

Sukhomlinsky News

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Learning and development

Dear readers,

This month's extract from Pavlysh Secondary School examines the relationship between learning and development.

Sukhomlinsky suggests that teachers should focus less on making sure the children absorb the curriculum, and more on how their learning contributes to their overall development. If the teacher focuses on developing the students' minds, and their capacity to learn, then it will be a good deal easier for children to master the curriculum.

To develop students' minds, we need to appreciate their individual idiosyncrasies, their temperaments and interests. For Sukhomlinsky this meant studying the children even before they enrolled in his school, through preschool activities that began eighteen months before they entered grade one.

Sukhomlinsky continued to study children's individual characteristics throughout their schooling, and to provide ample opportunity for them to develop their talents and interests. A rich extracurricular program played a crucial role in his students' intellectual development, which in turn helped them to master the curriculum.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Intellectual development

In this issue we continue to translate extracts from the fifth chapter of Pavlysh Secondary School, on intellectual education.

The acquisition of knowledge and intellectual development

One must not see the aim of instruction as being to ensure by any means that pupils master the material in the curriculum. One must not assess the effectiveness of the means and methods of instruction only by the quantity of knowledge acquired by the pupils. The aim of instruction is to ensure that the process of acquiring knowledge contributes to the optimum level of general development, and that the general development achieved through the process of instruction should facilitate greater success in the acquisition of knowledge. In our school we assess the effectiveness of the methods of instruction by the extent to which they facilitate the process of the child's general intellectual development, by the extent to which the process of instruction is at the same time a process of intellectual, moral, ideological and aesthetic education.

Many teachers are troubled by the question: why is it that a child who studied well in the primary school, and acquired knowledge without exceptional effort, finds study more and more difficult as they progress through the school? Why is it that the knowledge acquired appears to be a heavy burden, that requires ever greater effort to maintain? It is because a gulf forms between the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual development, since the teacher sees the aim of instruction as being to acquire a certain volume of knowledge, and fails to see instruction as a means of educating a developed mind that finds studying easier as new knowledge is acquired. We consider avoiding this separation of the process of instruction from intellectual development to be just about our most important educational challenge.

[Continued on the following page]

Learning and development (continued)

Educational work with the aim of guaranteeing the integration of instruction and intellectual development begins with the study of a child's development. Our teachers get to know future grade one students long before they begin schooling. During summer and spring, they take them on excursions to the forest, to fields and orchards. During winter, the pre-schoolers play in a room especially allocated for that purpose. The features of each child's thinking processes are ascertained and studied, and their intellectual interests are aroused.

Children's thinking is manifested in their active relationship with the surrounding world. They think about what they see, observe, and do. For our future grade one students we have several locations where the surrounding environment stimulates thought. We observe how they explore the world, and predict how they will study, and where they may encounter difficulties. In one of these locations there are dozens of plants: trees and fruit-bearing shrubs. The children observe their development from spring to autumn and they have many occasions to ask 'why?' Another location is a room with dozens of working models of machines and mechanisms; a third location has pictures showing the life and behaviour of animals; a fourth has pictures showing the life of nations around the world.

This pre-school preparation helps us to identify, study and become aware of the specific characteristics of each child's thinking processes. We begin with the idea that the process of study is an activity of the brain, and in order to understand the individual characteristics of each child's intellectual development, we need to observe that activity long before a child sits behind a desk. The activity

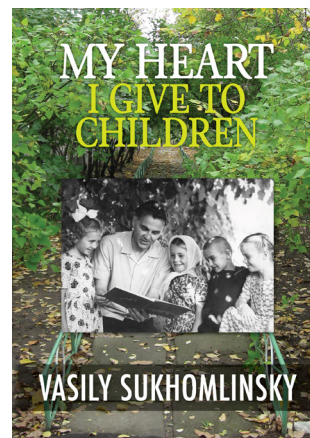
of the brain is discrete. The brain instantaneously switches from one thought to another, and then to a third, and then returns to the first thought and so on. This switching happens instantaneously, and the ability to make sense of the object of cognition depends on the speed with which this switching occurs.

In each child this switching of thoughts occurs in a way that is characteristic for them: in one child it will be extremely rapid, in another extremely slow. All of this we study, reflecting on how best to develop the brain of each child, how to concentrate their thought on one object and switch it instantaneously to another. This is an extremely important process in intellectual development. The ability to rapidly switch thoughts is in fact quick-wittedness, which determines the quality of a developed mind. To develop this ability, we conduct lessons in thought with our pre-schoolers, and then at school. The children investigate and make sense of the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world.

When the children are only five or six years old, we identify a group of children whom we call investigators. They investigate the plant world in the orchard and the vegetable garden. These little children come to school in March, when they still have a year and a half before they will commence school. They gather again in a day or two, and then every day, in the school greenhouse or in the orchard. They sow the seeds of grain crops (wheat, buckwheat, barley, millet) and fruit trees (apples, pears, peaches, plums, sour cherries, sweet cherries), and plant grape and rose cuttings. They water the soil with the help of pumps made especially for the little ones. Soon the first shoots of the grain crops appear, then the fruit trees, and leaves appear on the cuttings.

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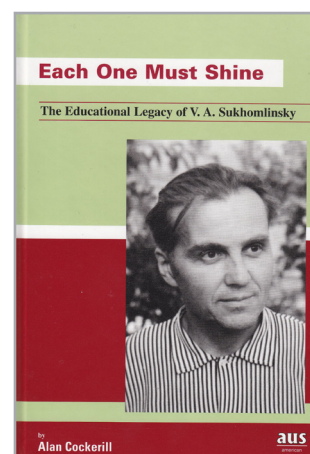
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The more significant the results of this work, the more questions the children have: why does one plant produce a harvest in the first year, while another takes several years? Why does the peach tree grow a metre over summer, while the oak seedling produces only four leaves? Why does an ear of wheat look different to an ear of millet? Why does a watermelon keep its seeds in a 'sweet storeroom', while wheat has no such 'storeroom'? During moments of intense thinking about each of these questions a child's thought switches thousands of times as the object is studied from all angles. The child learns to think while observing and to observe while thinking; this is the essence of these lessons in thought. Before learning to study, a child learns to think.

Another group of children is investigating plants in the forest, in the steppe, in the meadow; a third group observes life in the pond and the lake; a fourth gets involved with the working models; a fifth constructs little houses, factories and power plants from little wooden parts; a sixth breeds fish in an aquarium; a seventh grows flowers; an eighth is attracted by unusual phenomena. We have one location where everything is unusual: pumpkins growing on a tomato plant, wheat grafted on to maize. And everywhere they look prompts one question after another: what, how, why? Every child is thinking about something and asking questions of the teacher, of the club leader, or of an older student. Each one develops an interest in something. Without interest there is no joy of discovery, no talents and abilities, no living soul or human individuality. Even during these pre-school years, theoreticians and dreamers stand out amongst the children. The theoreticians immerse themselves in the details of phenomena and try to get to the essence. In their

thoughts we discern a tendency to reason and to seek logical proof. Dreamers and poets see an object or phenomena in its general outline. The beauty of a sunset or a storm cloud makes a great impression on them; they are admiring the play of colours, while the theoreticians are posing questions: why is the same area of sky azure one moment, and then scarlet the next? Why is the sun golden overhead, but crimson on the horizon?

Each child's thought has its own path of development; each is intelligent and talented in their own way. There is not a single child who has no ability and no talents. It is important that each child's mind, each child's talents, provide a foundation for success in study, so that no child should study below their level of ability. In each class, in each generation of children, we greet the appearance of talented mathematicians, talented mechanics and constructors of models, talented horticulturalists, and later talented chemists, linguists and historians. We try to kindle the spark of these abilities during the pre-school years.

In their studies each child produces what they are capable of. The realisation of this principle allows us to achieve the comprehensive intellectual development of all students, and to prevent failure. We do not allow talented, gifted children to work below their abilities. If a student who should be an investigator of nature, a young experimenter, a future scientist, descends to the level of an average crammer, then those who lack any clearly expressed gifts and talents will also fail to fully develop their abilities. To avoid failure amongst the weak students we consider it necessary for talented and gifted students to go beyond the curriculum in those subjects and those spheres of activity for which they have exceptional ability. If, for example, a student in grade seven or eight shows a special

interest in botany, we do not limit their studies to the secondary school textbook, but encourage them to study biochemistry and to investigate the microflora of the soil. This has a major impact on the development of the abilities of the weaker students as well, because the intellectual life of the school community is an integrated process. We became convinced that no students will fail physics in a class where several students have gone beyond the curriculum and are studying contemporary problems in science: semiconductors, quantum generators, electronic equipment. When studying literature, even the weakest students are assisted by learning about a difficult area of literature such as the works of Vissarion Belinsky, whose essays of literary criticism, while they are not included in the curriculum, are studied by their more capable friends, who prepare essays on them that contain elements of research. One talented young man studied the articles of Lunacharsky and other scholars about the eminent literary critic, and wrote an essay on the topic 'The evolution of Belinsky's world view'. Now he is a young scholar and teaches literature at a tertiary institute. The influence of stronger, more developed, more gifted students on weaker and mediocre students is an extraordinarily complex process involving constant spiritual exchange. In this exchange a major role is played by clubs devoted to school subjects and by polytechnical clubs, and also by our many faceted extracurricular work: evenings of science and technology, competitions and quizzes...

...If a teacher can lead the most capable students beyond the curriculum, the intellectual life of the school community becomes rich and diverse, and because of this the weakest students do not fall behind.



Stories

Sorry for himself

Six-year-old Grisha, while running in the yard, stepped on a little prickle. The prickle stuck into his foot and it hurt. The boy sat on a bench, rested one leg on the other, and began to take the prickle out.

The mother saw her son. What was Grisha doing? She threw up her hands, ran to her son, hugged him, kissed him, and cried.

'My poor little child! Does it hurt?'

At that moment Grisha felt his foot hurting with a stabbing pain in his heel. His mother washed his foot and bandaged it.

'You sit still, now, son, and don't run,' she said to Grisha, wiping her tears away.

But Grisha did not want to sit still and ran off to play.

An hour passed. Running in the yard, Grisha stood on a sharp little stone. He remembered how his mother had cried over the prickle, and he felt pain. He ran to the house and sat on the bench. He lifted up his foot and saw a red mark from the stone. When he saw the red mark, his foot hurt even more.

'Mum...' he snivelled, 'Come quickly, my foot is hurting...'

His mother saw him, threw up her hands, ran to her son, hugged him and kissed him... Tears fell from Grisha's eyes. He felt sorry for himself...

Several years passed. Grisha became a school student. When there were hard frosts, he stayed at home. When the weather was foul, the boy did not want to go to school, and his mother said it would not matter if he missed one day and told him not to go to school.

When Grisha was a teenager his class went to work in the fields, but he stayed at home. Sometimes he had a stomach-ache and

sometimes his foot was sore.

Grisha turned eighteen. He was a tall, well-proportioned, handsome young man. He was called up for compulsory military service. In the middle of the night a battle alarm sounded out. In three minutes, the soldiers dressed and lined up. They set off on a long march. Everyone was marching quickly and energetically, and only Grisha was hanging his head and dragging his feet along.

'Why are you so slow?' the commanding officer asked Grisha.

'I can't keep up... It's hard...!' he answered.

'Did you think serving in the army would be easy?'

Grisha had nothing to say.

Tale of a mother goose

One hot summer day a mother goose took her little yellow goslings for a walk. She showed her children the wide world. The world was green and full of joy: a huge meadow stretching as far as the goslings could see. The mother goose taught her children how to nibble the tender blades of grass. The stalks were sweet, the sun was warm and comforting, the grass was soft, and the green world sang with the many voices of beetles, butterflies and moths. The goslings were happy. Suddenly dark clouds covered the sky and the first drops of rain fell on the ground. Then hailstones, as large as sparrows' eggs began to fall. The goslings ran to their mother, who lifted her wings and covered her children with them. Under her wings it was warm and cosy. As if from a distance, the goslings could hear the claps of thunder, the howling of the wind and the hammering hailstones. They even enjoyed it: beyond their mother's wings something terrible was happening, but they were warm and comfortable.

Then everything fell quiet. The goslings wanted to return to the meadow as soon as possible, but their mother did not lift her wings. The goslings cheeped insistently: let us out, mum.

Their mother quietly lifted her wings and the goslings ran out onto the grass. They saw that their mother's wings were injured, and that she had lost many feathers. She was breathing heavily. But the world around was so full of joy, the sun shone so brightly and gently, the beetles, bees and bumblebees sang so beautifully, that for some reason the goslings did not think to ask, 'Mum, are you OK?' And when one of them, the smallest and weakest gosling, waddled up to his mother and asked, 'Why are your wings hurt?', she quietly answered, 'It's alright, my son.'

The yellow goslings ran all over the meadow, and their mother was happy.