

# Small school as a sociocultural center in rural settlements of the North-East of Russia: search for the ways to preserve and develop

## La pequeña escuela como centro sociocultural en asentamientos rurales del noreste de Rusia: Búsqueda de formas para su preservación y desarrollo

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#### ABSTRACT:

The article reveals the positive experience of creating socio-cultural centers in rural settlements on the basis of small schools with the aim of preserving and developing them in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) as the largest administrative-territorial division in the North-East of Russia, since periodically there are trends related to the threat of closing such schools as 'economically unprofitable', although it should be noted that in Russia the ability of regional executive authorities to carry out their educational policies aimed at seeking opportunities to save a rural school as a center of social, cultural and economic life of the population has been retained successfully for all previous years.

**Keywords:** rural school, small/underfilled school, North, Yakutia, socio-cultural center, educational policy, traditional culture

#### RESUMEN:

El artículo revela la experiencia positiva de crear centros socioculturales en asentamientos rurales sobre la base de pequeñas escuelas con el objetivo de preservarlas y desarrollarlas en la República de Sakha (Yakutia) como la división administrativo-territorial más grande en el noreste de Rusia, ya que periódicamente hay tendencias relacionadas con la amenaza de cerrar tales escuelas como "económicamente no rentables", aunque debe señalarse que en Rusia la capacidad de las autoridades ejecutivas regionales para llevar a cabo sus políticas educativas apunta a buscar oportunidades para salvar una escuela rural como centro de vida social, cultural y económica de la población se ha conservado con éxito durante todos los años anteriores.

**Palabras clave:** escuela rural, escuela pequeña / incompleta, norte, Yakutia, centro sociocultural, política educativa, cultura tradicional

# 1. Introduction

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is one of the northern regions, a significant part of which is the territory of the Arctic Circumpolar Zone. Undoubtedly, ensuring the quality of life in the harsh conditions of the North and, above all, ensuring the quality education for children and obtaining sufficient educational and instructional potential for the development of the abilities and talents of the younger generation, which will contribute to an incremental innovation development of Russian society is an important condition to populate the northern territories of the Russian Federation.

## 1.1. Brief information about the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) of the Russian Federation

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is a constituent entity of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern Federal District. The area of the republic is more than 3 million square kilometers. More than 950 thousand people live in this vast territory. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is represented by 5 territorial zones (northern, eastern, southern, western and central ones), which include 34 municipal districts (uluses) and 2 urban districts. There is one city with a population of over 300 thousand people in the republic, the other 17 cities have a population of less than 60 thousand inhabitants (Neryungri, Mirny), in the remaining 15 settlements that have the status of a city, the average population ranges from 10 to 20 thousand. In total, there are 18 urban and 365 rural settlements (naslegs) in the republic (TB FSSS RS (YA), 2016).

During the Soviet period, the network of primary and secondary schools successfully covered all the corners of the vast territory of the republic. Today, in the conditions of a market economy and per capita financing of schools, the situation with the preservation of rural schools becomes a condition for preserving the traditional way of life and, perhaps, preserving the rights of the indigenous peoples of the North-East of Russia to receive quality school education.

## 1.2. The relevance of the problem under study

Assessing the state of the educational resources of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), it is necessary to note the impact of the ongoing demographic and migration processes. During the recent four years (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), the population of Yakutia has decreased, and primarily among the able-bodied population (TB FSSS RS (YA), 2016). The above demographic situation in our republic is reflected in the indicators of educational institutions.

Measures taken by the Government of the Russian Federation to support the birth rate of the population brought their results, which contributed to the beginning of a positive demographic dynamics in the growth of the population of the RS (Y). This situation influenced the increase in the number of pupils attending the primary classes of general education organizations. From 2011-2012 to 2015-2016 academic year, in the day general schools of the republic, the number of pupils attending primary classes increased by 4.5%. The growth of the number of pupils is observed especially in urban areas of the republic mainly due to internal migration and urbanization. In the rural areas, there is a migration outflow and a natural decline, as a result, the number of the rural population decreases annually, for example, from 2011 to 2015, it reduced by 11.471 people (3.5%). Despite these processes, majority of schools are represented by rural general education organizations in the republic. On average, according to statistics of the Ministry of Education of the RS (Y) for 2016, there are 28.3% of urban schools and 71.3% of rural schools (Zhukova and Malyshev, 2011).

Comprehensive measures are being taken in the territory of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) aimed at promoting positive demographic development, including the implementation of forms of government support for Russian families for the birth of children (maternity capital), improving the accessibility and quality of medical services, the construction of

maternity homes and kindergartens, support for private entrepreneurs, etc. The increase in the birth rate leads to the appropriate increase in the demand for preschool education services and aggravates the problem of the shortage of seats in the existing educational institutions. The growth of internal migration, which is a consequence of intensive urbanization, results in overloading to pre-school educational institutions of cities and settlements of urban type.

The average occupancy rate per class is calculated at least 7 children according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. Consequently, the occupancy rate ranging from 8 to 14 children is an average indicator; that from 15 to 25 children is a high indicator of classroom occupancy rate. Higher children's occupancy rate per class is typical for central regions, but even in this zone in rural areas the average occupancy does not exceed 12 persons. In the city of Yakutsk, the classroom occupancy rate exceeds the standard of 25 children, reaching 40 and more children in the class. Apart from Yakutsk, schools throughout the territory of Yakutia are represented by underfilled schools. Thus, the average indicator in the western zone has decreased from 10 pupils to 9 since 2011. The smallest indicator (3-4 children in the class) is more common in the settlements of the Arctic zone, although owing to the central inhabited localities the average figure is approaching the indicators of the western zone (9 pupils). A significant decrease in the number of pupils has been observed in the southern zone in the last five years (the average figure fell from 11 pupils to 7), where the population was engaged in the extractive industry, and migration to the central cities had a significant impact on the number of children at schools. But the lowest indicator is typical for the eastern zone, where the classroom occupancy rate, including schools in district centers, does not exceed 8 pupils for all these years (Zhukova and Malyshev, 2011: 6].

As can be seen, throughout the republic the average occupancy of the primary classes of rural schools is characterized by low filling. The highest classroom occupancy rate is identified in the central zone of the republic, the lowest one is in the eastern zone, and the areas that belong to this group are considered to be almost northern uluses, such as the Oymyakonsky ulus, known as the Pole of Cold and the coldest place on the planet, where the lowest temperature in the world (-72%) was recorded. On average, in all areas of the republic, except for the central one, there is a slight decrease in the average primary school occupancy from 2011 to 2016.

The rural population is unevenly distributed within the republic. The character of agricultural production affects the prevalence of the number of small villages. In small settlements, the school serves as a socio-cultural center of the village, and is also a production and socio-economic factor. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a forced discussion of the possibility of carrying out a phased transfer of underfilled educational organizations that implement educational programs for pre-school education, primary general education, basic general education, secondary general education into the branches of educational organizations; and starting from 2014 it was proposed to liquidate or reorganize small educational organizations that implement educational programs for pre-school education, primary general education, basic general education, secondary education, with class occupancy rate up to 10 pupils and (or) learners. This is conditioned by the desire of the state to ensure the high quality of education for children as a result of the enlargement of basic schools, and at the same time the need to reduce the costs of maintaining educational organizations with a small number of pupils. Thus, in the republic since 2011 general educational organizations for children of preschool and primary school age (kindergarten-primary school) have decreased quantitatively by 7 organizations. This trend can be explained by the need for enlargement of educational organizations in the context of the introduction of per capita financing, strengthening the material and technical base and resources of each individual school.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize that the closure or transformation of a school into a secondary school branch in a rural settlement will eventually result in the resettlement of the able-bodied population into urban settlements and large rural settlements, which will lead to the liquidation of the settlement as a whole, since a settlement without an educational institution has no prospects for socio-cultural development. At the same time,

we all understand that it is the preservation of a rural school in Russia that is a prerequisite for the development of rural settlements, the development of agriculture, the traditional way of life of peoples, and preservation of the culture and traditions of peoples. According to M.P. Guryanova, a well-known Russian scientist on the problem of raising children in rural environment, "for contemporary Russia it is strategically important that the space of residence, being the most important part of the society, becomes a space for children upbringing, a territory of positive influence of the adult lifestyle, their behavior and attitudes towards values of the society on children. It should be filled with creative, constructive, socially useful work of citizens; public control over the social security of people, and especially children; quoteworthy examples of public assistance to people who need the support of others" (Guryanova, 2016). This kind of pedagogization is possible provided that the rural society has a general education school as the driving center for this process. It should be noted that a small school performs significant socio- and culture-establishing functions in the countryside, being at the same time the center of cultural, sporting, and public life of the villagers.

In the conditions of the North, characterized by low population density, great remoteness from the center, poorly developed transport infrastructure, a low school occupancy rate and the practice of the teacher's versatility in teaching, the issues of providing the quality of implementing new requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard of Basic Education that are related to ensuring the conditions for the implementation of school educational programs become relevant. In order to find a way out of the existing situation in terms of preserving underfilled schools and improving the quality of their activities, a model of a sociocultural rural center was developed; the effectiveness of its implementation is considered in this article.

Thus, currently a far-reaching possibility has emerged to create a social and pedagogical environment, a system of social, cultural, spiritual, material and informational conditions in accordance with the goals, tasks and requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard of General Education by combining rural resources into a sociocultural educational complex.

**The objective of the article** is to reveal the problem of preserving the underfilled schools in the North-East of Russia based on the example of the republic and describe the experience of organizing a socio-cultural center by combining the resources of a small school, a kindergarten, a cultural center, a sports gymnasium and a library, under the normative financing of educational organizations, which is supported by the community and the population of the republic, as a promising life-supporting project, contributing to the increase of human, material and financial resources of the underfilled school. In turn, it is the rural school that remains the mainstay of preserving the traditional natural way of life and legacy of the indigenous peoples of the North-East of Russia.

### **1.3. Literature review**

As part of the analysis of this problem, the actual requirements for the organization of the educational process in a small rural school in accordance with the generally accepted Russian school practice were studied, including the peculiarities of the teachers' work in mixed-age classes, described in detail by L.V. Bayborodova (2013). The ideas of creating a sociocultural center proposed in this article practically confirm the content of the Concept of the Small School Development in Russia, presented by V. Obukhov (2010), who defined the need to search for different models of small schools and regulatory support for their activities. The authors have studied the technologies of differentiating the education of children in classes with low occupancy, which are described by M.I. Zaikin and coauthors (2008).

And also this article includes materials from the works of N.D. Neustroev (2013), who is the leading researcher of the problems of an underfilled school in Yakutia. The urgency of preserving rural schools and the importance of establishing a foothold for young people in rural areas is emphasized by other well-known researchers, such as N.V. Baigulova and E.E. Sartakova (2009), A.M. Lobok (2007), E.V. Bondarevskaya (2001), N.P. Vitenko, and P.P.

Pivnenko (2015).

To compare the status and prospects for the development of rural schools in other Arctic regions, the articles of such authors as G. Karlberg-Granlund, (2011), J. Halsey (2011), A. Raggl, (2015), Mathews and coauthors (2008), K. Aðalsteinsdóttir, (2008) were studied and analyzed.

## 2. Methodology

A sociological study in the form of a written questionnaire survey was conducted in 32 districts of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), with coverage of 3007 people. The questionnaires were processed by the method of percentage rating of the answers received for certain questions and by the content analysis method in the part of open questions. Information about the participants in the survey is given in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Age, gender and social composition of  
people taking part in the 2016 research

Age	18-24 years	14.0
	25-34 years	27.9
	35-49 years	31.5
	50-64 years	19.0
	65 years and older	4.5
Gender	Not specified	3.1
	Male	35.6
	Female	61.5
	Not specified	2.9
Education	Secondary school/not completed secondary school	10.3
	primary technical school	2.7
	vocational secondary education	27.4
	higher education	55.8
	academic title available	0.5
	Not specified	3.2
Social status	employed	80.2
	student	6.9
	not employed pensioner	4.8

	in recess	4.6
	Not specified	3.4

To analyze the current situation in the education system of Yakutia, the authors analyzed the annual statistical monitoring data by the RF Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the annual statistical data of the relevant executive authority of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), conducted a sociological survey of the population, including a questionnaire survey of the residents of municipal districts of all 5 territorial zones of the republic, including 32 districts. The number of respondents totaled 3007 people. The survey suggested a written anonymous questioning of citizens and rural residents, the sample was random.

### 3. Results

For the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the low occupancy of rural schools is a socio-economic regularity; most of these schools are located significantly removed from the cultural and educational centers of the republic and from each other. At the same time, the preservation and development of small rural schools as a socio-pedagogical, family and public education, a translator of spiritual and material national culture, a village-forming, demographic, production, socio-cultural factor in the specific conditions of the North becomes a condition for the preservation and national revival of the peoples of the North, which finds reflection in the Strategy of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025, and also in the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and national security for the period up to 2030.

The creation of a single socio-cultural educational complex presupposes the unification of the resources of rural cultural, sport and educational institutions within the framework of a single legal entity – an educational institution.

The unification of the resources of rural institutions ensures:

- improving the quality of education, the successful coordinated and continuous additional education of children;
- improving the material and technical base of the rural school, complete and optimal use of the buildings, facilities, property and equipment of the village in the interests of quality education for rural youth and children;
- saving costs for the maintenance of facilities;
- increasing the budget of a rural school with a small number of pupils;
- attracting young qualified and competitive teachers to rural schools;
- preserving a village with a small population.

Improvement of the financing of sociocultural school complexes cannot help creating more favorable opportunities for maximizing the use of the organizations' resources in order to fully develop the personality of the rural pupil.

The underfilled rural schools of Verkhnevilyuyskiy ulus, such as the Kharbalakhskiy secondary school (Principal V.A. Rufov) and the Onkhoy basic school (Principal V.M. Konstantinov) exemplified the effectiveness and gains in performance of such a model. Let us consider the experience of the Kharbalakhskiy school, where the village had a school, a kindergarten, a health unit, a community center, a museum, a post office, and an administration. The population is engaged in agriculture. The distance to the ulus center is 45 km, the nearest village is located in 10 km, transport link with the ulus center is provided by the shuttle bus. The population is over 500 inhabitants. The number of able-bodied population is about half of the inhabitants (260 persons). Apparently there are few institutions in the village, and the school is the center of the whole life of the rural community.

According to the current regulations, this school was considered underfilled with the number of pupils up to 90 people. The school principal conducted explanatory work among the village public and approval was accepted for the creation of a sociocultural center in the

village at the premises of the school. Unification of the school and kindergarten allowed increasing the number of learners to the norm above 100 pupils, switching to an alternative financing system and expanding the capacity of the educational organization for the comprehensive development of children. Added rural community center and library has made it possible to intensify the activities of these institutions in the direction of the development of village children, to include them in the planned educational work of the entire school. Previously, this work was complicated, because subordinating to different departments, these institutions conducted scattered unsystematic work; there were difficulties with access of the school pupils to the material base without numerous approvals and lengthy correspondence. The increase in funding has enabled to improve the hot meals for children, to strengthen work in terms of continuity of preschool and school levels, and, equally important to increase incentive payments to teachers, their motivation and established foothold for young teachers in the rural school. This experience was supported by nearby schools, which also decided to restructure.

### **3.1. Discussion**

A survey among the respondents on the attitude towards such unification of the general education school and kindergarten showed understanding of the importance of such a step by the population for improving the resource base and, as a result, improving the quality of education in the small rural school.

Out of 3007 surveyed persons, 53% spoke positively for the creation of school complexes aimed at supporting small schools in the republic. In our opinion, respondents from regions where the population is familiar with the problems of underfilled schools, such as Megino-Kangalassky (78.9%), Oleneksky (60.6%), Tomponsky (60.9%), Ust-Aldansky (62.6%), Verkhnevilyuysky (64.9%), the Vilyuisky (61.7%) uluses demonstrated the greatest understanding. The residents of cities and major regional centers were unfamiliar with this problem and found it difficult to answer.

Since 2014, in the republic the number of small schools has decreased by 42 schools (there were 249 schools in 2014 and 207 schools in 2016), also due to the unification of all the resources of educational organizations in one village, including kindergarten pupils, which allows breaking ranks with the underfilled schools, increasing the per capita financing and, strengthening the material and technical base of the rural school. The population understands well this necessity and the growing tendency, since the sociological survey conducted in 137 settlements showed that more than half of the population actively support such an undertaking (Zhukova and Malyshev, 2011: 4).

At the same time, a question was asked in the sociological study about the prospects for the small schools. The respondents of the Verkhnekolymsky and Verkhoyansky districts voted for preserving the underfilled schools at the highest percentages, which is 70% and 65.4%. These uluses, located in the Arctic zone, are especially familiar with the difficulties of living in extreme conditions. In general, this survey showed that the answer in favor of the closure of small schools was not supported by the majority of the population in any region of Yakutia.

According to E.V. Bondarevskaya and P.P. Pivnenko (2001), P.P. Pivnenko (2002), N.P. Vitenko (2015), the main goal of educating rural schoolchildren is upbringing men of culture capable of becoming sound stewards of their land, being aware of their responsibility for ecological health of their land, the processes of village renovation and revival of traditions.

Considering the global trends and perspectives of preserving underfilled schools, the authors examined the works of researchers from the United States, Finland, Norway, Canada, Iceland, which also raise the problems of content and quality of rural small schools.

According to Finnish scholar G. Karlberg-Granlund, 513 schools were closed or enlarged in Finland from 2005 to 2009, but the author emphasizes by his research that working in a small rural Finnish school requires the teacher to maximize all competences, and enables to get professional satisfaction due to full interaction with children and their parents, the ability to observe their personal contribution to the development of children in the long term. The

author underlines that the effectiveness of the educational process, owing to the possibilities of individualization, is higher in schools where the number of children is less than 50 pupils, than in large schools. This article analyzes the reasons and motives that move the modern rural educator to work in the situation of the threat of redundancy in a remote village with children of different ages. Consequently, the role of rural Finnish schools in the development of the country's educational potential should be highly appreciated by the state and government (Karlberg-Granlund, 2011).

Also noting the policy of reducing the small rural schools in the history of Australian education, D. Halsey writes about the growing role of the rural school in the conditions of the future demographic growth in Australia until 2050, and the food security of the country becoming urgent in this connection and the need to strengthen the position of the rural school. The author emphasizes the importance of revising the state educational policy with regard to rural schools, which account for 45% of all Australian schools (Halsey, 2011).

K. Aðalsteinsdóttir (2008) studies the same issues about the importance of a small rural school in Iceland, where this type of schools is also predominant. The author describes in detail the advantages of the rural school with regard to the implementation of an individual and personality-oriented approach, the close interaction of the rural teacher with the rural community, and the need for special teacher training to work in rural schools with mixed-age classes.

An article written by a group of American authors is of interest in this respect; they have revealed an increasing trend in the central big cities of dividing schools into small schools, because schools supported by educational funds with the aim of improving the quality of the educational process have begun restructuring within themselves. The authors note that in small schools up to 500 students, the work with pupils is more effectively organized, as each pupil receives the necessary share of attention to their own needs and wants. Training becomes more targeted, and consequently, the future belongs to the small schools, according to the authors (Mathews, 2008).

A special attitude was expressed by A.M. Lobok (2007), having familiarized himself with the life of many Yakut villages: the most important characteristic of the life of the Yakut village is a marked sense of dignity. Every Yakut nasleg, no matter how small and wherever it is territorially, is experiencing itself as a world, as a community of people being undoubtedly significant for each other, proud of their origin and the cultural micro world that they have been building together for hundreds of years (Lobok, 2007).

This micro world can be destroyed by following the path of closing the hearths and homes of education – general schools around which the entire socio-economic and cultural life of each remote northern village is built, which is contrary to the strategic goals of developing the Arctic territory of Russia.

This analysis of general trends in the development of school education makes it possible to conclude rather about the increasing discussion by the pedagogical world community of the importance of finding ways to individualize the educational process, which is possible precisely in a small and underfilled school than about the trend toward enlarging and optimizing schools at the present stage. As can be seen, the researchers from different countries write about the importance of a rural school, predicting the significance of the rural school role as a condition for the development of the country's agriculture and its food security. Thus, the search for different models of a modern rural school is a way to preserve and revive it as a center for the socio-cultural and economic life of a small village, which are the mainstay of preserving and developing the viability and culture of any people.

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## 4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the current situation with small rural schools in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), often characterized by the threat of optimization and closure, it is possible to maximize their functioning by searching for adequate measures and internal resources by regional executive bodies implementing their national and regional educational policy. The authors reveal the necessity and possibility of preserving the underfilled schools of the



North-East of Russia, as exemplified by the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The experience of organizing a socio-cultural center in a rural area is described by unifying the resources of a small school, a kindergarten, a cultural center, a sports gymnasium and a library in the conditions of the normative financing of educational organizations, which is supported by community of the republic, as a promising life-supporting project, contributing to the increase of human, material and financial resources of a small school. In turn, it is the rural school that remains the village-forming, demographic, manufacturing, and socio-cultural factor that ensures the well-being and quality of life of the population in the North and provides preservation and development of the traditional nature-friendly lifestyle and activities of the indigenous peoples of the North-East of Russia.

The authors rely on the results of studies by foreign authors, which justify such provisions: teaching in a small underfilled school provides teachers with more fruitful individual work with pupils, the possibility of comprehensive development of their personality than in large schools; the role of rural schools in the development of the country's educational potential should be highly appreciated by the state and government. The advantages of the rural school are being developed with regard to the implementation of an individual and person-oriented approach, close interaction of the rural teacher with the rural community, special training of teachers for working in rural schools with mixed-aged classes and others. Thus, the search for models of a modern rural school that are adequate to specific local conditions is a way to preserve and revive it as a necessary condition for the social and economic development of the territories of any state.

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