

## VASILY SUKHOMLINSKY'S PLACE AMONGST OTHER INFLUENTIAL CREATORS OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

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### ABSTRACT

*The author attempts a comparative analysis of the system of education developed by V. Sukhomlinsky with educational systems of other prominent educators, and also with educational methodologies that have been adopted in many countries around the world. From the many practical educators of world significance and renown, the author has chosen for comparison the Waldorf School created by Rudolf Steiner, the Modern School created by Célestyn Freinet, and the work of Janusz Korczak in his orphanages. It is also fruitful to compare Sukhomlinsky's ideas with innovative ideas and practices of recent times, notably Carol Gilligan's 'ethics of care' and Matthew Lipman's 'philosophy for children'.*

*A comparative analysis of the foundational ideas of these creators of educational systems will allow us to see their correspondence with the ideas and views of Sukhomlinsky as manifested in his work: a holistic approach to education, relating to each child as a unique personality, the organisation of an optimal environment through the joint efforts of children and adults, avoidance of forcing premature development upon the child, adherence to democratic principles of instruction, the therapeutic function of education, humanism and other features.*

*An analysis of modern conceptions of intellectual and moral development reveals the harmony of Sukhomlinsky's ideas with reflective approaches to education, emotional and values-based assimilation of life experience, and the ethics of care, which involves sympathy, empathy and support, developed through innovative practices. Such an approach allows us to distinguish the divergent ideological and ontological views of these prominent educators, which are sometimes contradictory, from the purely pedagogical views that unite them, and which, when amalgamated, have enormous potential and are oriented to the future.*

**Keywords:** Vasily Sukhomlinsky, Janusz Korczak, Rudolf Steiner, Célestyn Freinet, Matthew Lipman, Carol Gilligan.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2018 the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Vasily Sukhomlinsky, a Ukrainian schoolteacher, principal, polemicist and children's writer, was celebrated not only throughout Ukraine, but in other countries. The 39<sup>th</sup> session of the General Conference of UNESCO included this anniversary in its calendar of memorable dates recognised by that international organisation and its 193 national participants. This recognition intensified the already keen interest in Sukhomlinsky's life and work in former soviet countries, and stimulated interest in him amongst educators little acquainted with his ideas, both in a historical context, and also in the context of contemporary educational narratives and vectors of development.

Considering this interest, let us examine Sukhomlinsky's work through the prism of personified educational thought, by considering other significant formulators of educational thought: educators, teachers, and the institutions in which their ideas were developed. It is

also interesting to analyse how Sukhomlinsky's ideas correspond with leading contemporary trends in educational and humanitarian thought and practice.

We are thus considering educational practitioners of world significance and renown, and particularly those among them whose work is not diminished by the passage of time, but on the contrary, whose systems have become ever more stable, elegant and methodologically refined. And not only because they have been analysed and systematised by researchers, but because the systems that they created were not isolated instances, tied to a particular location, but found development in institutions in various countries around the world, and passed the test of time.

## **SUKHOMLINSKY**

Before tackling our theme, let us outline the essence of Sukhomlinsky's system of education, because he will be less known to the reader than the other educators under discussion. Vasily Aleksandrovich Sukhomlinsky (28.09.1918 – 02.09.1970), was for 22 years the principal of a combined primary and secondary school in the village of Pavlysh in central Ukraine, where together with a like-minded staff he conducted a lengthy educational experiment. During the 1950s his quest led him from a 'school of study' to a 'work school' as the basis of children's development and their preparation for life, seeing the foundation of such an education in educationally motivated and methodologically organised work. During the mid-1960s Sukhomlinsky elaborates his ideas for developing the creative faculties of each individual with the support of a friendly school community united by shared ethical and aesthetic values, interests and needs, which ultimately lead to the creative work of the pupils. By the end of the 1960s Sukhomlinsky clearly formulates and embeds in the educational process universal humanistic educational ideas: relying on love, trust and respect for the child; emphasising the intrinsic worth and uniqueness of each individual child and their free development and taking steps to organise work with children with special needs (inclusion); actively including the environment among the various educational influences on a child; developing children's emotional intelligence; practising natural (in natural surroundings) instruction and education (lessons in thought, the activity of the 'School under the open sky', the 'school of joy', lessons in the appreciation of nature); insisting on the need for pupils to 'refine desires' and 'refine feelings'; viewing the process of instruction as one full of the creative discoveries involved in coming to know the world and oneself, facilitated by the creation of a 'school's intellectual milieu' and 'two programs of study'<sup>41</sup>; formulating the idea of the 'joy of discovery'; defending the idea of education without punishment; and generally developing a holistic approach to education. Broadening the sphere of his educational activity, he begins to write stories and fables for children, involving children in the process and using stories widely in the educational work of the school in lessons in thought and lessons in creativity.

Such a structuring of the educational process led Sukhomlinsky and his staff to the thoughtfully planned creation of suitable material conditions. On the 4.9 hectares of land that belonged to the school were 14 buildings allocated to various purposes, mostly for classrooms, a vineyard, a berry patch, an orchard, a section of forest, experimental plots, flower beds and greenhouses, all facilitating the varied activities of the pupils. The village school in Pavlysh still follows his system, with some inevitable modifications dictated by the passage of time.

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<sup>41</sup> Translator's note: 'Two programs of study' refers to the practice of encouraging students to carry out an informal course of study, stimulated by their own interests, alongside the formal course of study prescribed by the state curriculum. The extensive reading, research and practical work involved in the process of pursuing interests creates a background of knowledge that greatly facilitates the successful completion of formal studies.

Sukhomlinsky left behind a rich legacy of work, some of which was published posthumously. His best-known works are *My heart I give to children* (1968), *Pavlysh secondary school* (1969), *Conversation with a young school principal* (1973), *How to educate a real human being* (1975) and *One hundred pieces of advice for schoolteachers* (1976). In recent years his collections of stories for children have enjoyed great popularity under various titles, including *The hot flower* (1978), *Tales from a school under the open sky* (1991), and *Let me tell you a story... Philosophy for children* (2016). Sukhomlinsky's books are published in many countries of the world. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 65 of his works had been published in 59 languages in print runs totaling 15 million copies.

## STEINER

If we compare Sukhomlinsky's educational ideas with those of other creators of educational systems, then the closest, in my view, is the Austrian philosopher and anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, who founded the Waldorf School movement in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919. Now there is a major international network of Waldorf schools and the Waldorf pedagogy is practised in 60 countries and becoming ever more widespread.

I will suggest the components of Rudolf Steiner's system that bear comparison with Sukhomlinsky's ideas: a holistic vision of the child; the child as a human being is an organic part of nature; bringing the process of study as close as possible to the origins of thought and language, to nature; a particular and carefully thought out organisation of the physical space surrounding the child; the development of a child's spiritual world, their natural talents and imaginative thought; the narration and creation of stories as a significant way of developing both the creative faculties of a child, and also their world of imagination and emotion; the major influence of the teacher on the development of each child, and the joint participation of teachers and children in creative activity. Both educators are distinguished by a phenomenological approach that is anthropological, with an accent on the development of a child's creativity and the unity of a human being with the world. 'The cornerstone of Waldorf instruction,' writes T.V. Shelyganova (2004), 'is a phenomenological approach, which is sequential: first living experience and observation, then description, and finally interpretation and formulation [the search for meaning and order]. The eminent soviet teacher and scholar V. Sukhomlinsky spoke of these things in the 1960s.' Shelyganova sees the consonance between the pedagogies of Steiner and Sukhomlinsky in the structuring of a child's education through the investigative nature of their intellectual work, through observation, interpretation, examination and comparison. At the same time both educators prioritised the significance of an emotional and values-based assimilation not only of educational values, but also of the content of the school curriculum. Sukhomlinsky wrote: 'Observation of children's intellectual work convinced me more and more, that emotional impulses (feelings of joyful excitement, wonder, amazement) appear to awaken the sleeping cells of the cortex, stimulating their activity... Study must be closely connected with the multi-faceted play of a child's mental and physical energy, so that this play of energy will give rise to bright, exciting feelings' (Sukhomlinsky, 2012, p. 231). Steiner writes: 'We must know how to engross the whole child, and only on the basis of the feelings and impressions that you have awakened to lead him to an understanding of what you have told him. This is your ideal: when you tell a child a tale or legend, or work with him on painting or drawing, you do not explain anything to him, do not work through concepts, but strive to engross the whole person. (Steiner, 1996, p. 18)

## FREINET

Another name that we have included among the creators of educational systems that share common features with Sukhomlinsky's is Célestyn Freinet, a French educator who worked at schools in Bar-sur-Loup (1920-1928) and Vence (1928-1934). He created the 'modern

school' and a methodology that relied on a child's independence and self-motivated activity. The Modern School Movement is still active today, with an international association and schools in 30 countries.

Characteristic features of Freinet's pedagogy, if we view it through the prism of Sukhomlinsky's ideas, are concern for children's health and for the child's optimal development; the creation and extensive use of educational technology and methodology (a school printing press, school self-government, the creation by children of informal texts (in Sukhomlinsky's case, of fairy tales)); a pedagogy of success; and democratic relations between teacher and student. Freinet is also close to Sukhomlinsky in the priority he gave to work education during lessons in school workshops and in extracurricular activities, when the children manufacture things that they need or that are dear to them. The curriculum in the schools run by Freinet and Sukhomlinsky included traditional structural components—physical, intellectual, vocational, moral and civic—that were unavoidable in the centrally organised systems of education in France and especially in the Soviet Union, but they filled these traditional structural components with innovative content, relying on the development of initiative, self-motivation and creativity. The French educator assigned particular significance to work education, maintaining that 'the school of the future is a school of work'. Sukhomlinsky and Freinet are also akin in that both worked in small country schools and enjoyed a special relationship with the surrounding environment, with parents and the community. Their pupils were from relatively poor families, and experienced shortages and want. And both saw it as their responsibility to lighten their pupils' lives, to give them an opportunity to succeed, to teach them to live a rich life. Freinet's and Sukhomlinsky's positions also coincide in the similarity of their views of nature, and in their realisation of the inseparable link and harmony between education and life (Sukhomlinsky, 1996). Freinet wrote: 'We have spoken more than once about how life-giving the natural environment is for children... in the primary school the school grounds (the vegetable garden, the orchard, the meadow, the apiary, the poultry yard), and of course areas for play, rest and work take on special significance'. (Freinet 1990, p. 72) Sukhomlinsky also gave enormous significance to the school's facilities and to the environment surrounding the children. He was convinced that 'education via the environment, the milieu, through objects created by the students themselves, that enriched the spiritual life of the school community, this, in our view, is one of the most subtle areas of the education process'. (Sukhomlinsky, 1980a, p. 93)

## **KORCZAK**

A special place in the life and work of Sukhomlinsky is occupied by Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) (1878-1942), the eminent Polish humanist, paediatrician, publicist and writer, taking his place in the history of education as a great defender of children with his orphanage for Jewish children, the creator of a system of social education and childhood support. The international Korczak movement (the International Janusz Korczak Association, the European Janusz Korczak Academy and others), which has spread to all continents, is supported by teachers, educators and social workers and continues to popularise his humanistic ideas.

He shares with Sukhomlinsky the *social orientation of education*, a great love for children, respect for children's rights, the idea that we should defend childhood, a rejection of violence towards children, a view of childhood as a distinct, separate, important and intrinsically valuable period in a person's physical and spiritual development, and of maturation through an experience of interacting with the surrounding environment and with nature. Sukhomlinsky, like Korczak, focused his attention on deprived, socially damaged children, often orphans (in Sukhomlinsky's case, children had often lost one parent during the war), as

both lived and worked in in very poor city (Korczak) and rural (Sukhomlinsky) environments. Both were not afraid of describing the difficult circumstances that damaged and sometimes crippled the mental and physical health of children, with a view to humanising the social and educational milieu so that children could develop fully. The two educators also shared the way they introduced the use of creatively written ethical material (children's literature) into the education process, and both were the authors of children's literature. Another important quality shared by Korczak and Sukhomlinsky is their 'contemplative pedagogy', to borrow a phrase from the English educator Kelvin Ravenscroft. He writes: 'This pedagogy is closely linked with such aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century education as communion with nature, aesthetic and creative receptiveness, contemplation, the power of narrative, service, ecology and reverence.' (Ravenscroft 2017, p. 57)

While Sukhomlinsky may not have heard of some other creators of educational systems, due to the isolationism that characterised cultural life in the Soviet Union, and the negation of overseas ideas as 'bourgeois', 'directed against the children of workers', Sukhomlinsky did know of Janusz Korczak and read his work. In many ways the Polish educator was an inspiring example and guiding star for Sukhomlinsky the teacher. He referred to Korczak as 'a man of unusual moral beauty' and commented that 'I understood that to be a true educator of children one must devote one's life to them'. (Sukhomlinsky, 2012, pp. 47-48).

### **A.S. NEILL**

Among the creators of educational systems that might be compared with Sukhomlinsky we could also mention the Scottish educator A.S. Neill (1883-1973) and his Summerhill School, who was an advocate for the free development of the child. His ideas and practice have provoked varying reactions, and a thorough analysis of his work and Sukhomlinsky's may reveal more differences than similarities, but here we shall focus on the similarities in their approaches. A.S. Neill's ideas may not have been adopted very widely, but have attracted considerable attention amongst educators and researchers in various countries due to the representative nature of his publications, which include more than thirty books, including books for children. The ideas that he shares in common with Sukhomlinsky include the view that 'every child is a unique individual' and that 'the only way [to the heart of a child] is the way of love', that the best education is one that allows for natural free development, and that education has an important therapeutic functions. Both speak of the importance for education of a child's freedom of expression, of the development of technical creativity (in carpentry and metalworking workshops). And if A.S. Neill's moto was 'freedom, love and happiness', and he negated any form of compulsion in regards to the child, Sukhomlinsky, however much he may have strived towards these ideals, also placed great significance on responsibility, duty, cultural traditions and conscience, as important principles and norms in the development of an individual's consciousness.

### **COMMON FEATURES**

We have cited significant figures and significant institutions for children—educators who are not only of historical significance, but whose work continues to be developed in our time. What unites these European educators? Firstly, a dissatisfaction with the general state of school education, a desire to change the status quo, to introduce something original, and the opportunity to do so. They directly or indirectly (Steiner) managed institutions for children, where they had the opportunity to realise their ideas. The *time factor* also played a very important role: they worked for many years, long and hard, to create their systems of education, modifying them and perfecting them.

They were all conceptual educators, and there are elements of philosophy and educational psychology underpinning their systems. They defended humanistic and democratic ideas and values and they constructed their educational paradigms from that point of view.

On the basis of humanistic world views, they proposed new methodologies for constructing the content of education, based on pedocentric ideas, placing the child at the centre of educational influences, arguing for the need to approach each child as a unique individual, and they accepted children as they were. These conceptual educators proposed and established new methodologies, facilitating the manifestation and development of the child's inner resources through a particular organisation both of the process of instruction and also of the total environment surrounding the child.

Let us also acknowledge the significant fact that the institutions for children under discussion, particularly those of Freinet, Korczak and Sukhomlinsky, were schools for children from poor families, for whom the school was not just a school, but a whole world, providing light and meaning both for the children and for the teachers.

These conceptual educators are also all united in the way that they viewed the main, guiding task underlying the school's activity as being to motivate the child's development, and around this goal they constructed their theoretical frameworks and systems of work. Motivation has always been a significant issue in schools, but today it has gained prominence as one of the most pressing issues, upon which depend all the activities of the institution, and even its very existence.

As we can see, even though these systems originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some early in the century, others in the middle, they are still alive and continue to exert significant influence on the development of school pedagogy in many countries of the world.

Since Sukhomlinsky lived and worked in the Soviet Union, his ideas are associated with communist ideology, and we find many references to communism on the pages of his works. However, we also know that there were other creators of educational systems with world views that could be considered controversial. Rudolf Steiner was a promoter of Anthroposophy, a religious and mystical world view that derived from Theosophy. Célestyn Freinet during certain periods of his life held Marxist views and was a member, on and off, of the French Communist Party. A.S. Neill was a radical libertarian, heavily influenced by Freud and psychoanalytic theory.

Undoubtedly, the world views of these educators were reflected in their educational ideas and the development of their educational systems. But in spite of their ideological differences, in their educational approaches they are in harmony with each other. Their educational philosophy is one of carefully and lovingly 'nurturing the garden' whose name is 'Childhood'.

## CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

Let us now turn to contemporary theories and practices in which I perceive a confluence of ideas with Sukhomlinsky, or, at the very least, movement in the same direction.

Now in the West, especially in the USA and Australia, to a greater extent than in previous decades, researchers are concerned with issues around the moral education of children. We will not go into the reasons for this concern, but interest in these issues has led to interest in Sukhomlinsky, for whom, as we know, issues of moral and spiritual education were central.

For example, the *International Journal of Educational Research* has published many articles devoted to this theme. In 2011 it published a special edition entitled 'Values Education and Holistic Learning', including Alan Cockerill's article 'Values education in the Soviet State:

The lasting contribution of V.A. Sukhomlinsky', which acquainted readers with the personality and ideas of the Ukrainian educator.

Such publications are evidence of the relevance of Sukhomlinsky's ideas today, of their introduction in the context of contemporary educational research, and of the consonance of Sukhomlinsky's ideas with some new concepts in moral education. For example, in recent years in the West we have seen the development of the 'ethics of care', which differs somewhat from classical ethical frameworks. Carol Gilligan initially developed her 'ethics of care' within the framework of feminism, but now it is conceived more universally. A Russian researcher into Gilligan's work, O.V. Artemieva, suggests that 'the ethics of care is an ethics of individual relationships. It is based on feelings of direct connections between people. We might say that the relationship of a mother for her child is not based on a knowledge of universal principles, but on love and care for the child. Love and care are unthinkable without an understanding of the needs of a concrete person, who is unique, without having an 'attachment' to them. In this case the quality of moral action is determined by a capacity for empathy, sympathy and emotional sensitivity. The requirement to clarify that no two people and no two situations are identical, leads to a renunciation of any universal foundation for moral action, to a recognition that each action in the context of the ethics of care is unique, but not arbitrary. Arbitrariness is guarded against by the injunction to consider the peculiarities of concrete people and concrete situations, which present themselves to the moral subject as information and determine his or her actions.' (Artemieva, 2005) It seems to me that Sukhomlinsky's ideas are in harmony with these precepts, and that his practice is fully supportive of such an approach.

From these conceptual positions of the ethics of care, the ethics of empathy and their practical applications, flow another trend in contemporary pedagogy and psychology: support for the child, 'defensive pedagogy', the essence of which consists in 'the ability to touch the sick, damaged heart of a child in such a way that education does not cause suffering'. Sukhomlinsky wrote about 'defensive education' (his words) in 1967 in his article 'How to love children'. (Sukhomlinsky, 1980b, p.321)

From such an understanding of education there arose the theory and practice of inclusion, of inclusive instruction and education, which now enjoy widespread support throughout the world (where by inclusion we mean a process of adapting to the needs of all children without exception, including those with special needs).

That Sukhomlinsky considered every child to be special, that he paid special attention to those in need of supervision, care, support and defence, is known to everyone familiar with his works. In 2008 a thematic anthology was published under the title *Take care: a child! V.A. Sukhomlinsky on difficult children*, in which were collected together many of the educator's thoughts and recommendations that are consonant with the ethics of care and with inclusion. Sukhomlinsky writes extensively about children's grief and child trauma and distinguishes between these two concepts and phenomena. He identifies children's grief as an active, healthy process, lays bare its emotions, involves other children in the process, so that they can share with the child the overwhelming feeling of grief and experience it with them, so that they can come out of it without major damage to the child's psyche, given its lability in childhood.

Sukhomlinsky frames the issue differently when a child suffers psychological trauma: this is a lengthy process grounded in personal experience that the child is sometimes unable to share with other children. Here the role of an adult, the educator, is invaluable, as he functions as a therapist over a significant period of time. (Sukhomlinsky, 2008)

Now psychologists and educators recommend, and provide evidence for, similar approaches and methods of overcoming this condition (Petranovskaya, 2014). Sukhomlinsky adopted a systematic and thorough solution, with a pedagogy of compassion and care, showing the child a world of goodness and beauty, offering, amongst other things, positive relationships with other children and adults, therapy via creativity, through work, and through an imaginative and emotional assimilation of life experience.

Let us focus now on another point that I believe is relevant today, and consonant with the most recent trends in education: a reflective approach to the education process as an expectation of educators and a characteristic of student work. Reflection in the sense of a focus on a person's inner world, a clarification of their values, both established and in the process of formation, as an indicator of a teacher's professionalism, and directed towards the awakening of thought processes in a child; this was a characteristic of Sukhomlinsky's creative activity. If we examine his main book, *My heart I give to children*, from this point of view, we can see the proposed process of instruction and education as providing a paradigm for reflective education. The teacher adapts to the context of his environment, the mood of the children, the season, and other factors, and in response to all these components he constructs his educational interaction, leading the children to doubt, to wonder, to think aloud, to listen to their intuition, to put questions, to act in response to the educationally created conditions of reflective thought: 'Who am I? What does it mean to be human? For what purpose have I come into the world? Am I automatically human, or do I become human because I develop and am exposed to values and to culture?'

These themes run throughout Sukhomlinsky little stories for children, which occupy a special place in the educator's legacy, because in their own unique, artistic and ethical form, they unpack a comprehensive range of educational issues. Sukhomlinsky wrote more than 1500 such stories, which fulfilled various functions in his educational theory and practice: as illustrative material to help children assimilate the ethical values outlined in his educational works; as exemplars for writing reflective essays, with the aim to awakening children's creativity; as a vivid and accessible way of conveying educational ideas, leading adults to reflect; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, to meet Sukhomlinsky's own need for artistic self-expression.

Sukhomlinsky's short tales go beyond the bounds of purely ethical discussion. They encompass the whole process of a child's life and are directed towards a holistic, imaginative and emotional assimilation of life experience by a growing child (Sukhomlinsky, 2016).

Now in the West and throughout the world they are utilised for the development of critical thought or for the teaching of philosophy for children. They are part of Sukhomlinsky's artistic legacy. In Sukhomlinsky's stories a child is presented first and foremost as a human being (I am a human being, I am a Ukrainian, I am a citizen, I am a son or daughter, I am a grandson or granddaughter, I am a school student), and each role that the human being assumes bears certain qualitative characteristics (Sukhomlinsky, 2002).

But the most important thing that we find in Sukhomlinsky's work, and that is very relevant today, is the possibility of reidentification, the possibility of becoming better tomorrow than we are today, of changing one's fate, having changed oneself, and in so doing to climb another step on the path of self-knowledge and self-development. Here we see Sukhomlinsky as a precursor of the modern conception of philosophy for children and of the work of the American philosopher Matthew Lipman (1922-2010), who in the early 1970s created the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. This institute developed school programs and literature: theoretical texts, methodological manuals for teachers, and literature for children written by adults (primarily written by Matthew Lipman himself). Sukhomlinsky

and Lipman were pursuing the same goal, to teach children to engage in philosophical thought, that is to reflect, to assimilate the world through envisaging it emotionally and imaginatively.

While Lipman focuses on democratic values, children's rights and critical thinking, Sukhomlinsky focused mainly on ethical issues, reflecting on the meaning of life through the lens of tradition, culture and family values.

In letters to me, Lipman valued Sukhomlinsky's little stories highly ('I found the stories enchanting') and he included two of them in a reader for children entitled *Thinking Trees and Laughing Cats: A Thinking Curriculum for Pre-school Education* (2003).

Now Philosophy for Children is a living pedagogy and practice that is in high demand. It has a tendency to development, absorbing into its foundation and structure previously developed creative approaches to the issue, including Sukhomlinsky's.

All the above is just notes providing a brief introduction to the study of Sukhomlinsky's creativity and its analysis from the perspectives of contemporary scholarship and practice. As we uncover new issues and themes in the context of the current humanitarian and ecological crisis, more and more questions will arise in educational scholarship and practice, and we will seek answers from authorities of the past and the present. It is quite possible that with the passage of time Sukhomlinsky will be read, and his legacy interpreted, in new ways.

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