

When a Teacher Is More Vital Than Putin

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In early September, Natasha, my former high school classmate, gave birth to her fourth child. If everything turns out OK, in one month she will return to her job teaching first- and eighth-grade math.

Teaching both grades is not only interesting, but it also allows her to retain her professional qualifications as a graduate of Moscow State University with a master's degree in mathematics. With that level of education, she is more than qualified to teach elementary- and middle-school math.

Three years ago, Natasha completed a unique experiment serving as both math and homeroom teacher for the same children from first grade through their final year in the 11th grade.

She had not planned it that way. It was just that the students did not want to part with her when they reached the fifth grade, the time at which schoolchildren officially begin middle school and typically switch homeroom teachers.

Their graduation ceremony was especially gratifying. Her departing students had been

accepted to leading Moscow colleges and universities, and one was even headed for the renowned University of Virginia.

It is a tough job being a schoolteacher in Moscow. I know because I occasionally teach in high school myself. The pay is dismally low, but the responsibility is very high. Conducting a single bad lesson or saying the wrong thing just once can kill a student's interest in a subject for years — even a lifetime. University professors carry less responsibility in this respect because their students are nearly adults and their interest in a subject is less affected by the instructor's personality and influence.

Good teachers can never relax on the job. They always strive to make their classes interesting and substantive, even if they also have three or four children to raise at home.

At the same time, the reward for teachers' dedicated labor comes only years after their students have graduated from school. Earning a university degree is only the first step toward becoming the kind of person who a schoolteacher can take pride in. Natasha's graduates are well on their way to that goal, but school performance alone is a notoriously unreliable indicator of later success in life.

Like many other commentators and analysts, I spend too much time writing about Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, President Dmitry Medvedev, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the "big" issues and problems that Russia faces today. Of course, sometimes there is good reason to discuss such questions because every country goes through certain historical turning points in its development. September alone was full of significant events, from Putin announcing the tandem switch at the United Russian convention to the ousting of former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin quickly thereafter.

This type of breaking news is interesting for any commentator or journalist. But it is important to remember what is truly important and what is not in the larger scope of life development. Natasha, with her sincere desire to raise a family and help her students become successful adults, might not make headlines, but it is people like her that are really moving my country forward — one good deed at a time.

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