

Sukhomlinsky News

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The power of thought and language

The Power of Words

The following extract is taken from *I will tell you a story: Philosophy for children* (pp 14-15).

I believe in the limitless power of an educator's words. Words are the most subtle and at the same time the sharpest instrument that we as teachers can use to touch the hearts of our pupils. Educating through our words is the most complex and difficult part of pedagogy and of school life. It is completely absurd to say that verbal education is a vice that afflicts many of our schools. What we should be talking about is the primitive nature of verbal education, about the inability of some teachers to educate through their words.

I consider a teacher's words to be a most essential and most subtle form of contact between a person who is convinced of the value of their own philosophy of life and the heart of a young person *thirsting to be good*. Note that we are speaking of contact between conviction and a *thirst to be good*, to be better today than we were yesterday. Only when these two things meet does true education take place. Consequently, education through words is only possible when you are dealing with an *educable* person. The creation of human *educability* is the leitmotif of ethical education.

The things that make a child educable are joy, happiness and an optimistic outlook. A truly humane pedagogy protects the joy and happiness that is every child's right. Let me tell you about something that happened in my own practice:

Zoya, a grade three student, left home joyful and happy. The night before her mother and father had sat by her bed for a long time, telling her stories, and when she was sleepy, they kissed her and wished her happy dreams about a bright sun. Zoya dreamt of a bright sun, a green meadow as wide as the ocean, of yellow dandelions, buzzing bumblebees and the song of the lark...

Zoya's classmate Mitya left home pale, sad and thoughtful. The night before his parents had shouted at each other for a long time. His mother had cried.

[Continued on page 3.]

In this issue of our newsletter I am continuing my translation of Sukhomlinsky's One Hundred Pieces of Advice for Teachers with the tenth chapter, which continues the discussion of the importance of extracurricular reading begun in last month's newsletter.

I have also translated an extract from I will tell you a story: Philosophy for children, which looks at the power of words in ethical education. The little stories for children that are included in each newsletter should be read in the context of Sukhomlinsky's reflections on 'educability' that are included here.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Working with 'difficult students'

The tenth chapter in Sukhomlinsky's collection of advice for young teachers continues to look at the role of extracurricular reading in providing an 'intellectual background' for studying the curriculum.

10. Working with 'difficult' students

Hardly any teacher will disagree that one of the hardest 'nuts to crack' in educational work is working with 'difficult' students. These students need three to five times more time to understand and memorise material than the majority of the class does. These students forget what they have studied a day later, and instead of needing to complete revision exercises in three or four months, need to do so in two or three weeks. Thirty years of educational work has convinced me that for these students, the 'second program', discussed above [see previous newsletter], plays an exceptionally important role. For these children limiting instruction to the bare essentials is especially harmful. It dulls their wits and accustoms them to rote learning. I have tried many means of lightening the intellectual work of these students, and have come to the conclusion that the most effective means is to widen the scope of their reading. Yes, these students need to read as much as possible. Working with grades three and four [senior primary classes], and grades five to eight [junior secondary classes], I always took great care to select reading material for each 'difficult' student: books and articles in an attractive format that developed an understanding of concepts, generalisations and scientific terms. With these children it is important to stimulate as many questions as possible about the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world, so that they will come to me with their questions. That is a very important precondition for their intellectual development. In what 'difficult' children read, in what they encounter in the surrounding world, from time to time they must discover things that amaze them and awaken a sense of wonder. This is a practice I have always observed in my work with 'difficult' children, and I advise all teachers to do likewise. The apathy, inertia and weakness of the neurons

of the brain's cortex may be treated by a sense of wonder and amazement, just as weak muscles may be treated with physical exercise. It is difficult to say what happens in children's heads when they discover something that amazes or astonishes them, but hundreds of observations have led me to the conclusion that the moment of amazement or astonishment triggers a mighty stimulus that awakens the brain and intensifies its operations.

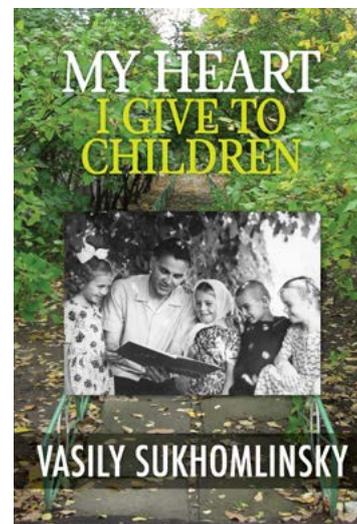
I will never forget little Fedya. I taught him for five years, from grade three to grade eight. His great stumbling block was arithmetic and the multiplication tables. I became convinced that he simply could not remember the elements of a problem. He could not form a conception of the objects and phenomena at the basis of the problem. As soon as his thought moved from one element of the problem to the next, he forgot what the first element was. There were children similar to Fedya in other classes, though overall there were not very many of them. I compiled a special collection of problems for these children. It contained about 200 problems, mostly taken from folk pedagogy. Each problem consisted on an engaging story. The overwhelming majority of them did not require arithmetical operations for their solution, but rather reflection and thought. Here are two of the problems from my 'Book of problems for distracted and inattentive students':

1. *Three shepherds, tired out by the summer heat, lay down under a tree to rest, and fell asleep. A mischievous shepherd boy blackened the foreheads of the sleeping shepherds with the 'ink balls' from an oak tree. When they woke up all three began to laugh, but each one thought the other two shepherds were laughing at each other. Then one of the shepherds stopped laughing. He realised that his forehead was also blackened. How did he realise this?*

2. *In the wide Ukrainian steppes in ancient times there were two villages*

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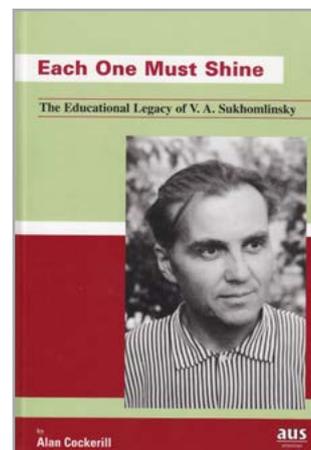
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not far from each other, the village of Truth Sayers and the village of Liars. People in the village of Truth Sayers always spoke the truth, and people in the village of Liars always lied. If you managed to travel to ancient times and landed in one of those two villages you could find out which village you had landed in just by asking a single question of the first villager you met. What question should you ask?

At first we just read the problems, as interesting little stories about birds and animals, insects and plants. It took quite a while for Fedya to realise that the stories were problems. The boy began to think about one of the simplest problems, and with my help was able to solve it. He was amazed by the simplicity of the solution. 'Does that mean every one of these problems has a solution?' asked Fedya. For days you could not separate him from that book of problems. He experienced every solution as a major victory. He copied the problem he had solved into a special exercise book set up for that purpose, and next to the text he drew the problem—birds,

animals and plants.

I compiled a special library for Fedya. It contained about a hundred books and pamphlets that the boy read from grades three through to seven. Then we created another library, containing about two hundred little books, which was used by three other students, as well as by Fedya, over a period of two years. Some of the books and pamphlets were directly related to what was being studied in lessons, while others had no direct connection, but I thought they provided a sort of gymnastics for the mind.

By grade five Fedya had caught up to the other students: he began to solve the same arithmetical problems as them. In grade six the boy developed a sudden interest in physics. He became an active member of a club for young designers. The more interested he became in this creative work, the more he read. He did experience other difficulties in study, especially in history and literature, but each new difficulty was overcome through reading.

After completing grade seven,

Fedya entered a technical college, and became a highly qualified tradesman, expert in setting up machine tools.

Not once did I conduct with this student, or with any other student, supplementary lessons with the aim of memorising material that had not been mastered during lessons. I taught children to read and to think. The reading seemed to induce or awaken thought.

Remember, the more difficult the child, the more apparently insurmountable obstacles they encounter in their studies, the more they need to read. Reading teaches them to think, and thought is the stimulus that awakens the powers of the mind. Books, and the living thought stimulated by books, are the most powerful means of avoiding rote learning, a great evil that blunts the mind. The more students think, the more they are puzzled by what they see in the surrounding world, the more receptive they become to knowledge, and the easier it is for you, as a teacher, to work with them.

On the power of words (continued from page 1)

Mitya could not get to sleep for a long time, and in his dreams he saw his mother's tearful eyes.

Zoya and Mitya walked to school together. The little girl was happily chattering about something. Mitya wanted to think about what she was saying, in order to dispel his own sad thoughts, but he could not. All he could think of was his mother's sad eyes, full of tears. The boy wanted to cry himself.

Suddenly Zoya exclaimed:

'Look, Mitya, there are cranes in the sky! A whole flock of them... It's spring, it's spring. Look how beautiful they are! The cranes are blue! Sky blue cranes, look, Mitya, look!'

'They're not blue, they're grey...' said Mitya quietly.

'They're not grey, they're blue! How can a blue bird look grey to you?' asks Zoya in surprise.

The children come to school. Zoya comes up to me and says:

'When we were walking to school, there were some blue cranes flying in the sky. But Mitya said they were grey. How can they be grey? I saw them with my own eyes and they were blue.'

There are some children's questions that are painful to hear, and terribly difficult to answer. Education does not have such magical power as to make a person happy independently of their circumstances, but education is obliged to protect that incomparable spiritual inheritance, the joy and happiness that make up a little heart's spiritual wealth. And if a child's soul does encounter grief, we must remember that we are dealing with a person who needs peace of mind, who needs to have their suffering, confusion and disappointment lifted, and then to be given joy, the joy without which a crane will never appear blue. If your child sees the world with optimism, if they perceive the beauty and fragility in everything that surrounds them, they will be easier to educate. They will listen eagerly to your every word.

Beauty makes a person educable, more precisely, a spiritual life in the world of the beautiful. My ideal is that literally every child should perceive beauty, stand before it in wonder, and make the beautiful a part of their spiritual life, feeling the beauty of words and images. The world of beauty that surrounds us is inexhaustible and limitless. Find a way to reveal this world in such a way that words resonate in a child's soul like music, so that the quest to find words to express that beauty brings incomparable joy to a child. Once the music of words begins to resonate in a child's soul they will become receptive to your educational influence. Your words, your ethical guidance, will reach the hidden recesses of their soul and awaken a desire to be good.



Stories for Children

Yura is sitting in his sled...

Three grade three students—Yura, Kolya and Petya—took their sleds to a big hill. The ground was frozen and generously covered in snow. A sled track ran from the top of the hill to the bottom.

The boys sat in their sleds and pushed off. The sleds went faster and faster. Half way down they were going so fast the wind whistled in their ears. It was such fun to fly down from the top of the hill: the headlong descent took their breath away. The children reached the bottom of the hill. The sleds slowed down and came to a stop right in middle of a frozen pond.

The boys looked back up the hill.

'Wow, what a big hill!' they said. 'We'll have to drag our sleds all the way up again.' Kolya and Petya dragged their sleds up the hill. It was hard going, but they knew that after the difficult climb they would enjoy the easy headlong flight to the bottom.

But Yura took a few steps and stopped.

'It's really hard climbing this hill,' he thought. 'I'll have a rest here at the bottom.'

Yura sat in his sled and rested. He saw Petya and Kolya reach the top of the hill, and then come flying down in their sleds, but he just sat there. He was freezing, but he still just sat there.

Petya and Kolya climbed the hill again, and came flying down again, but Yura just sat there.

Yura wanted to ride his sled down the hill, he really did... But he didn't want to drag his sled up the hill.

Yura sat in his sled until evening, while Petya and Kolya flew down the hill again and again.

The horse ran away

The mathematics teacher gave the grade four students a problem to solve independently. All of them leant over their exercise books and concentrated on their work.

Vitya was sitting in the back row. He had completed the problem. Suddenly a note fell on his desk.

'That's probably another note from Petya,' thought Vitya. 'I bet he wants to borrow my skates again. Why should I always lend him my skates?'

'Ivan Petrovich,' said Vitya, raising his hand, 'Someone threw me a note... Are you allowed to write notes during the lesson?'

'You're not allowed write notes during the lesson,' said Ivan Petrovich. 'But if someone did write you a note, then it's not good to tell the teacher about it, Vitya. A note is a secret that should only be known to you and your friend. And you are exposing that secret. Take the note, hide it, and read it during the break...'

Vitya's face turned red. The class fell silent. From time to time some of the boys looked at Vitya, and in their eyes he saw surprise and indignation.

Vitya opened the note and read it. 'Vitya,' Petya had written, 'I have drawn a horse with a fiery mane for you. If you want, I can give it to you.'

During the break Vitya went up to Petya.

'Give me the horse,' said Vitya.

'The horse ran away...' answered Petya quietly.

The rubbish heap

Zina is already in grade two. Her mother wants her to start helping and says:

'Zina, I would like you to sweep the house every day and take the rubbish out to the rubbish heap.'

Zina begins to sweep the house every day, but she does not want to take the swept rubbish out to the rubbish heap. It is quite a long way to walk, on the other side of the vegetable garden. She looks at the rubbish heap, which is surrounded by a little fence, and thinks, 'I could just sweep the rubbish under the wardrobe.'

Zina sweeps the house and puts the rubbish under her wardrobe, which is next to her bed.

One day Zina comes home from school and sees her mum and dad sitting together. They take the wardrobe and move it. Where the wardrobe had been is a whole pile of rubbish.

Zina hangs her head and her face turns red.

Her father brings the little fence from outside and puts it around the rubbish. 'What are you doing, Dad?' asks Zina.

We need to put a fence around the rubbish heap. It's not out behind the vegetable garden anymore; it's in the house.

Dad puts the fence around the rubbish, and moves Zina's bed next to the rubbish heap.

Zina is embarrassed and begs:

'Oh, Dad! I'll take the rubbish out! I don't want the rubbish heap to be in our house.'

Zina gets a bucket and takes the rubbish out behind the vegetable garden. Then she washes the floor.

