Teaching them to read Russian: Four hundred years of the Russian bukvar

Historical reviews of educational methods and materials typically reflect a wide range of influences that go beyond purely pedagogical concerns. Nila Banton Smith (1965), in the classic American Reading Instruction, notes a number of distinct epochs of instructional thought and practice in the U.S. classroom that reflect social, religious, and political trends. Other scholarship has deepened and extended our understanding of early reading and writing instruction in U.S. schools (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1990; Mathews, 1966; Robinson, 1977), but nearly all of the work described in these historical investigations (with the exception of Mathews) has focused on English-language materials used in U.S. classrooms. While this attention to U.S. practices and materials is not surprising, it is clear that such a “local” view of literacy and its acquisition may distort our viewpoint.

The purpose of this article is to provide a broadened historical perspective on literacy instruction by focusing on the Russian azbuka or bukvar, the first text typically placed in the hands of Russian children as they begin formal schooling. One specific objective of this article is to provide an overview of the historical development of the Russian primer from the earliest known examples (Fedorov, 1574, 1578) to the materials currently in use in Russian primary schools of the post-Soviet era (e.g., Elkonin, 1996 [See Figure 1]; Goreskii, Kiryushkin, & Shanko, 1994; Voronkova & Kolomytkina, 1992). A second objective is to
describe instructional methods used in current Russian primers that reflect a long tradition of attention to phonemic awareness in the earliest stages of literacy instruction.

Obviously, an overview of a lengthy historical span within a short article requires selective presentation of material. I have not, for instance, attempted to differentiate the use of primers in religious schools (Bissonnette, 1963; Haley, 1976; Lipsky, 1968), the zemstvo schools (Brooks, 1982; Seregin, 1989), or other educational institutions from the czarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. In my view, this level of detail would tend to be distracting and not contribute significantly to the primarily descriptive objectives of this study. For the same reason, I have not considered a number of technical issues that, while important in comparative investigations, are not particularly relevant given the more modest ambitions of this study.

Descriptive research need not stand speechless before its findings, however, and I will make occasional comparisons and offer conclusions, not because I consider these comparisons and conclusions proven, but because I believe it more useful (if sometimes painful) to stick my neck out rather than say nothing at all. It is also important that I acknowledge the influence of Nila Banton Smith, whose work on early U.S. primers (Smith, 1965) influenced both the content and the organization of this study and thus provides an appropriate place to

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**Figure 1**

Frontispiece from the Elkonin *bukvar* (1996)

Translations for phrases appearing in the Figure are: **Страна Слов** = Land of words; **Неграмотные Земли** = Illiterate Territory; **Гласная Область** = Vowel Region; **Город Букв** = City of Letters; **Прият** = Welcome; **Осторожно! Злой звукомор!** = Danger! Evil Sound Monster!; **Подземелье Злых Ошибок** = Cave of Wicked Errors; **Волшебница Грамота** = Enchantress of Literacy.
begin developing the background upon which this article builds.

The grounding of the present investigation

Smith (1965) identified eight distinct periods of U.S. reading instruction from the earliest days of European settlement in North America to the mid-1960s when Smith last revised this work. For the purposes of the present analysis, however, it is most useful to focus on three major influences that emerge from Smith's work in the history of U.S. reading instruction. These three influences include: (a) religious/moral influences, (b) social/political influences, and (c) pedagogical/scientific influences.

I will begin by describing these influences or themes in the context of Smith's review of U.S. reading instruction in order to ground these concepts in a more familiar terrain. Following this introduction, I will present an overview of the Russian bukvar that is grounded in these same three influences. I will conclude with a more detailed look at current Russian instructional practices in the use of phonemic awareness training in the earliest stages of reading instruction in the Russian primary school (начальная школа).

Themes in U.S. reading instruction

In Smith's account, the early days of U.S. reading instruction were dominated by religious, spiritual, and moral themes. Many of the earliest European settlers came to North America to escape religious persecution, so it is hardly surprising that reading instruction was commonly viewed as a means of attaining other specifically religious objectives (i.e., spiritual redemption). Over time, however, earlier emphases on specific religious practices, prayers, and beliefs were gradually secularized. Increasingly, reading materials drew upon moralistic stories and tales that had a more general ethical orientation than the religious materials of earlier days.

The second major theme that emerges from Smith's account of U.S. reading instruction is that of national, social, and political identities as reflected in reading materials and practices. Smith identifies this theme as first emerging immediately following the American Revolution as the newly created United States struggled to establish a national identity. Although a religious emphasis persisted, stories of patriotism and selections intended to imbue patriotic feelings increasingly found their way into materials used in reading instruction. In addition, there was growing interest in stories and literature from specifically U.S. authors and a tendency to abandon both English authors and materials published in England that had been used since the days of European settlement.

With the emergence of U.S. national identity in the early 1800s, the nationalism of early postrevolutionary days was gradually transformed into a more reflective emphasis on the role of education in developing citizens in a democracy. Exhortations to patriotism and stories of national heroes were gradually replaced by selections that tended to explain more mundane aspects of citizenship. Reading instruction at this time was often viewed for what it contributed to the development of an informed citizenry, which, naturally enough, was deemed of central importance in a democracy.

The third theme that arises in Smith's account is that of pedagogical and scientific emphasis. The distinguishing marker for this theme is the systematic attempt to ground instructional practices in scientific principles, usually psychological or linguistic in nature. In Smith's chronology of U.S. instructional practice the first evidence of this theme appears early in the 20th century with the scientific movement in U.S. education. Specific historical markers for this period cited by Smith include the early work in educational measurement and testing and the publication of Edmund Huey's (1968) The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading, which summarized much of the psychological work at the time of its publication and related this work to instructional practices.

Although Smith identifies eight epochs or historical periods, for the purpose of the present analysis, I believe these eight periods can all be interpreted as reflecting the influence of the three broader influences I have noted above (i.e., religious, social, and pedagogical). For instance, Smith distinguishes the beginnings of a scientific approach from the expansion and widespread application of scientific principles in reading instruction, but both of these periods can be reasonably characterized as reflecting the influence of a scientific/ped-
agogical perspective. In a similar fashion, I would argue that Smith’s period of international conflict, which reflects the influence of the World War II era on instructional practice, can reasonably be viewed within the social/political theme. In any case, whatever utility these themes might have for understanding Smith’s work, their primary purpose in the present context is to provide a broader framework within which both Russian and U.S. practices and materials can be understood so that meaningful comparisons can be drawn across these very different historical records.

**Origins of the Russian azbuka or bukvar**

In this investigation I examined a variety of Russian- and English-language primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included Russian language primers, teacher manuals, and other classroom-oriented sources. Secondary sources included both Russian- and English-language materials on the history, theory, and pedagogy of Russian-language reading instruction.

Russian literacy education has traditionally begun with a text that has variously been referred to as the bukvar or azbuka, both of which can be translated as primer or alphabet book. The earliest known example of such a text is the bukvar of Ivan Fedorov published in L’vov in 1574, with a second edition issued in Ostrog 4 years later in 1578. Fedorov’s bukvar was quite similar to many others that had preceded it in many other places. It adopted what had become a “standard” format since the time of the Greeks, with an introduction to letters of the alphabet, followed by a syllabary consisting of lists of common letter patterns, and concluding with reading material (Mathews, 1966). Like its U.S. counterpart, the Russian bukvar underwent many changes over time as a consequence of a variety of religious, social, and pedagogical influences.

**Religious influences**

Although the Russian bukvar predates the earliest American primers by more than 100 years, the earliest Russian and U.S. primers were similar in their common emphasis on religious themes. Like their U.S. counterparts, early Russian texts for reading instruction are dominated by two kinds of material: (a) technical material that presents letter forms, syllables, conjugated verb forms, and other examples of archetypal written language, and (b) material intended as content for reading that was usually dominated by prayers and other religiously oriented text.

There were also some notable differences between the earliest Russian and U.S. readers that reflect important social and political differences. The earliest Russian bukvars were primarily developed for and used by children of the wealthy and noble families, and it was not unusual for even these earliest of instructional materials to introduce students to several different alphabets and languages. Many bukovars introduced children to both the Church Slavonic typeface (Азбука Церковная; see Figure 2) used in religious literature and the Civil typeface (Азбука Гражданская) employed in other nonreligious materials. Some even included introductions to the Greek and Latin alphabets as a prelude to the study of classical literature and the languages of the European court (e.g., Polikarpov, 1701; see Figure 3). U.S. texts, on the other hand, were usually intended for broader use in a society that was less stratified than czarist Russia and thus was not as interested in promoting either multilingualism or classical studies.

Overall, the character of the Russian bukvar in this first epoch is quite formal. The earliest examples tend to be illustrated with heavy baroque ornamentation that heads or outlines pages. Characters in the early bukovars of this epoch are printed in a font that closely resembles handwritten manuscript style. Many of the bukovars of this period also included block print illustrations in addition to marginal ornamentation. Some bukovars employed two or more colors of ink to emphasize ornamentation or initial letters.

Toward the close of this first epoch, the baroque style of ornamentation and illustration begins to change, and text fonts are increasingly cleaner and more print-like. There is also a movement away from the heavy religious emphasis of early texts, but the formal character of these materials remains. Some bukovars late in this period include color prints and hand-colored black-and-white illustrations.

**Social and cultural influences**

Over time, the formalism of the early religious epoch gave way to a more relaxed style.
Figure 2
A bukvar from 1717

The alphabet introduced includes examples of now archaic letter variants. The page on the right introduces the syllabary portion of the text.

and content. In the early phase of this epoch, highly stylized formal images began to be replaced by illustrations depicting ordinary objects, animals, people, or historical events. One primer (A Gift to Children as a Remembrance of 1812, Anonymous, 1814) introduced each letter of the alphabet with verse and lively illustrations depicting the retreat of Napoleon from Russian soil at the conclusion of the Patriotic War of 1812. Another introduced the alphabet with illustrations of people from other lands around the globe (The People of the Earth Primer, Anonymous, 1820).

In addition, content reading material began to include Russian folk tales that were well known to Russian children. The overall organization and typical teaching methodology of primers in this period were still dominated by the traditional model with letter charts (sometimes with keyword cues—see Figure 4), a syllabary, and subsequent reading materials, but a number of important innovations also began to appear.

One example of the movement away from traditional alphabetic methods were the primers written by Lev Nikolaievich Tolstoi, the well-known author and educator who founded the Yasnaya Polyana school for peasant children in 1859. In response to his own dissatisfaction with existing materials, Tolstoi
Figure 3

Four pages from the *bukvar* of Fedor Polikarpov (1701)

Pages on the left present reading material and depict scenes from school life. Pages on the right introduce four different alphabets including Church Slavonic, Russian Civil, Greek, and Latin. Students are first introduced to the Russian characters in an earlier portion of the text.
(1872, 1875) wrote original teaching materials that reflected an analytic-synthetic approach to teaching. Tolstoï's method began with keywords and letter-sound relationships within those keywords. When students had mastered the keywords and the letter-sound relationships, they applied those relationships in learning new words. Tolstoï's distinctive mark was a simplicity of style and content that focused on the experiences of Russian peasant children rather than those of the aristocracy. Tolstoï's primers and those of his followers (e.g., The New Russian Primer, [Kuzhkom Uchashchik, 1912]—see Figure 5) also show the influence of K.D. Ushinskii, another very important—perhaps the single most important—inventor of teaching methods in Russian reading.

Ushinskii's work is important both for a relaxed style that appears designed to interest the child as well as instruct, and for its introduction of a systematic linguistically oriented approach to early literacy instruction. Ushinskii's first primer Native Word appeared in 1864 and, in a number of ways, looks much like primers used in Russian classrooms until very recently (Figure 6). It introduced children to letterforms and words and also presented basic principles of drawing and penmanship. Most importantly, however, Ushinskii's method began by ground-
ing instruction in a systematic phonetic/linguistic framework that involved substantial training in what we now know as phonemic awareness. Largely on account of his efforts to put Russian reading instruction on a systematic foundation and for the powerful influence his work had on subsequent Russian educators, Ushinskii is commonly acknowledged as the “father” of Russian reading instruction. Even today, his influence continues to be strong among modern Russian educators (e.g., Agarkova, Bugrimenko, Zhedek, & Tsukerman, 1993; Goretskii, Kiryushkin, & Shanko, 1990; Varentsova & Kolesnikova, 1996).

Pedagogical and scientific influences

Up to the time of Ushinskii Russian educators had designed learning materials and instruction almost exclusively based on precedent and ideas imported from other languages and cultures, many of which were based on the classical alphabetic model. Ushinskii, however, called special attention to linguistic features of spoken Russian and the relationship between these features and the written language. Ushinskii’s insights into the subtle aspects of sound-symbol relationships seem remarkably sophisticated even today.

The concept upon which Ushinskii founded his theoretical framework was that of “phonematic hearing” (Ushinskii, 1962), an idea that is essentially equivalent to the modern concept of phonemic awareness. Ushinskii went on to identify numerous components of phonematic hearing including discrimination of phonemes; segmentation of words, syllables, and phonemes; blending of phonemes; and phoneme replacement or substitution. Moreover, Ushinskii’s theory of instruction began with the assumption that a thorough understanding of oral language was the foundation for future literacy development. This led him to conclude that efforts to promote literacy should begin only after students had been trained to hear and manipulate the distinct sound values that characterize spoken Russian.

Another interesting aspect of Ushinskii’s approach to literacy is that writing instruction was initiated simultaneously with instruction in reading. Reading materials in the Ushinskii primer were organized into thematic sections that drew heavily from nature topics and Russian folk tales.

Ushinskii’s ideas proved enormously potent. Unlike most of his predecessors, Ushinskii’s materials suggest he genuinely hoped to interest young readers. The topics chosen for reading were familiar to Russian children and were usually accompanied by visually appealing graphics (see Figure 6). A second reason for the potency of Ushinskii’s ideas is that he developed methods and materials that capitalized on the phonemic regularity of the Russian language. The Native Word primer soon became a standard for early litera-
acy instruction and eventually was issued in 147 different editions.

Ushinskii’s proposals were not without opponents, however. Some educators felt Ushinskii placed undue emphasis on letter-sound relationships or that the appropriate place for instruction to begin was with the printed language rather than the sounds of language. In any case, phonemic methods did take hold and from that point on had a central role in the mainstream of Russian literacy education. In fact, much of the development that occurred in the later 19th and 20th centuries in Russian reading instruction involved elaboration or more thorough grounding of the methods first introduced by Ushinskii in the Native Word primer (see Figure 7).

The Soviet era

The Soviet era brought political and scientific influences together in a powerful new way. Reading was no longer viewed as a tool for redemption or as a link to a wider world and a cultural heritage. It was, rather, viewed as a critically important political tool for organizing and building society. The early Soviets made extraordinary commitments to developing programs to promote literacy among Russian-speaking people and, soon thereafter, among people of non-Russian re-
publics. Science was viewed similarly as a tool to ensure the successful outcome of the Soviet agenda, so an emphasis on scientific approaches soon dominated educational practice.

In the Soviet era, however, politics was a science of its own, so political influences were part of the larger scientific push. Cultural and social themes continued to appear in Russian primers, but alongside those also appeared a wide variety of political icons. Red stars and banners often appeared on covers and title pages. Portraits and busts of Soviet leaders appeared in obligatory fashion, and landscapes were as likely to be adorned with industriously smoking factories or political monuments as they were playgrounds and bucolic scenes (see Figures 8 and 9).

As indicated, much of the development that occurred during the Soviet era involved the implementation or elaboration of the phonemic methods that had been growing in use since the time of Ushinskii. But this approach to instruction did not proceed without controversy, as two different theoretical orientations toward the role of phonemic principles in early reading were entertained. One, identified most closely with an academic lineage that includes Ushinskii, Shaposhnikov, and Elkonin, held that phonemes should be treated as instructionally meaningful units that serve as the ultimate foundation for literacy acquisition. The other camp (including such figures as Soloveva, Goretskii, Kiryushkin, and Shanko) contended that phonemes are essentially abstractions and that instruction should focus on higher level syllabic units as the foundation for subsequent instruction. In addition, differences arose concerning the appropriate place to introduce written language and writing and the role of explicit instruction in phonemic awareness in the earliest stages of the literacy program. Even though, in some respects, Russian educators have agreed upon a central role for phonemic methods in early literacy instruction, there is still enough room for Russian educators to speak of a "Great Debate" among literacy educators (Nazarova, 1988).

The post-Soviet era

Some academic disciplines have been literally reinvented since the dissolution of the Soviet state, but that has not been the case in early literacy education. Post-Soviet primers in current use have a clear and unbroken lineage with prior Soviet publications. Of the two post-Soviet primers that are considered in this section, both are revisions of predecessors that were the work of well-known and respected Soviet educators. Although changes have occurred in the way educational programs are implemented, these changes are largely due to...
economic constraints rather than changes in the way Russian educators think about reading acquisition and instruction.

One of the themes that continues to play a central role in early literacy education in the post-Soviet era is the relationship between oral and written language. As in the past, however, there are disagreements about both theoretical and practical issues when it comes to the development of instructional programs. The purpose of this section will be to describe two different primers that adopt different perspectives. One primer is the most recently updated edition of the Elkonin bukvar (Elkonin, 1996), which adopts an emphasis on phonemes as linguistic and pedagogically useful units. The second primer is the eighth edition of the Goretskii, Kiryushkin, and Shanko (1993) azbuka, which places less emphasis on phonemic units and more attention on the use of syllabic units as a basis for early instruction.

*The Elkonin bukvar.* One interesting aspect of the 256-page Elkonin primer is that letters do not appear until p. 63, a span that includes all of the first two sections of the primer (“Syllables, sounds, and words” and “Hard and soft consonant sounds”) and a portion of the third section (“The work of vowels”). This part of the primer introduces a visual coding system that uses shapes and color to represent sounds in spoken Russian both prior to, and concurrently with, the introduction of letters as the carriers of sound values, an idea that is the pedagogical backbone for Elkonin’s teaching method.

According to Elkonin, the sound aspect of language is where literacy instruction must begin because “Reading at the initial stage of its development is an activity in re-creating the sound form of a word on the basis of its graphic model” (1988a, p. 398). Elkonin criticizes both traditional alphabetic methods and the approach typically adopted in other phonemic methods as promoting a premature emphasis on visual letterforms that prevents students from developing an awareness of and ability to manipulate the sounds of oral language. In effect, Elkonin establishes his instructional program on metacognitive and metalinguistic foundations that he views as distinct from, and prior to, a student’s knowledge of visual language.

The Elkonin program begins by developing students’ linguistic awareness by training them to match words, syllables, and stress with visual forms. Individual phonemes are introduced soon thereafter by means of paired words that differ by a single phonemic unit. The use of matched word pairs like this constitutes a central pedagogical tool in Elkonin’s method, both in the early stages promoting awareness and in subsequent efforts establishing students’ capacity to manipulate sounds. Thus, despite an emphasis on developing phonemic-synthetic word reading skills, those skills have their origins in the analysis of higher level units.
After mastering the concepts of word, syllable, and phoneme, students move on to vowel and consonant sounds. Both vowels and consonants are distinguished according to whether they are hard or soft (i.e., palatized), although soft consonants are determined solely by the vowels that follow them in a word (analogous to the role a final e has in determining the vowel sound that precedes it in the English language). Consonants are further distinguished according to whether they are voiced or unvoiced. In all of these cases, however, students are learning specifically about the *sounds* of language and the visual coding system that represents it. All of this is taught in the 63 pages before the alphabet is introduced.

The exercise illustrated in Figure 10 is presented immediately before the introduction of letters in the Elkonin *bukvar*. Vowel sounds are represented by round marks. Stressed vowel sounds have a protruding stress marker in the upper right-hand quadrant. Hard-consonant sounds are represented by a single dash and soft-consonant sounds by a double dash that looks like an “equals” sign. Syllables are indicated by arcs below the phoneme markers. At this point in the text students have learned to distinguish hard-consonant, soft-consonant, and vowel sounds. Stress and syllabification have also been taught. In this matching exercise, students apply that understanding by associating one of the patterns in the middle column with the appropriate word (i.e., illustration) in the columns on either side.
For example, the Russian pronunciation of the word for elephant is слон (sλon). The only sound-value pattern that matches this pronunciation is the second from the top, which indicates a single-syllable word that begins with two hard-consonant sounds (c, j), ends with a hard-consonant sound (H), and has a single stressed-vowel sound between. The Russian word for cherries (vee-shnia, with the stress on the first syllable) is illustrated in the fourth pattern from the top, beside the illustration of the elephant. The onion (lule) is the third pattern just above the pattern for cherries.

From this point on in the text, letters begin to replace sound-value markers. As in the earlier portions of the text, letters are introduced in word pairs that highlight the concept being transferred or taught (e.g., the difference between hard- and soft-consonant sounds as represented by letters). The transition from sound-value symbols to letters, however, occurs over an extended period of time. By p. 154 in the Elkonin primer, only 24 of the 33 Russian letters have been explained in sufficient detail to take their place in “the City of Letters” (see Figure 11), and it is only in the last 35 pages of the 255-page bukvar (in the section titled “Reading”) that sound markers finally disappear and letters stand on their own.

The abukov of Goretskii, Kiryushkin, and Shanko (1993). The Goretskii, Kiryushkin, and Shanko (GKS) abuka, like the Elkonin primer, begins with a focus on oral language but at a higher level. The starting point in the Elkonin bukvar is with words, syllables, and sounds. The GKS primer begins instruction with the concept of a sentence, introducing words as derived elements. This introduction to sentences and words is concluded fairly quickly, however, since phonemic markers begin to appear just 14 pages into the text. In the GKS primer visual aids serve primarily as short-term sources of support that are set aside much sooner than in the Elkonin text. Following their initial introduction, word-, sentence-, and phonemic-level markers appear rather sparsely, either in parallel or within common graphic elements for only 40 pages, after which they are no longer used in the text. Although the GKS primer continues to highlight phonemic distinctions, particularly the use of hard and soft vowels and their influence on the pronunciation of consonants, letter forms are used exclusively as symbols for sound values beyond the first 56 pages of the text.

While acknowledging a role for phonemic awareness training in early literacy instruction, the GKS primer is committed to a system that moves students to using letter forms as carriers of sound values as quickly as possible, in contrast to Elkonin’s approach, which delays the use of letter forms until students have developed a clear independent understanding of the sound values of spoken Russian. As a consequence of these different approaches, a major distinction between the Elkonin and GKS
primers is the extent to which nonalphabetic visual aids are employed in teaching students about elements of oral language and the manner in which those elements ultimately map onto letter forms. In the GKS primer, nonalphabetic visual symbolism plays a relatively minor role, and the association of sounds with written letter forms occurs early in the text. In the Elkonin primer, on the other hand, nonalphabetic visual symbols have a much larger role in promoting student awareness of oral language sounds and in preparing students for the subsequent association of those oral elements with written language.

**Concluding remarks**

It is important to note that although early literacy methods and materials in Russian schools place heavy emphasis on phonemic awareness, this emphasis diminishes beyond the early months of first grade. In the selective-admission lyceum, gymnasium, and private schools that are increasingly popular in Russia, the *bukvar* may be completed in a matter of weeks. By mid-winter even the 4-year Elkonin program (Agarkova et al., 1993; Elkonin, 1996), which devotes more attention to phonemic awareness than any other, has completed work in phonemic awareness.

Once the *bukvar* is completed, Russian-language instruction is distinguished from reading instruction. From that point on phonemic issues continue to be addressed, but they are generally treated as an aspect of Russian grammar. Moreover, reading instruction takes a decided turn from the carefully controlled materials of the *bukvar* to the use of both Russian and non-Russian literary classics in poetry, prose, and folklore. Teaching methods at this level continue to be rather formal, relying on memorization, recitation, round-robin and choral reading, and teacher-directed questioning. However, the content of instruction just beyond the *bukvar* is remarkably literary, with a focus on reading as the interpretation and appreciation of literature.

Two things make international studies of reading particularly interesting: similarities and differences. In the present study, two very different cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts (i.e., Russia and the U.S.A.) can be understood and interpreted by means of a common framework. This common framework has been developed around the idea of three distinct but related kinds of influences that have shaped the historical development of both Russian and U.S. primers. Moreover, in each instance there has been a common sequence of dominance with religious/moral influences gradually being replaced by social/political influences, that eventually lead to increased emphasis on a pedagogical/scientific orientation in the development of the primer and associated instructional methods. This kind of correspondence compels...
us to consider the influence of broader cross-cultural forces that are sometimes difficult to discern within our more typical and parochial ways of thinking.

Paradoxically, a second benefit of international studies is that they allow us to better understand and celebrate what is distinctive in local views of literacy. A central focus of the present study has been to reveal the historically remarkable and very distinctive emphasis in Russian literacy on phonemic awareness, an issue that has attracted the attention of western educators and researchers only recently. Equally interesting, although only briefly discussed, is the movement from a primarily metalinguistic orientation in the Russian first-grade classroom to a literary approach following the completion of the bukvar.

It may not surprise anyone, however, that, even in a context where there seems to be far greater agreement and historical consistency in teaching methods and materials, arguments and “Great Debates” (Nazarova, 1988) about literacy still flourish. Indeed, the contributions appearing in Downing’s (1988) edited work on Russian reading suggest that the level of passion about what is, and is not, considered appropriate in Russian literacy education hardly differs from that documented in the U.S. literature.

The exchange that occurs between Goreskii, Kryushkin, and Shanko (1988) and Elkonin (1988b) is one example. Despite clear agreement about the central role of phonemic awareness and sound-symbol relationships in early literacy acquisition, these authors tend to characterize one another as headed in the wrong direction. In the same volume, Nazarova takes the position that Goreskii, Kryushkin, and Shanko have deviated from the “true path” laid down by Ushinskii and Shaposhnikov, a path that, in her view, is preserved in Elkonin’s approach. Even Downing, the editor of the volume, characterizes the Goreskii, Kryushkin, and Shanko position as a “polemical attack constituting a rear-guard defense of conventional phonetic methods” (1988, p. 440). In responding to their critics, Goreskii, Kryushkin, and Shanko contend that positions taken by their opponents are false or far-fetched and that the recommendations of Elkonin and Nazarova would be “observed in actual practice only among teachers who are methodologically poorly prepared” (p. 355). Moreover, this tendency toward intellectual polarization is clearly nothing new, given Nazarova’s (1988) description of the “bitter struggle between the proponents of the phonetic method and the supporters of the whole word method” (p. 45) that took place in Russia in the early decades of the 20th century.

Reading about Ushinskii’s development of the concept of phonemic awareness more than 100 years ago and Russia’s great debates is a good reminder of the role and value of historical studies in literacy. It occasionally may occur that new ideas and approaches are not quite as new as we think. Unfortunately, our literature provides few opportunities to consider historical perspectives in literacy. A recent article in Reading Research Quarterly (Moore, Monaghan, & Hartman, 1997) expressed this concern about our research literature, and a quick review of The Reading Teacher articles dating back to 1966 (using the ERIC database) would seem to support this concern regarding the practitioner literature. Only 19 articles (out of 2,897) in that 30-year span addressed the history of reading or reading instruction.

There are obvious difficulties and hazards in the interpretation and application of historical and cross-cultural studies in literacy research and practice. Social, cultural, and pedagogical contexts change across time as they do across oceans. Transplanting methods from one place or time to another is unlikely to be productive unless these ideas are interpreted within the local context. I am convinced, however, that the hazards we face applying what we learn from historical, comparative, and international studies are no greater than those we contend with in other research genres. Thus, having acknowledged those hazards, I offer three conclusions based on the results of this study.

1. If you have not already been convinced by the empirical evidence amassed in support of the critical role of phonemic awareness in early literacy (see Chapter 12 in Adams, 1990, for a readable overview), consider the historical and cultural durability of this concept as documented in this article. Even in Chinese, a language traditionally described as logographic, there is strong evidence of an essential phonetic component (DeFrancis, 1989; Lam, Perfetti, & Bell, 1991; Perfetti & Zhang, 1991), and Chinese educators have found it useful to de-
velop an alphabetic sound-symbol system as a teaching device (Chen & Yuen, 1991). If we are looking for literacy “universals,” I would suggest phonemic awareness is at or near the top of the list, and that classroom instruction should reflect this.

2. When the next movement comes along promising to reinvent literacy and solve all our problems, we might be wise to consider the advice of Margaret Early (1992/1993), who suggested that new words are not necessarily new ideas and that the instability of the lexicon of reading may more truly reflect our insecurity rather than our progress. Greater attention to the history of instructional research and practice will help us avoid the bandwagons and terminological arms races of the past.

3. Although we are creatures of our place and time, we have the power to reflect upon and expand the boundaries within which we work. I believe, as educators, we can and should do this by promoting a view of literacy that both acknowledges unique local conditions and appreciates the broader historical and cultural perspectives that help explain “the most intricate workings of the human mind, as well as to unravel the tangled story of the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learned in all its history” (Huey, 1968, p. 6).

Author note
I am grateful for the assistance of colleagues at the Ushinsky Library of the Russian Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (Moscow, Russia) who provided access to the rare book collection of that institution and provided other sources I have used in preparing this article. I am also grateful to colleagues at Ryazan State Pedagogical University (Ryazan, Russia) for their assistance and support during my term as a Visiting Senior Scholar.

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