between its theme and the main motifs of the poetic's creative work. Also serving as the basis for differentiation when it comes to the study of a lyric work are the elements of its structure. The students' motivation to make observations as to the meaning-forming role of the sound pattern, vocabulary, syntax, rhythm, rhyme, line, and so on, can be linked to which linguistic structure level is the most difficult to understand. Understanding the functions of the elements of verse composition gives rise to the necessity of putting together assignments of differing levels to analyze the lyric work, assignments that are linked to appreciating the role of a particular literary device.

Assignments of greater complexity in the course of studying a lyric work can be linked to discerning the meaningful role that is played by relations of time and space; characterization of the lyric self; compilation of historical, cultural, and biographical commentaries; determination of the place of the verse in the creative works of the poet (in the Russian cultural process and that of the world); the meaningful role played by the epigraphs, hidden quotations, dedications, dates; the title, and intertextual connections of the verse; and the provisionality of lyrical descriptions.

For the purpose of differentiated instruction *in class lessons of drama study*, it is necessary to have assignments designed to discern the play's basic conflict, the characteristics of the speech of the characters and the way that they interact, and to determine the role played by the author. For advanced students the assignments can be linked to the characteristics of the action on stage in space and time, to the study of the role of the interior, the landscape or detail, to a comparison of a play and a show, the writing of a review, and so on.

Methodological foundations of differentiation of the teaching of literature in the schools are linked to general didactic stages of the instruction: to diagnostics, to instruction itself (the mastery of the material that is to be learned and the formulation of the abilities and skills that are necessary for independent activity), and to testing, based on the system of the criteria that reflect the students' literary development. What is necessary at the beginning stage is differentiated *diagnosis of the students' level of literary development* (based on the results of previous instruction). This diagnosis should determine:

(1) the students' amount of reading and the literary level of their intellectual horizon, their reading interests and needs (no interest in reading at all; reading texts of the school course; reading works of Russian and foreign classic literature that are not included in the school program; reading popular science literature that is in keeping with school learning interest; reading best seller works that are "fashionable," "glossy magazines," and so on);

(2) the ability to discern the relevance of the social and moral array of problems that are presented in the works read (the ability to single out moral and ideological problems in a text; actively evaluate what is read);

(3) the amount of students' historical, theoretical, and literary knowledge and the way they make use of it when analyzing a text (a knowledge of historical, theoretical, and literary information; the ability to make use of the knowledge when analyzing and evaluating what they have read);

(4) the level of students' development of reading comprehension (determination of the emotions of a text—those of the author and

those of the reader; development of the imagination—both duplicative and creative; level of grasp of the contents—whether that of reproduction, retelling, or analysis, the ability to ask questions, to talk about what has been read, to perceive the relations between protagonists and events, and also synthesizing—the conception of the work as a whole, and interpretation of the artistic form on the level of detail and composition);

(5) abilities that have to do with analyzing a work of fiction (determining the emotional leitmotif and the main problem portrayed in the work; discerning the plot in an epos, the conflict in a drama, and alternation of feelings in a lyric work; determination of the stylistic coloration of a text; comparing protagonists and events in one work and in different works; determining the author's position; comparing the intent of a work and how well it has been executed; and determining what is the same and what is different in works of the same genre);

(6) abilities and skills that have to do with the literary and creative activities of the students themselves (reading with expression; the ability to explain their feelings when they read; oral portrayal of the scene of the action and the character of the protagonists; the ability to compare an episode with an illustration, a screen treatment, the ability to put together a movie scenario or stage a work; the ability to create literary works of different genres such as works of fiction, works of literary criticism, and social and political journalism).

Multiaspectual diagnosis has the purpose of helping the teacher to determine which spheres of the students' literary development have not been adequately developed and to forecast the character of teaching assignments for the different groups of students as these have been differentiated on the basis of particular features.

Differentiation can be linked to the typology of class lessons and to the necessity of drawing up assignments for the different categories of students. The assignments necessary for introductory class lessons are linked to making the facts of a writer's life story relevant, to the history of the creation of a work, to discussion of the reactions of contemporaries and literary criticism, to the detection of the first reader reactions, and so on. In lessons in which texts are analyzed, the assignments can be linked to the students' ability to

make use of information from the history and theory of literature, to see the functional purpose of various literary devices, and so on. In lessons devoted to generalization and repetition, the assignments can be linked to the students' ability to discern the meaning of a work on the level of generalization, based on compiling various editions of texts, on comparative analysis of the evaluations of works in literary criticism, and on the completion of creative projects. In lessons that require reading outside of the classroom, the assignments can be linked to the students' ability to interpret and evaluate the works that they have read on their own. In lessons designed to develop the students' speech skills the assignments can be linked to the development of skills of connected expression and the creation of written works of different genres.

Differentiated control [testing] of the students' level of literary development include intermediate current control (retelling in oral and written form, recitation in oral and written form, recitation in monologue form, the ability to ask a question, preparation of a report, a paper, an abstract, etc.) and final control or testing (the unified state exam, a composition, an oral exam, defense of a research project necessary for graduation).

When recording and testing the students' literary knowledge and abilities it is important to pay attention to their individuality, to require that they not just reproduce what they know but actually make use of it in a new learning situation. Work of the differentiated type, in which the student chooses an assignment that is not only of interest but also is in accordance with the level of his development, reduces the burden of learning.

Having an understanding of the purpose of each stage of the teaching of literature in school, the students' age-phase abilities and their most important type of activity in each developmental period, makes it possible to set up a differentiated system of ways to interact with works of literature. How successful the system is will be verified by objective diagnosis of the students' abilities, by the character of the instruction that is most optimal for different students, and by regular testing of the level of their literary development. These can be useful when choosing the profile of instruction in the upper grades of school and in college.

An experiment designed to test in practice the methodological model that was developed by the author of the present article, an experiment carried out over a number of years in Tver oblast, showed that the optimal project design of didactic principles of differentiated instruction in the teaching of literature in the schools, taking account of the specific character of the subject, produces positive results. We instructed the teachers to trace the dynamics of the literary development of their students in control and experimental classes, and we analyzed the data obtained.

After studying the results of the experiment in Tver oblast, we concluded that the level of literary development of fifth-graders through eighth-graders, under the influence of differentiated instruction, was raised most effectively in the experimental classes. Students who did not have the habit of reading began to show an interest in reading; just about all of the students were familiar with the works in the school program, and those on the advanced level showed an interest in reading the classics and began to take a critical attitude toward low-grade "literature," indicating that they have acquired literary taste. The students were able to discern the moral problems portrayed in the works that they studied and read on their own and to make an intelligent assessment of what they read. They showed a heightened interest in reading outside of class and in choosing assignments that offered their own evaluations. The amount of their theoretical, historical, and literary knowledge grew, the level of their perceptive abilities went up, and there was a decline in the number of students who merely interpreted the text at the level of retelling. The students developed the ability to analyze a text, taking account of its type and genre; they were able to compare a literary episode with an illustration, to create a movie scenario or dramatic staging, and they perfected their skills of expressive reading.

In our study of the influence of differentiated instruction on the level and amount of reading among students in the ninth through eleventh grades, and their intellectual horizon as readers, we found that with differentiated instruction the students read more; they became more interested in the classics and began to take a critical attitude toward "fashionable" literature of little artistic merit as well

as popular magazines. Higher-level school students read works of Russian and foreign classics that are not included in the school program; they were able to evaluate them and compare them with movie versions. The quality of their written projects on literature improved, their historical, theoretical, and literary knowledge was increased, and they had a better ability to make use of that knowledge when analyzing a text. More students in the upper grades began to take part in school-level and raion-level literature olympiads, to work on senior abstracts, and to write compositions of a creative character. More and more students began to interpret literary texts on the analytical and conceptual level.

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