

Sukhomlinsky News

No. 31
January 2018



Developing language and thought

In this month's extract from *Pavlysh Secondary School*, Sukhomlinsky describes how he brought students' thinking processes to life through interaction with the natural environment.

When each teacher delves deeper and deeper each day into the details and intricacies of the education process, analysing their work and the mental work of their students, there is, figuratively speaking, a kindling of living thought amongst the staff, who seek answers to the questions posed by life itself. An educational idea provides the wings upon which collective innovation can soar. An idea inspires the staff, and there begins the most interesting and necessary thing in the life of a school—collective research.

Twenty years ago, while analysing one of the lessons I had visited, I began thinking about why students' answers were so dismal, so colourless and inexpressive. Why were children's words so lacking in their own, living thoughts? I began to record these answers, to analyse students' vocabulary, and the logical and stylistic elements of their speech. I realized that many of the words and phrases that students used were not connected in their consciousness with clear concepts, or with the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world.

Analysing observations at my own lessons, and those of my colleagues, I tried to find answers to the following questions. How does a word find its way into a child's consciousness? How does it become an instrument of thought? How does a child learn to think with the help of words? How does thought, in its turn, develop speech? What were the weaknesses afflicting the educational management of that most complex and subtle thing in the spiritual life of a school—of a child's thought?

[continued on the next page]

Education for the Anthropocene

We live during the Anthropocene, a geological age when the dominant influence upon the planet is the human population. According to some scientists, the Anthropocene began with the migration around the world of settlers from Europe, and accelerated during the industrial revolution. The Anthropocene has been characterised by mass migration of humans around the globe, an explosion in the human population, competition for resources, exponential growth in species extinctions, ever accelerating growth in scientific knowledge, technology, and communication networks, and by climate change and environmental degradation.

During the Anthropocene it is crucial that our education systems develop an awareness and understanding of the natural environment upon which we are totally dependent, and a willingness to live in a way that is sustainable.

I have written an article about Sukhomlinsky's relevance in this context, which can be viewed at: <http://www.msvu.ca/site/media/msvu/International%20Conversations%20of%20Teacher%20Educators%20Dec%2013.pdf> (Pages 94-110.)

This month's extract from Pavlysh Secondary School is also relevant to this theme.

*Best wishes,
Alan Cockerill*

From Pavlysh Secondary School [cont.]

My research focused mainly on my own work, my own lessons and the answers of my students. One child, for example, told about the journey of a drop of water. I was looking for an account of the awakening of the first spring streams, of spring rains, of a rainbow, of the quiet lapping of a sleeping lake. These are things about which a child should speak, describing the world that surrounds them, and feeling themselves to be a part of living nature. But what do I hear? Tortured, clumsy phrases learnt by rote: word combinations, the meaning of which is hazy to the child. I listen carefully, and reflect on the children's speech, and I gradually come to the conviction that we, as teachers, do not teach a child how to think. From the very beginning of their school lives we close a door on the captivating world of the childrens' natural surroundings, so they stop listening to the babbling streams, the sound of spring raindrops and the song of the lark. They just learn by heart dry, colourless sentences about all these wonderful things.

I took my grade five class to the school orchard. Half the sky was covered with a dove-grey rain cloud. The sun lit up a rainbow. The apples trees were in bloom: milk-white, pink and red, and the air was filled with the quiet humming of bees.

'What do you see, children? What excites you, delights you or amazes you?' I asked my companions. Their eyes sparkled joyfully, but they struggled to express their thoughts, to find suitable words. My heart ached for the children: words had entered their consciousness unaccompanied by vivid images. Instead of being exposed to sweet-scented, living flowers,

they had been presented with dried flowers, pressed between the pages of a book, only faintly resembling the living reality.

No, we should not continue like that. Forgetting about the most important source of knowledge—the surrounding world of nature—we push children towards a world of rote learning, and in so doing, blunt their thought. We forget the lessons learnt by classic educators such as Comenius, Pestalozzi, Ushinsky and Diesterweg.

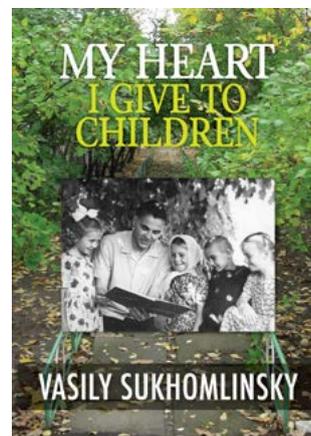
Lesson after lesson I began to take the children into that inexhaustible and ever new source of knowledge—into nature—to the orchard, to the forest, to the riverbank, and into the fields. Together with the children we began to study the art of conveying in words the subtlest observations of objects and phenomena.

A lark sings in the sky, while the wind sends a wave through a field of wheat, all the way to the horizon... Through a dark blue haze, far, far in the distance, ancient Scythian burial mounds reach to the sky... Amidst hundred-year-old oaks, in a forest thicket, babbles a transparent stream, while above it an oriole sings its artless song... All of these things should be described precisely and beautifully.

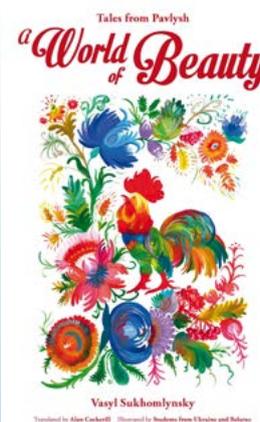
More and more new books appeared on my desk: educational essays about object lessons, dictionaries, books on botany, ornithology, astronomy, and flower growing. On quiet spring mornings I would walk to the riverbank, into the forest or the orchard, and study the surrounding world, trying to convey as accurately as possible in words its forms, colours, sounds and movement. I started an exercise book to record my

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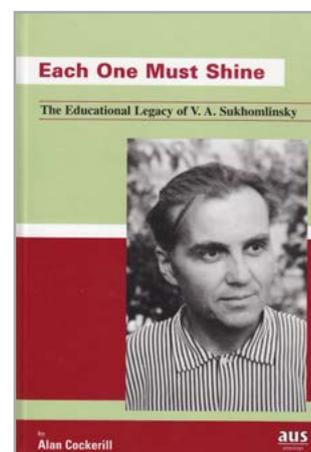
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miniature compositions about a rose bush, a lark, a crimson sky, a rainbow... I began to call my excursions into nature 'journeys to the source of living thought'. Gradually they became richer and richer in their purpose and in the forms of intellectual work undertaken by the children.

Sometimes I read my miniature compositions and poems to the students. It gives me joy to share with them my thoughts and impressions of the surrounding world, of nature and of people. I notice that the children are especially moved by those compositions and poems in which they find a reflection of their own experiences. When one of my compositions or poems touches their hearts and souls, the children themselves take up their pens, and try to express their feelings. It seems to me that a sensitivity to language, and the urge to express in words the subtlest movements of the human soul, are one of the most important sources of genuine human culture.

Here are two examples of such miniature compositions:

Autumn

The warm, golden days of autumn have arrived. The air has become transparent and pure. Now we can see deep into the steppes. The distant Scythian burial mounds appear ash-grey in the gentle radiance of the weak sunlight. By the road a chamomile flower shines brightly. In the morning drops of dew sparkle like emeralds on its petals, the melting remnants of the first frosts. Yet the flower lives on, and does not shed its petals.

In the evening the sky takes on a greyish-pink hue. The ravens, their dark silhouettes showing against an orange-ashen sunset, seem like creatures from a fairy-tale, as they fly, with wings outspread, towards their nests. The

forest stands quiet and thoughtful, with only a few distant leaves rustling from the troubled stirrings of a cold autumn breeze. With each minute the field grows darker. It is as if the dusk is flowing in waves from the gullies and ravines, covering the earth and spreading a blanket over the forest. In the grey sky a lonely star loses its grip and falls to earth.

Sunrise

The dawn blazes in the sky. I am standing next to a field of clover. Its gigantic, multi-coloured carpet trembles, as it is flooded each minute with waves of changing hue. It is as if it is being deluged with thousands of multi-coloured pebbles: sky-blue, lilac, pink, orange, crimson and gold. Now it is being sprinkled with sky-blue pebbles, but as soon as the eye manages to capture this hue, it turns to lilac, which then is transformed into pink. Then the pink disperses, and the whole field appears engulfed in flame. In the distance, where the earth meets the firmament, shines the blinding light of a golden rim. Soon the sun will rise.

A lark spurts from the clover and soars upwards, then halts. This trembling little ball of grey turns golden in the rays of the sun. Soon sparks of sunlight play in the drops of dew on the clover flowers, and bees hum over their opening petals. It is as if the whole field is singing, the whole world is singing, as a spellbinding music floods the earth.

Then I turned my attention to my school lessons. The lessons I conducted were first and foremost lessons in thought. At one lesson the children and I began to discuss phenomena, cause and effect. At my suggestion the children began to seek cause and effect relationships in the surrounding world, and to describe them.

Before my very eyes the chil-

dren's thinking gradually became more and more clear, rich and expressive. Their words took on emotional colouring, and came to life. I became aware of an amazingly rich area for developing pedagogical skill, inexhaustible in its beauty: the ability to teach children how to think. This discovery inspired me, and I experienced the exceptional happiness that comes with creativity.

I told my colleagues about my thoughts and observations, and they began to accompany me on lessons in the midst of nature. I read them my miniature compositions, and one day in early autumn, the teachers and I walked to an oak grove to admire the many shades of colour in which the trees were decked, so as to then describe this beauty as clearly and expressively as possible.

The teachers became interested in these journeys to the source of living thought, and began to take the children on similar excursions themselves. During spring and autumn we began to conduct nearly a third of our lessons outdoors, and nobody complained of a lack of time. The primary school teachers began to compete with me, to see who could write the better miniature compositions.

Gradually our staff became focused on the idea of the unity of language and thought. We began to come together to discuss this interesting idea, and gradually our discussion gave birth to the understanding that every teacher, regardless of what subject they teach, must be a teacher of language. Language is our main pedagogical tool, and nothing can replace it. Nature, with its inexhaustible richness and diversity, is the main source of thought, and the main school for the development of intellectual ability.

Stories for Children

Nuts for the squirrel

Once a year in the village of Vasilevka, in May, there is a big market. People come from distant towns and villages, put up tents, and display their wonderful wares. The market is a festive day for all the villagers in Vasilevka, and especially for the children.

Little Pavlik woke up at dawn. Today was Sunday, so he did not need to go to school. He could spend all day at the market. His mother gave him a whole fifty kopek piece to spend, and told him he could buy whatever he liked. Pavlik clutched the coin in his hand and went to the market. What riches he saw all around him! They seemed to have everything! The boy, as if bewitched, admired the sweets in coloured wrappers, the fluffy white bagels, the short-cakes, the rooster-shaped lollypops, the horse-shaped gingerbreads and lark-shaped sweet-breads... He wanted to spend all his money at once, but he thought to himself, 'I'll buy one thing, and then there will be so many other sweet things that I cannot buy... No, I'll wait a bit. All these wonderful sweet things will not go anywhere, not the lollies or the bagels, not the lollypops or the gingerbreads, with their sweet centres...'

Pavlik wandered around the market, walking from tent to tent with joy. There were lots of good things being sold here that he could afford to buy...

He wandered like this until midday, in joyful anticipation of the pleasure to come, when suddenly he came upon a squirrel in a cage, and next to it a little tent where a man was selling nuts. The squirrel looked curiously at everyone who approached its cage. Pavlik looked into its eyes, and thought he saw sadness there. He went over to the little tent and spent all his money on nuts. The nuts were expensive, imported ones, and he did not get very many for his money.

Pavlik went over to the cage and tipped all his nuts in for the squirrel to eat. It began to gnaw on them straight away, looking up at the boy. Pavlik stood in front of the cage for a long time, until the squirrel had cracked open and eaten all the nuts.

When the man selling nuts for the squirrel came over and opened the door of the cage, and threw out all the shells, Pavlik sighed and went home. It was already getting dark.

When he got home he sat by the window and burst into tears.

'Why are you crying, Pavlik?' asked his mother. 'Why did they lock it up in a cage?' he cried.

At the railway station

This little incident took place at a railway station in a big city. The trains leaving that station travel to distant places throughout our nation.

One warm June day, in a garden next to the station, two little children, Olya and Serezha, met each other. They were still too young to go to school. Both the boy and the girl were travelling home with their mothers, and both had to change trains at this station. Olya lived in a city in the far north, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean. Serezha lived in a city far to the south, in the middle of a sandy desert.

They had two hours to wait until their trains departed. Children make friends very quickly. Olya and Serezha played, and told each other about the cities where they lived, about the wonderful northern lights, about birds that made nests of stones, about the ship of the desert—the camel, and about the mysterious ruins of ancient cities covered in sand dunes. Suddenly the girl noticed a sweet lying on the grass, melting in the sun. A many-coloured butterfly had landed on it, and was beating its wings, trying to escape from the sweet's sticky surface. Olya saved the butterfly, and handed it to Serezha. They spent a long time admiring its beautiful wings. Then Serezha raised his hand and the butterfly took off, its many-coloured wings fluttering in the warm summer air.

Joyfully excited, the children held each other's hands and watched the butterfly flit about. The children's mothers came up to them. Olya's mother said, 'Children, our trains are leaving. Let's go. We need to get into our carriages...'

'Say farewell to each other, children,' said Serezha's mother. 'Say farewell, because you will never see each other again.'

The children did not know what 'farewell' meant, but they felt the pain of parting forever. Their hearts ached.

'Will we really never see each other again?' asked Olya, her voice shaking.

Serezha was silent. He looked at Olya and thought to himself... What the boy was thinking about, nobody knows, because nobody can express in words what a five-year-old boy is thinking when he is in pain.