

EUGENE MATUSOV

Guest Editor's Introduction

Alexander Lobok's Probabilistic Dialogic Pedagogy

In this issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, we introduce a very bright Russian educational scholar and practitioner, Alexander Lobok. As Alexander describes in his short biography, his entrance point into his probabilistic agency-based dialogic pedagogy odyssey was his rejection of the conventional educational concept that the goal of education is to make all students arrive predictably at the curricular endpoints (i.e., curricular standards), preset in advance by the teachers and the state. In contrast, in his view, teaching and learning have to be probabilistic, not determined in advance, improvisational, dialogic, and authorial. As Alexander's innovative educational practice and radical conceptualization show, this shift from deterministic to probabilistic education has significant consequences. In the new probabilistic pedagogy, the educational focus and teaching objectives change from students' acquisition of universal knowledge, skills, and attitudes viewed as important by the society, to the promotion of students' personal agency in particular socially valuable practices through their participation in critical dialogue.

For more than twenty years, Alexander Lobok has been a theoretical-practitioner. He constantly theorizes his innovative pedagogical practice while trying to enact his theory of agency- and dialogue-based education in practice. His evolving theory and emerging pedagogical practice mutually inform and test each other. His overall methodology is based on Kurt Lewin's "action research" and Lev Vygotsky's "formative experiment."

The articles presented in this issue reflect different years of Alexander's writing. We have embedded our dialogue with each other into the articles. We tried to select diverse genres of his writing: his detailed capturing of and reflection on

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his innovative pedagogical practices, the conceptual manifesto for a new type of agency-based schooling, ethnography of his work with an educator whose educational philosophy is very different from his own, fruitful disputes with Davydov's framework of Developmental Education and followers of Bibler's School of the Dialogue of Cultures. Alexander's writing reflects his deep dialogues with Bakhtin, Vygotsky, Bibler, Elkonin, Kurganov, Piaget, Hegel, and other influential scholars. My dialogues with Alexander about his texts at times reflect agreement and at times—disagreement. We hope that these dialogues will help the readers to engage more deeply with Alexander Lobok's evolving radical dialogic agency-based pedagogy, and that this will produce responses in the academic literature and new exciting pedagogical projects.

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ALEXANDER LOBOK

My Educational Odyssey to Dialogic Agency-Based Probabilistic Pedagogy

In this short biographical chapter, I give the background in regard to how I came to probabilistic pedagogy and what consequences it had on my professional fate and pedagogy in the historic turbulent time of the transition from the Soviet totalitarian empire to the Russian limited democracy. As I embraced the probabilistic nature of pedagogy, I discovered that it must be improvisational, dialogic, authorial, and agentive.

I was born in Bol'shaia Laia village, in Sverdlovsk oblast, on June 19, 1957. My mother was a rural teacher of mathematics; my father was a mining equipment mechanic.

In 1980, I graduated from the school of philosophy at the Ural State University (in Sverdlovsk, today Ekaterinburg). I wrote my dissertation in a more or less underground manner. It was devoted to the origin of philosophical thinking (in the history of culture and in personal human life). In my dissertation, I wrote of philosophy as a psychologically intense state of interrogation that breaks through the state of various mythological simplicities and elements of ideology and always presents itself as an act of individual life achievement. Fortunately, Gorbachev's perestroika was already under way, and in summer 1986 I defended my dissertation, "World Perception as a Sociocultural Phenomenon (in Its Historical and Genetic Aspect)," on the birth of human subjectivity, of the ability of people to break through to themselves and emerge beyond the limits of mythological world perception established by the culture, and on people's ability to become themselves. The replacement of one knowledge horizon with another, the replacement of one ideology with another does not change anything in any way, if no philosophical

Translation © 2013 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Russian text, "Moe obrazovanie-odisseia v dialogicheskuiu sub"ektnuiu veroiatnostnuiu pedagogiku."

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(and thus, existential–dramatic and deeply personalized) self-fulfillment occurs within a person.

Unfortunately, the progress of perestroika (and postperestroika) political trends only confirmed the principal point of my dissertation. One set of “true knowledge” was replaced by another and one mythology, by another, and basically nothing changed: I was surrounded by a mass of dedicated faithful whose quest for the experience of philosophical existence in the world was their lowest priority, and who desperately thirsted for a new mythology, a new ideology, a new set of “true knowledge,” that is, everything that provides spiritual coziness and comfort and saves a person from having to make an existential choice—the choice that is the only thing that allows a person to determine the truth about his or her ego as a truth of not conforming to some “we.”

That was the point that forced me to turn to the problems of education. I saw that history—which is filled with “masses” and not with people—was essentially an empty history that to a certain extent was fated to move along some course, in a vicious circle. Meanwhile I saw that the key to a new history was, of course, education. Not education in the Enlightenment format, where the individual was merely the pedagogical object of some kind of “true knowledge” (if only an agreement as to what is truth could be arrived at in advance!). No, what must be considered is a strategically different philosophy of education, when the absolute origin is not some universal truth that had been discovered by someone (not knowledge, not faith, and not ideology, which is essentially the same thing), but the ongoing existential drama of the human idealized self and a dialogue between personal existential philosophies.

And, thus, began my educational odyssey.

I peered intensely into the peripheries of the “new pedagogics,” around which educational discussions stormed, but a feeling of dissatisfaction stubbornly clung to me. Many were talking about how the new school “must teach how to think,” and many were discussing the need to arouse children’s agency. However, not a single educational concept or innovation called for a fundamental emergence beyond the bounds of academic predetermination, beyond the bounds of some previously defined “academic profile,” which children were supposed to assimilate with the aid of some educational gimmick or other. Yes, we are prepared to arouse agency in the child, but only so as to use this aroused agency as a tool for the assimilation of the academic content we have defined in advance. This was true both in Developmental Education and in the School of the Dialogue of Cultures, which quarreled with Developmental Education.

But can we speak of sound activity if it is fundamentally *educational*, that is, knowingly subordinate to some predefined content and predefined script? Can we speak of sound human agency if this agency is created using previously developed educational molds? After all, true subjectivity is always the construction of a *uniquely personal, authorial* path within various worlds. I argue that true thinking is thinking that a person works out in his or her own personal existential

experience and the experience of extremely intense human feelings and experiences (*perizhivanie*), but far from what may be taught as some collection of preset procedures and algorithms.

I recalled myself as a child and understood that my principal and personal educational content was created not when I was being taught something, but when I was creating my own trajectory of educational motion through various library spaces. Back then, yes, I was in fact the subject of my own educational movement. This was not agency someone had artificially and deliberately inculcated in me—this was agency that I myself had created and discovered; so it was not some academic agency that had been posited by someone else, but true agency that without doubt belonged to me.

Finally, I decided to begin my fundamental pedagogical experiment: I gathered a group of six- and seven-year-olds and, together with them, constructed an entire educational process as a process of dialogical interaction, not as a process of mastery of academic curriculum preset in advance.

In 1992, I found, within my own town—what was Sverdlovsk at the time and has now again become Ekaterinburg—a district and a school where I was given carte blanche to implement my “crazy” project of “undirected education” (which is just what the project was called in its first draft). The main idea was to attempt to radically abandon the very idea of academic programming, abandon “preset knowledge”—that is, setting in advance what specifically students must acquire and “master” in the course of school instruction. The educated person is not one who has assimilated some specific sum of “preset knowledge, abilities, and skills,” but one who has developed a passion for *educational journeys through various world cultures*. An education cannot be “given” like something universal, which is something suitable for all. Education is what each person *creates personally* (*authors*) in the process of encountering various phenomena of human culture, as well as living bearers and creators of such phenomena. Consequently, the task of the educator must consist not in “teaching” the child in accordance with some previously devised program, but in organizing *an educational space of authorial meetings with the widest possible spectrum of cultural phenomena*. Naturally, this should be done with due regard for the capabilities and needs of a particular age, and the first age category that worried me greatly at this time was the age of what was commonly called the “primary school.”

To be honest, I had initially intended to immerse myself in this project for not more than a year, to see the extent to which such an “undirected education” model might be productive for children during their first year of instruction. However, the educational events that began to take place in the experimental class turned out to be so staggering, that I very much wanted to see what would happen if I continued to work in this key and further. I organized an open educational environment and I kept devising ever newer games that could activate, to the greatest extent possible, children’s agency within the scope of this environment, and the more I engaged in this inventive activity, the more interesting it became. I increasingly understood

that traditional school educational activities are not aware of children at all, or of their deepest needs and capabilities, and this is the main reason why any motivation for school instruction is quickly exhausted in such huge numbers of children. As concerns my experimental class, despite the fact that just half of the children were recruited from among those who had initially been diagnosed as “unfit” for school instruction, my educational excitement only grew from day to day.

In the end, I guided that first experimental class through to the eleventh grade, that is, to the very end of the school. In addition, once the first class had advanced to the sixth grade, I gathered yet another group of first-graders and guided this group through the eleventh grade as well. In this way, I spent a total of fifteen years in this experiment. During this time, dozens of pedagogical techniques were developed and implemented, and these allowed me to create, over all of those years, a genuinely passionate educational process—a process of dialogical journeys with children into the most varied cultural spaces. I have been able to describe and present only a very small portion of these pedagogical techniques in a series of books and articles, for alas, when one works closely with real children, little time is left over for writing. This of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* presents some selected fragments of my publications for English-speaking readers.

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ALEXANDER LOBOK

Two Schools

Psychological Foundations of a New Educational Ontology

The chapter represents fragments of my work in the second part of the 1990s when I was reflecting on my radical pedagogical experiments on probabilistic pedagogy and abstracted the principles of a new school based on this innovative pedagogy. In my historical analysis, I contrasted the new school based on probabilistic dialogic pedagogy with the old school based on deterministic monologic pedagogy. I claim that with the historic shift from a knowledge-based society to an agency-based society, a new type of school is required.

The contemporary primary/elementary school is the heir and successor of the European educational tradition whose purpose is to ensure universal elementary literacy and numeracy—that is, skills in reading, writing, and performing arithmetical calculations. The formulation of specifically these day-to-day, practical educational skills and habits was the center of attention for all well-known European and national educators such as Comenius, Pestalozzi, Ushinsky, Tolstoy, and others. It was specifically these everyday, practical educational skills that were the highest goal of mass schooling up to the end of the twentieth century; in tsarist Russia, three-grade parochial schools were a variant of such mass schooling, and, undoubtedly, these schools had a lofty educational mission.

The set of everyday arithmetic skills may be mastered completely by relying on the psychological mechanisms of memorization without engaging any particular

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Translated by Alex Lane.

thinking activity. And because of this, memorization was the principal strategy of instruction in the mass primary schools of this time. The main thing was to “study the lesson.” And what took place in this case—whether activation of deep thought structures or blind operation of the memory—was of no consequence for the purposes of mass primary education.

What we call the intermediate school has a completely different origin and, correspondingly, addresses a completely different set of objectives. Its scope is by no means determined by a set of some everyday, practical needs, but by demands originating at the core of European science since the new and modern times characterized the the Enlightenment, especially after the French Revolution. Algebra, geometry, theoretical grammar, systematic natural history—the need to study all these disciplines in intermediate school had very little to do with any kind of everyday needs. On the contrary, the set of knowledge, abilities, and skills traditionally received by a primary school graduate (a more or less developed skill at reading as well as skills in writing, spelling, penmanship, and arithmetic calculation) has only a very approximate relation to the problems that will be encountered by the intermediate school student, who is entering a world of theoretical natural science, abstract mathematical thought, and language theory. If traditional primary education is oriented toward the creation of some kind of everyday skills, then the purpose and significance of intermediate education is, in particular, to develop the student’s ability to engage in abstract and theoretical thinking (Davydov, 2008).

Thus, a significant mismatch of historical origin exists in program content between primary and intermediate education in the modern school. However, until such time as the culture was faced with the issue of universal intermediate education—and it was the destiny of the few—this mismatch did not represent any kind of notable issue. Only in the 1920s and 1930s did this problem begin to be recognized as significant, and since that time, rather diverse attempts to enact more or less thorough reforms in the area of primary education have been made in different countries.

Thinking in capabilities

However, why did the recognition of the problem described above not lead to the early transformation of the primary school to match the mathematical and other demands of the new age? It is because,¹ as had been shown by the classic studies of J. Piaget and L.S. Vygotsky,² there exist rather clearly defined age boundaries that do not permit abstract conceptual thinking patterns to form naturally in children of primary school age.

In particular, per Vygotsky, the preconceptual period of children’s thinking may be initially described as a period of “syncretic,” undifferentiated thinking, and later as “thinking in complexes,” where the child interacts intellectually with the world not through concepts but through “association,” “collection,” “chain,” “diffusion,” and “pseudo concept” cognitive complexes. Here, the primary school age is characterized by thinking in complexes, in which pseudo concepts predominate

(which corresponds to the boundaries of concrete-operational thinking established by Piaget), while proper conceptual structures develop only during the adolescent period (according to Piaget, a stage of formal operations occurs), “the child comes to think in concepts” (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 175). This is a fundamental difference between conceptual and preconceptual cognitive forms, and is an objective basis for the fundamental difference that traditionally exists between the educational strategies of the primary and intermediate school.

But does this mean that the schism between the two schools is irreconcilable?

As early as Vygotsky’s work, methodological ideas had been stated that permitted the question of the primary school curriculum to be reformulated in a fundamental manner: this should be instruction that is not so much an adaptation to the existing particular features of children’s thinking as it is a development of its latent capabilities (e.g., “the zone of proximal development” in Vygotsky’s term).

But what does this mean, “to develop the latent cognitive capabilities of a young pupil?” In what direction should such development proceed, so as to prove as productive as possible?

Dealing with this issue leads Vygotsky to ideas that signify, in point of fact, a radical change in the ontological status of the school itself. Nevertheless, it must be admitted, that many of these ideas themselves proved to be “ideas in possibility,” as neither the times, nor the cultural and political situation in the country (the Soviet Union), nor the time remaining in his life would allow Vygotsky to bring the innumerable many lines he had traced in his academic work to a logical end.

A new ontology of the school [fragment written in spring 1997]

Yet, nevertheless, we have grounds to maintain that, in essence, Vygotsky asked a question about the new *ontological* foundations of formal education, that is, a question about a new ontology of the school.

According to Vygotsky, the purpose of a school is not to convey various pieces of knowledge to the child, but to create in the child an ability to think. But this means that not only the content of formal education but also the very existence of the school must be radically changed. In other words, the school’s ontological status must be changed and its place in the very structure of social being must be changed.

Previously, all schooling was nothing other than a collective social tool for “sharpening” intellectual and professional “components” capable of supporting the stable operation of the existing system of the division of labor in society similar to assembly line factories. And in this sense, the screening mechanism of formal education was more than expedient. The attitude that children must “acquire knowledge” accumulated by society and be included, with maximum efficiency, in the existing system of the division of labor in society, considered the individual as a gear, a small piece of an integral socioeconomic mechanism. It is just that gears of varying levels of complexity and qualification are required.

The ontology of the entire old school is the ontology of a school oriented

toward the ideology of social control. School prepares the individual to perform functions that are known by society in advance, and this is the source of the need for consistency and continuity of educational programs, starting with the first grade and concluding in the programs of professional and technical schools or the most prestigious universities.

Vygotsky—relying on Marx’s idea of free self-development and self-realization (self-actualization), in everyone, of a “communist” personality (the personality of a “genius”)—arrives at the idea of education as the individual’s personal self-development that is in no way related to the problem of any social control. The school must operate not for the purposes of social control, but to maximize the development of latent individual capabilities. This means that its content must not reflect a “top-down” structure (one where those at the “lower” levels of formal education toil under a need to assimilate “higher” levels of knowledge), but a “bottom-up” approach that is powered by the psychological possibilities of children’s development.³

Thus, the question was formulated in true “Hamburg account,”⁴ not in terms of particular methodological improvements in the educational system, which would allow it to even more efficiently “adapt” primary school content to the content of the intermediate school, intermediate school content to that of high school, and so on, but in terms of a radical change of views on the purposes of formal education and a radical change in views on the very ontology of the school’s existence.

In search of conceptual supports

At the same time, Vygotsky’s immediate heirs, in developing his ideas under more than inadequate conditions of a Soviet totalitarian-bureaucratic society, were consciously stripped of the ability to develop the thread described above for changing the ontological status of the school. And it is not surprising that they posed the question concerning conditions for maximum efficient self-development of the child’s personality in primary school within the rather rigid context of “adapting” primary educational content to the objectives of intermediate and higher education. Thus arose the famous Elkonin–Davydov concept of “Development Education” (e.g., Davydov, 2008), which attempted to combine some of Vygotsky’s ideas with Soviet formal educational objectives of the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the more evident possibilities of overcoming the schism described above between the two types of schools is the advanced development in the child of his or her own conceptual structures. If conceptual thinking represents fundamentally more advanced thinking, then would it not be reasonable to try to create such educational content (i.e., academic curriculum) in the primary school, so that by mastering this content the creation of fully formed concepts would take place among children of primary school age? It was precisely this line of development of Vygotsky’s ideas that formed the basis of a cycle of psychopedagogical studies and experiments performed in the 1940s and 1950s under the direction of P.Ia. Galperin, D.B. Elkonin, and V.V. Davydov, which subsequently became the basis for the system of development training.

Galperin, in summarizing his many years of research on the formation of mental activity, drew the following enthusiastic conclusion:

In forming concepts using the methodology of incremental formation of corresponding actions, neither complexes, nor pseudo concepts, nor intermediate forms appear from among the elements of scientific and everyday concepts. . . . These concepts quickly and successfully appear during older preschool age, and their scope is limited only by the presence of necessary prerequisite knowledge and abilities. (Galperin, 1966, p. 50)

This conclusion had decisive significance for theoreticians of development training, who saw a general path for the transformation of primary education in the early formation of conceptual structures through the introduction of fundamentally new educational content that required the child to exhibit “new and higher forms of thought” (Elkonin, 1966, p. 52).

In essence, the question arose of the possibility of a “great leap”⁵ to conceptual or formal-operational (in Piaget’s sense) thinking, bypassing—or, more accurately, acutely shortening—the stage of complex and, in particular, pseudo conceptual thinking (which, by the way, corresponded completely to the political and ideological dominants of that time, when ideas of revolutionary social leaps—to socialism, bypassing capitalism; to communism, by the end of two seven-year plans; and so on—were sounded from podiums at the highest Communist congresses. At the same time, there was no doubt that the very occurrence of the early formation of conceptual structures (bypassing or acutely shortening the stage of complexes and pseudo concepts) was an unqualified blessing for the child. According to the theoreticians of development training, the cognitive complexes described by Vygotsky had no absolute significance, but served only as steps to a higher conceptual level for organizing the cognitive process.⁶ For this reason, the early appearance of conceptual structures and emergence beyond the boundaries of pseudo-conceptual complex thinking was considered an unqualified blessing, as something of unconditional importance.

The concept of development training was, in essence, the first attempt to turn the issue of primary education onto a fundamentally new plane: education must not only be adapted to the age-related characteristics of students in the lower grades but also must actively influence the formation and development of these age-related characteristics.

Thus, D.B. Elkonin, in arguing against L.V. Zankov’s didactic system (Zankov et al., 1977), quoted Vygotsky and maintained that an educational system could only be said to be genuinely developmental if it went beyond expanding knowledge horizons within the scope of the child’s existing psychological capabilities to also exert a significant influence on the development of the very psychological foundation of education (Elkonin, 1966, pp. 47–48). This manner of formulating the issue appeared very convincing as compared to the expanded empiricism of Zankov’s didactic system, and it would appear that the Davydov–Elkonin development training system was the first to propose an alternative response to the underlying questions that Vygotsky had posed in his time.

The question is: Can one so unequivocally interpret what the development of the psychological foundation of primary school education might consist of?

Generally speaking, for development training theoreticians, the only criteria for development of the psychological foundation was and is the development of *conceptual* cognitive structures. As Elkonin stressed, this educational model should first of all present “ways of acquiring knowledge that are mediated by intrinsic concepts as elements of the subject theory” (ibid., p. 50). This must be an educational model where thinking in complexes would, at an early school age, give way to thinking in concepts: that is, the only kind of thinking that was considered valid by development training theoreticians.

In particular, development training theoreticians also viewed the early formation of conceptual structures as the general path toward transforming primary school mathematics. And specifically, development training theoreticians were the first to formulate a question regarding a fundamentally new type of primary mathematical education oriented not on the ability to memorize, but on the ability to understand; not on memorization, but on thinking. It was specifically within the framework of this concept that a fundamental thesis was first put forth, destined to overturn beliefs regarding the essence and purpose of the educational process: “a school must teach thinking!” Just so: *not to remember, not to know, but to think.*⁷

The secret of a child’s thinking

But here a question arises: What does it mean “to think?” And in particular, what does “to think” mean for a seven- or eight-year-old child?

In any event, development training reduced the thinking process to thinking in concepts and proceeded to marshal an educational process logic around thinking in concepts. But in fact, thinking is not exhausted by conceptual forms only! Furthermore, some grounds exist to suppose that *a person’s basic cognitive abilities are formed specifically at the preconceptual level*, which is suggested by the experience of most people who, while not having been taught in a school of early conceptual thinking using Developmental Education curricular and instructional programs, nevertheless learned how to think (and not too badly, at that).

Clearly, the question regarding the essence and character of thinking in childhood is theoretically disputable. In any case, however, the touchstone that may be used to determine the truth of theoretical disputes about the essence of children’s thinking is the educational content of the primary school. And thus, the most profound thread of innovative pursuits in the primary school is far from educational in nature. This is the watershed between two periods of childhood, and the fundamental purpose of primary school is to illuminate the essence of children’s thinking as such.

Yes, the traditional school—the knowledge-oriented school—is *a school about nothing at all*,⁸ since it in no way raises the question of the essence of the transformation in children’s thinking that must occur during the process of immersing the child in the school’s world. On the other hand, however, the assertion that school

must be oriented toward thinking is not at all as unequivocal, in itself, as it appeared to theoreticians and practitioners of Developmental Education. And in particular, the development of children's thinking is not at all the same thing as cognitive formation in its mature patterns. But in that case, what is this?

The value of preconceptual forms of thinking

Generally speaking, the unilinear progressive approach to the idea of development, where "higher" stages are acknowledged to be unequivocally "better," can hardly be accepted as absolutely and uniquely accurate in the context of modern philosophical knowledge. Even if we consider conceptual thinking to be a higher form than preconceptual, it does not at all follow that it should also be considered of unconditional importance at the early stages of a child's development. Vygotsky himself was very careful in his analysis, and the complex, preconceptual thinking of a seven- to ten-year-old was, for him, of completely independent importance as compared to inherently conceptual thinking. In raising the issue of studying the undiscovered potential of the child's mental development, it was the independent significance and value of the early stages of such development that he challenged the least.

In particular, in analyzing the phenomenon of syncretes and complexes as early, preconceptual structures of children's thinking, Vygotsky did not treat them at all as some kind of unique "misconception"—as an imperfect, half-baked concept. Pointing out that syncretes and complexes are steps toward concepts, Vygotsky in no way supposes that their preconceptual nature exhausts their substance, and that these forms of thinking represent merely steps toward concepts and nothing more. On the contrary, Vygotsky's entire analysis suggests that syncretes and complexes were, for him, of tremendous absolute significance, before everything else, as carriers of heuristic potential for human thinking.

In particular, in describing the phenomenon of children's syncretism as a striving "to pile up" "the most diverse elements having no internal relation, turning them into an undifferentiated, combined image" (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 137). Vygotsky notes that the essence of this tendency lies in "filling in the lack of objective links with an overabundance of subjective links and to accept the connection between impressions and thoughts as a connection between objects" (*ibid.*) But in doing so, is he not showing us the deciding factor that endows human thought with heuristic potential? After all, the ability to fill in a lack of objective links with a certain overabundance of subjective ideas and assumptions has always distinguished the thinking of people we call brilliant and ingenious!

Similar things are also examined in Vygotsky's analysis of complexes: these are by no means simply steps not taken on the path to strictly conceptual thinking, but also a stage of cognitive development in which the fundamental foundations are laid for a creative and variable attitude toward a subject. In distinction from syncretes, a complex attempts to generalize and systematize the surrounding world, relying

on some objective links; these generalizations, however, always exhibit individual variability and multiple meanings.

The diversity of links that underlie a complex constitute its predominant trait, which distinguishes it from concepts in which underlying links typically have a single meaning. This means that each individual subject subsumed by a generalized concept is included in this generalization entirely on the same basis as all other subjects. . . . In distinction from this, each element of a complex may be related to the whole, expressed in the complex, or to individual elements that are part of it, via the most varied links. In concepts, these links are primarily the relation of the general to the specific and of the specific to a specific through a general. In a complex, these links may be as multiform as the diverse actual juxtaposition and actual relationship among the most diverse of objects that have some kind of particular mutual relationship. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 141)

In this way, however, a fundamental capability for an individual and variable relationship to an object is established at the stage of complex thinking. If the stage of syncretes is the stage of pure subjectivism, then the stage of complexes is the stage at which the ability is first formed to subjectively order objective links, and consequently, those fundamental mechanisms that allow a human being not only to pursue some kind of objective laws but also to enter into a diverse and creative dialogue with these laws, are established during the stage of complex thinking.

Complex thinking as a basis for creativity

Vygotsky identifies five principal forms in which complex thinking is performed, and what is noteworthy is that all five forms point toward the specific features of that thinking, which is usually called creative or heuristic. In addition, different ways of activating creative thinking in adults, such as “brainstorming,” may be interpreted precisely as the activation of complex-based forms of thinking.

The first complex identified by Vygotsky is the *association complex*, in which arbitrary associative links underlie generalization:

Its basis consists of any associative link with any of the attributes noted by the child in the subject that is the kernel of the future complex in the experiment. The child can construct an entire complex around this kernel, including the most diverse items: one based on having the same color as a given item; another based on shape; a third based on size; a fourth based on some other distinguishing attribute that catches the child’s eye. *Any* specific relation discovered by the child, *any* associative link between the kernel and an element of the complex is a sufficient reason to refer an item to a group selected by the child and for this item to be designated using a common family name. (Vygotsky, 1982, pp. 141–42)

Naturally, this is profoundly incorrect thinking from the strictly conceptual point of view. However, one cannot fail to notice that the ability to produce these kinds of “lateral,” “incorrect,” and random associative links is the most important feature of those minds that we consider creative,⁹ and that have left their mark in cultural history.

The same may also be said about the *collection complex*, where:

[D]ifferent specific items are combined because they complement one another in some single aspect and create a single whole consisting of dissimilar, mutually complementary parts. It is precisely the dissimilarity of the parts as well as their complementary nature and combination based on a collection that describes this level in the development of thinking. Under experimental conditions, a child will select other figures to go with a given image, which differ from the image in color, shape, size, or some other attribute. However, the child does not select these chaotically or casually, but just because they are different from or complementary to the principal attribute encompassed by the image and taken as the basis for combination. The collection built on this basis comprises a group of items that differ in color and shape, representing a set of primary colors or shapes encountered in the experimental material. (Vygotsky, 1982, pp. 142–43)

There can be no doubt that the principles of variability and complementarity that underlie the described collection complex are the most important characteristics of creative thinking.

The next complex Vygotsky describes is the *chain complex*, which is built on the basis of a dynamic and branching chain of associations.

For example, a child with a yellow triangle may select several figures with angles, and then—if the last of the selected figures happens to be blue in color—the child will select other blue figures, for example, a semicircle or circle. This once again proves sufficient to adopt the new attribute and subsequently select items having a round shape. The process of creating the complex involves transitions from one attribute to another. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 144)

Thus,

[I]n a chain complex, the structural center may be entirely absent. Particular specific elements may enter into a mutual relationship, lacking a central element or image, and for this reason may have nothing in common with other elements, but nonetheless, they belong to a single complex since they share a common attribute with some other element, and this other, in turn, is linked to a third, and so on. The first and third elements may not have any link between them, besides the fact that they are both linked in their own way to a second. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 145)

And once more we are dealing with nothing other than a model of heuristic thinking. Specialists in scientific heuristics well know that many discoveries in science are made precisely using the described model of the chain complex, where a transition from one structurally organizing focus of thought to another occurs using a completely random, stochastic logic, and that it is precisely at the point of this stochastic transition (or within a series of such poorly reasoned, stochastic transitions) that what we call a scientific discovery takes place.

The next complex analyzed by Vygotsky—the *diffusion complex*—also apprehends the specific nature of creative thinking. For it is here that:

[T]he very attribute that associatively links separate specific elements and complexes becomes sort of diffuse and undefined, spread out, and nebulous, resulting in the formation of a complex that unites—using diffuse, undefined links—demonstrably specific groups of images or items. For example, a child may start with a yellow triangle and select not only triangles but also trapezoids because they remind the child of a triangle with a corner cut off. Trapezoids may be followed by squares; squares, by hexagons; hexagons, by semicircles; leading finally to circles. Just as the shape taken to be the primary attribute becomes spread out and undefined, sometimes colors mix together when a diffuse color attribute underlies the complex. A child may start with a yellow object and select a sequence of green, then blue, and then black objects. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 146)

However, the ability to think in washed-out, approximate, and misty outlines is the very ability that fundamentally distinguishes heuristic thinking from thinking oriented toward particular forms of knowledge and understanding! Vygotsky himself stressed how a very important quality of children's thinking—its fundamentally unbounded nature—was opened up by the diffusion complex.

Just as an ancient Biblical tribe, being a completely particular family-based association of people, wished to multiply and become as countless as the stars in the heavens and sand grains on the beach, a diffusion complex in a child's thinking represents, in exactly this same way, a family-based association of things comprising unlimited possibilities for expanding and including, in the basic tribe, ever newer and newer, albeit completely specific items. . . . We know what unexpected convergences—which are often incomprehensible to an adult—and what leaps of thought, risky generalizations, and diffuse transitions a child discovers when starting to reason or think outside the boundaries of his or her visual-object world and practical motor experience. The child enters a world of diffuse generalizations, where attributes slip and vary, imperceptibly moving from one to another. Here there are no solid outlines. This is the realm of unlimited complexes that are often overwhelming by the universality of the links that join them. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 147)

One cannot fail to note the following: trained conceptual thinking may only be called creative if it retains this childlike ability for diffusion, which means this surprising ability to make irrational leaps and transitions, even though they are performed on the basis and within the limits of strict conceptuality.

Finally, the fifth form of complex thinking, according to Vygotsky, is the *pseudo concept*,

created by the child each time he or she selects a set of attributes for a given image, which may be selected and interconnected based on some abstracted concept. . . . For example, using a yellow triangle, a child selects all of the triangles available in the experimental materials. This group might also occur based on abstracted thinking (the concept or idea of a triangle). But in fact, as research has shown, the child has combined the items based on their specific, actual, and outward links—based on simple association. The child constructed only a limited associative complex and arrived at the same point, but via a completely different path. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 148)

Authorship of thought

I shall add only one additional word: by the child's *own* path. And the fact that the child creates a pseudo-conceptual group based on his or her own authorial generalization and not at all on some generally significant conceptual universal set, presents itself as an extremely important fact in terms of the formation of the child's position in the culture. The child's authorial progression to a pseudo concept exhibits completely independent value that can in no way be substituted for or abolished by the conceptual progression from a diagram to an object. In fact, as a result of activity to form a pseudo concept, the child

obtains a product that is analogous to that of adults, but achieved through completely different mental operations, and developed by the ability to think. . . . In the end, the outward appearance is something, practically coincident with the meanings of words for adults, but inwardly profoundly different from those meanings. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 150)

Clearly, the principal value here is not the conceptual or pseudo-conceptual "product" itself, but the *path* the child traverses to obtain this "product." For in the process of forming pseudo concepts, the child's train of thought turns out to be absolutely individual, whimsical, and the child's own. The mental significance and even the predominance of this process consists in this. Before starting to act to *acquire* adult concepts, the child invents them at his or her own risk and peril. And in this regard, it may be hypothesized that at the stage of pseudo-conceptual thinking, there is development of its own inventive ability of the intellect. And if we artificially *jump over* the pseudo-conceptual stage and prematurely impose universal-conceptual thinking patterns on the child's consciousness, it is as likely as not that this inventive ability of the mind will remain inadequately formed.

Thus, I argue that pseudo-conceptual thinking is not some annoying interruption on the path to forming higher conceptual forms of thinking, but a *fully independent form of intellectual activity, which must be mastered by the child him/herself in all of its potential richness and fullness*, and not according to an accelerated schedule as has been proposed by various forms of early conceptual training. And if Developmental Education theoreticians and practitioners have fundamentally demonstrated the ability to effectively form conceptual thought patterns at early and even late preschool age, then we may still reasonably ask the question: Does such leapfrogging over such supposedly incomplete steps in the development of the child's mind and intelligence not involve the risk of some kinds of losses in such development? If early conceptual thinking has not been adequately mediated through a step of thinking in complexes, is it not impaired thinking?

The child who thinks within the boundaries of association, collection, chain, diffusion, or pseudo-conceptual complexes is a child who dares to think at his or her own risk and peril. The child's thinking lacks formal-logical and conceptual orderliness and remains, to a significant extent, random and stochastic, but on the

other hand it is the *child's own thinking*, which carries the risk of proceeding down obviously erroneous and incorrect paths. This is perhaps precisely the foundation of self without which and beyond which formal operational conceptual thinking would prove to be inadequate in some way.

Recall that, in this connection, as has already been shown by twentieth-century research, all theoretical thinking is rooted in a certain image-based underlayer, that is, the whole of what may be called "intellectual visualization." *Any authentic understanding begins not at the conceptual level, but at the level of intuitively grasping an image of what is being understood.* And only through personal image structures does an ascent occur to the substance of a concept, as such. Moreover, although the image lacks the accuracy or clarity of conceptual structures, it exhibits tremendous heuristic potential.

The image is always personal. It lacks the universal generality of a concept, but contains a coiled spring of tremendous cognitive interest. All conceptual thinking, regardless of how developed it may or may not be, contains this kind of image-based underlayer that is always profoundly individual, personal, and incapable of being transmitted to another. This image-based underlayer operates using laws of imprecise, approximate, washed-out, and incorrect thinking, which are precisely the types of thinking that Vygotsky characterized as thinking in complexes. And this means that thinking in complexes is far from being excluded or overcome by a higher, conceptual form of thinking, but retains its independent intellectual value and engages in a sophisticated dialogue with the conceptual level. It thus follows that *thinking in complexes merits special and particular development together with the formation and development of properly conceptual structures.*

In summary, a child's preconceptual thinking may be characterized as thinking in which the basics are established of irrational-creative structures of human consciousness. Its other basic characteristic is its fundamental projectiveness or stochasticity (as well as subjectivity, personality, and responsiveness). In that sense, what interests the child is not so much the question "What is it, really?" as the question "How could it be otherwise?"¹⁰

It may be said that the child is entirely in the future. The child continuously measures himself or herself using the standards of the adult world. And this is clear: the child cannot rely only on his or her own experience of the past, since precisely this experience suggests that everything he or she may think about something today may tomorrow change completely. The dynamics of intellectual and mental development, of self-modification, and of life experiences are fantastically active in a small child. Not just every day, but every hour is spent acquiring experience that, to that point, is completely new. And that is why *the child must perpetually readjust . . . for the future, and moreover, for a future that has yet to happen.*¹¹ For this reason, the child's life is arranged by the laws of play improvisation, while the screen of his or her thinking is a stochastic screen.

The child accepts the world as a world in which anything¹² is possible, and is open to any of the most unexpected and unbelievable of life's turns (from the adult

point of view). The child's thinking has not yet been constrained by the requirements of strict formal–logical certainty.

And what is most amazing, it is just such a stochastic attitude toward the world that creates an effective psychological buffer that allows the child to painlessly encounter the world as a world of unpredictable events and infinite possibilities.

Educational potential of thinking in complexes

It is logical to ask: Can one structure education and, in particular, primary school education on a probabilistic basis? It is thought that the above approach regarding the relation between complex- and concept-based thinking allows a fundamentally new view of the problem, stated by Vygotsky, of developing a psychological basis for training. If we acknowledge the inherent value of thinking in complexes, if we acknowledge that this is a kind of thinking that is in no way excluded by “higher” conceptual forms, but retains its heuristic value for any (however many) developed forms of thinking, this allows a fundamentally new formulation of the question regarding what the development of children's thinking consists of during the stage of primary school education.

Yes, traditional primary education does not concern itself at all with the issue of developing a psychological basis for education. Yes, Elkonin–Davydov Developmental Education was the first to attempt to address this issue. But why, strictly speaking, must the development of a psychological basis for instruction reduce exclusively to the formation of early conceptual thought patterns? In other words, must it occur only in the form of a “great leap” to conceptual forms?

Development is not, after all, a series of exclusively Hegelian jumps to a fundamentally new quality. De-velopment is also (or perhaps first and foremost) de-ployment and ex-pansion (i.e., getting out its existing limits as opposed to a-trophy, re-traction, and with-drawal) of the capabilities involved in the phenomenon of initial existence. And would it not be reasonable, prior to initiating a seven-year-old's dizzyingly rapid leap to the conceptual level, to try to figure out what potentially undiscovered possibilities lie hidden within *probabilistic thinking in complexes* and to construct a model of developmental education such that image structures—not conceptual ones—were the center of psychological development of the young pupil?

The formation of individual intellectual images, the formation of primary authorial intelligible intuition—unique to each child—are, essentially speaking, the principal content of primary education based on probabilistic techniques. Not the universal precision of concept, but the individual distinctness of the personal image, of personal intelligible intuitions, of personal (even supposing they are incorrect, but individually rich!) alternatives—these are the highest values in a system of stochastic education. In developing probabilistically diverse and fundamentally preconceptual patterns of thinking and understanding, we can see the primary objective of this educational model. And only to the extent that this objective turns out to have been achieved, as the adolescent years approach, does a transition occur,¹³

including to the assimilation of conceptual universality. But this transition must be made by the child, whose abilities to think probabilistically, to think in complexes, and to think in images have been developed to their greatest extent.

Thus, we are speaking of the development of a preconceptual region of personality and of special activities with complex thinking structures, which are directed not toward coping with them conceptually, but toward the development of one's own variability potential. And this approach represents a fundamentally new way of addressing the problem described above, of the mismatch between primary and intermediate education. *It is not the early formation of concepts but the development of probabilistic, preconceptual structures, carried to their internal limit, that allows the child (who is already of adolescent age) to enter the world of scientific and theoretical thinking via a world of individually personal experience ("perezhivanie"), personal intellectual visualization, and profound subjective (yet accomplished) understanding.*

Probabilistically based education

The key foundational ideas of the probabilistic system of education are authorship in the culture and cultural diversity (in addition to formally objective logic of unbiased, impersonal thinking). Correspondingly, the key objective of the new educational strategy emerges not so much as an objective of transmitting some sum of cultural knowledge and abilities to the child, as the formation of his or her authorial position in the culture, transforming his or her internal ("subjective") cultural world, and the task of forming his or her authorial individuality and ability to maintain an independent, individual authorial dialogue with the culture. To some extent, this coincides with the ideas of the School of the Dialogue of Cultures (SDC) (V.S. Bibler, S.Yu. Kurganov et al.), although here, even the interpretation of the phenomenon of culture itself, and the interpretation of dialogue, and moreover, of specific educational content definitely does not coincide with that understanding and those educational models developed within the scope of the SDC.¹⁴

The educational process in the probabilistic model represents a set of choice points, at each of which the joint event-driven cognitive movement of the teacher and the class may turn in a most unexpected (unpredictable) direction. Joint passage through these choice points or points of probabilistic transition constitutes the basic content of the probabilistic educational process.

If the trajectories of the educational development of different classes fundamentally coincide in an ordinary school (having been previously drawn in advance by the force fields of the educational program), then in probabilistic education classes, we are dealing with significantly different development paths for different classes as integral educational organisms. The only coincidence is in strategic objectives (both educational and psychological), which can be addressed by the teacher and students at different stages of the educational process, and the arsenal of techniques, which help in addressing these objectives.

The center of the educational space in the probabilistic model is not the lesson preset lesson-plan/scheme/script, which is fundamentally dependent on transmission, reproduction, and recitation, but an improvisational *lesson-event*, during which something happens or does not happen only with a certain degree of probability.

In its external outlines, this lesson-event resembles a collective children's improvisation within a space of cultural problematizations created by the teacher (and, sometimes, students); here, the principal heroes of the lesson are the texts created by the children (and under no circumstances a text whose medium is the teacher). This also equally applies to lessons of linguistic content as well as those of natural and mathematical sciences content. The individual authorial texts of children (both oral and written; both linguistic and mathematical) created in the course of these lessons are predominant.

At the same time, the highest objective of instruction is not to move toward some common understanding or common thinking patterns, but to encourage and support fundamentally individual and previously unplanned paths for the authorial movement of children within the space of cultural problematizations. And as a result, the lesson becomes an *act of authorial creation of culture*, or even a *text of culture* worthy of individual archiving. It is fundamentally not reproducible, but on the other hand, having been scribed, it may exist as a standalone cultural text. (Thus, genuine education is not impersonal reproduction and appropriation of ready-made culture by students, but rather always their authorial production of new culture through transformation of the existing ready-made culture as its material.)

An educational life strategy [fragment written in the spring of 1997]

The foundational principle of probabilistically based education may be expressed by the title of the well-known children's fairy tale, "Go I Know Not Whither and Fetch I Know Not What."¹⁵

Generally speaking, in itself, there is nothing special in this principle, as it is a foundational principle of life per se and a foundational principle of human culture. Another well-known expression that describes this principle is: "Man proposes, God disposes" [a Russian proverb—Ed.]. In other words, however refined the assumptions and curricular-standard programs constructed by humans (or society) with respect to the future, the actual process of life will proceed rather differently as compared to any forecasts. For some reason, this fact does not disturb or surprise anyone. Everyone constantly devises some plan or project for their own life but is at the same time well aware that real life will proceed largely defiant of previously made plans, and that this fundamental unpredictability constitutes the mystery and distinctiveness of life.

Life is what always happens *athwart* of rationally constructed plans. The strange effect of the "other room" always takes place in life ("he walked into a room and ended up in another,"¹⁶ as a certain heroine said in Griboedov's play). Life is least of all a school textbook in which everything is laid out in its assigned place. All of life consists of very random twists and turns.

In other words, one might say that all of life is *event-driven*: acts of an *existential* (and not consciously planned) nature happen all the time in life. Existential acts are acts that are unplanned and unforeseen, acts of “here and now,” acts of genuine first creation, and not acts in which scenarios previously written by someone are played out. *Existential*, in that they are elemental, not a projection of some plan, but a first principle for any acts of consciousness. *It is an event* (literally, “co-being” in Russian, see Bakhtin [1999]) *that concerns existence and corresponds to an existential scale.*

The school tradition is a profoundly *antiexistential and anti-eventful tradition*, since the basis of instruction is the principle of *advance knowledge*, represented in the ideas of the education program. A smoothly running school life truly does not know of events in educational content/curriculum. The main point in the process of scholastic learning is mastery of the curricular-standard program. This curricular-standard content of academic programs is often disputed, but the basic principle remains unshakable: there must be a curricular-standard program preset in advance.¹⁷ And this means that curricular programs created in advance—that is, artificial constructs—are exclusively granted an existential (and, in fact, pseudo-existential) status in traditional school, in accordance with which the lives of the instructed children must proceed. *What prevails is a priori knowledge* regarding what, specifically, a student should study at various stages of school education, and the student’s actual cognitive life is merely a weak reflection, a faint copy of what has been assigned the status of absolute and immutable existence. And what appears inconceivable (and is not even discussed) is the idea of structuring new education as a fundamentally open system, one that is not aware of its own content, and opening this content for the first time to the “here and now,” on an event-driven basis, in each new class (its own).

To be sure, education constructed as an open system, as a set of existential and co-existential, eventful processes and effects, must have its own cultural guides and values, and a notion of various cultural images, but it does not and cannot have a more or less clear notion of a program flow of dialogue with various cultural icons and values. And this means that the probabilistic system of education is capable of providing a fundamental key to structuring that completely new ontology of the school.

In overthrowing the fundamental values of the traditional educational process—that is, the value of programmed, consecutive instructional motions within the preset curricular material being mastered, the value of the lesson as an individually self-contained corpuscle of the educational process, and the value of universal, impersonal knowledge as the highest purpose of the educational process (and consequently, also the value of monitoring the acquisition of this knowledge)—probabilistic education forces the school to reexamine its deepest ontological roots.

Different forms of education [fragment written in spring 1997]

I will parenthetically note that the very word “education” has anything but simple destiny in the Russian language. This is a word in which some mystique is doubtless

present. In actuality, we talk of *formal education* [“*obrazovanie*,” literally, sounds like “molding” to a Russian ear—a connotation that the author disputes here—Ed.] but do we understand what we are saying in this regard?—not in the sense of “what comes immediately to our mind when we hear the word ‘education,’” but what our language “objectively” (i.e., *etymologically*) says in using this word?

If we were talking about “instruction” (*obuchenie*), everything would be simple. The semantic basis of that word accounts for the word “to teach” (*uchit*), “learning” (*uchenie*), and “study” (*ucheba*). And consequently, the word “instruction” (*obuchenie*) very precisely fixes the purpose of the school as system-level activity “to grasp” (*okhvativat*’) and “encapsulate” (*obvolakivat*’) the child in the learning process. The school is engaged in teaching, *grasping* the child in the learning process, and placing the child into the learning process (keeping in mind the meanings of the Russian prefixes “ob” and “o,” as indicators of some kind of an action of embracement). At this point, everything seems clear and nothing raises any questions. We can argue about the authoritarianism of the traditional school, and the extent to which it effectively and painlessly addresses this task of forcefully placing the child *inside and within* the instruction process (*obuchenie*); however, the point is that the meaning of the term should be more or less understood in this regard by everyone.

And the state of affairs is completely different for the word education (*obrazovanie*). Because here, we have a clearly different semantic root and, consequently, the semantic load of this word has a completely different appearance. In any event, this word appears very mysterious within the expanse of the Russian language.

In actuality, we automatically use collocations such as *Ministry of Education*, *system of education*, or *educational process*, unequivocally having in mind everything that is associated with school. However, alongside that, we tenuously imagine (or know precisely) that the semantic field of the word *obrazovanie* in Russian is extraordinarily vast. For example, we speak of how a crack has “formed” (*obrazovalas*’) in a wall of a house. Or we speak of strange “neoplasms” (*obrazovaniia*) that appear inside a living organism when we cannot put a name to such morbidity. Or we speak of “representations” (*obrazakh*) of human consciousness (for example, foggy visualizations of something), or about “images” (*obrazakh*) of artistic work. Finally, any Russian Orthodox Christian will tell you what an “icon” (*obraz*) is. Do these words share a common fundamental (i.e., meaning-generative) root, or do their semantic fields just not coincide?

It is curious that in different works devoted to the philosophy of education, we effortlessly find the semantic link between “education” (*obrazovanie*), in its scholastic-instructional sense, and “image” or “form” (*obraz*); in my opinion, the process of education is the very process of creating some kinds of images, forms, models, or templates. But are there any semantic links between scholastic-instructional education and, for example, the appearance of mold on a piece of bread, or the formation of stars and planets in the cosmological process? Or is formal

education completely unrelated and no root or conceptual link is to be found here? In the sense that “giving back to God the things that are God’s” and “giving back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Bible)?

It is sufficient to glance into the *Dictionary of Russian Language Morphemes* to truly determine that the semantic link between these words is undeniable, and that it is determined by the presence, in all of these words, of the root “raz” (“one,” “once” in Russian). That same root determines the meaning of the word “one-time” (*razovyi*) or simply the word “one” (*raz*). And it is specifically this root that can shed light on the secret of the word “education” (*obrazovanie*) and the secret of the word “image” (*obraz*).

The word “one” (*raz*) denotes *something* or some *wholeness*, some elementary *unit* of something. And the prefix “ob” denotes that this wholeness has been grasped (*okhvachena*), assimilated (*osvoena*), or embraced (*obniata*). Consequently, an “image” (*obraz*) is that “one” (*raz*) that is pulled out and embraced by an inward look. Or more accurately, it is that “one” (*raz*) with whose help a holistic insight of an object is gained. This is the “one” (*raz*) that fills a certain unique wholeness.

This is what we specifically have in mind when we speak of a person *having created an image* of something. When a holistic, intuitive understanding of that something has been created. For example, a mathematical image. Or an enchanting image of one’s beloved that gives rise to obsession and provides no rest . . . Or when we speak of how man was created “in the image and likeness of God” (Bible), even here we have in mind some single grasped wholeness. Or we speak of the figurative use of language, where what is said is replete with vivid, succinct units that are instantly (“at once,” *razovo*) comprehensible through the glance or hearing of one’s interlocutor. And conversely: images are vague when we cannot grasp them instantly (“at once”), when they lack the vividness to instantly disclose their wholeness . . . And so, there is a well-known speaker’s technique, when I want to be understood by my interlocutor: I offer some image that illustrates my statement, and if this image is sufficiently succinct, vivid, and accurate, my interlocutor will experience an instant insight, an instant “Aha!” that grasps the main point. And we have the same thing in mind when we say that someone has formed some course of action (*obraz deistvii*). This is when a *picture* of what must occur (and in what sequence) takes shape in some “one time manner.” And the same thing applies when we speak of the characteristics of a “way of life” (*obraz zhizni*). From what has been said, the meaning of the word “formation” (*obrazovanie*) also becomes clear, when we speak, for example, of strange “growth formations” on the body of a strange animal, or of the process of mountain formation, or the process of continent and ocean formation during planetary development. The process of the *obrazovanie* of something (tufted clouds, traffic jams) is always a process of the occurrence of what may be *grasped* at once as some whole that can be given a name. And in this sense, *obrazovanie* can be called the process of forming any new essence, or the new unique essence itself.

***Obrazovanie* of the personality (*lichnost'*) [fragment updated in the spring of 1997]**

Only one more step remains for us to answer the question of what *obrazovanie* might be in the specifically academic, specifically educational sense, and in what way it differs from instruction.

Obrazovanie (“education”) is not simply the process of being immersed in exercises or plunged into educational activity, but a process of forming some personal, intellectual, spiritual (etc.) *wholeness* in the student, which will permit the student to be described as an educated person consistent with the perceptual stereotypes existing in a given culture. In other words, there exists some cultural ideal, some cultural stereotype, some secret (unconscious, hidden) image of an educated person. Moreover, among different cultures, in different historical periods, these have been fundamentally different images. But the meaning of education is always the same: it operates on some image, model, template (*obrazats*) of an educated (*obrazovannyi*) person. And for this reason, when I speak of a change in the ontological status of the school, I have in mind specifically this fundamental question, which could be called the principal question of educational philosophy: what kind of person can we call an educated person?

Over the long period of the school’s existence, the meaning of scholarship has been seen exclusively in terms of some form of learning holding—possession of certain important universal knowledge, skills, and attitudes (*obuchennost'*). The difference in views was thus reduced to what, specifically, children should be taught, notably in the so-called subject-based orientation of instruction. How a higher quality of learning holding (*obuchennost'*) can be achieved through various actions or reasoning is what has created the core of scholarship in a specifically European sense, starting in the Middle Ages. Changes in the overall image of what an educated person is considered to be have occurred exclusively in the subject-based, curricular sphere of instruction. Thus, during the Middle Ages, an educated person was considered a person trained in accordance with the ideals and images of that epoch, who had mastered the usual subject knowledge that was typical for that time. By the time of the early modern period, what was “usual” and “typical” had changed completely. And the school curriculum had changed, in response. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it changed yet again. But in any case we can state that over the course of 1,500 years, *the European idea of education developed as an idea of changing subject matter* (i.e., curriculum preset in advance), and changes in educational values and educational reference points were related exclusively to changes in the subject of instruction (i.e., curriculum standards). Indeed, even today’s struggle to update education is proceeding along predominantly subject-based lines: as a rule, the more radical proposals are about *what* children must be taught.¹⁸

However, when I speak of a change in the school’s ontology, I do not at all have

in mind the banal (for the European educational tradition) renewal of the school's subject content (i.e., the curricular standards). I am speaking of something substantively different. I am speaking of the possibility of education that is not instruction at all. I am speaking of an educated person of a new type, of an educated person whose scholarship is not the result of instruction, but the result of a certain completely special process of personal *self-realization* that occurs in the course of a rigorous dialogue with the culture (or personal self-actualization, to use Maslow's term).

And this is not even so much self-instruction as self-learning. This is something absolutely special, related to the possibility of *fundamentally taking the individual beyond the boundaries of those models of educativeness (obrazovannost') that contemporary culture has adopted*. To go beyond the limits (transcendence) of what constitutes models of educativeness that are accepted in a given culture. And this is related to the possibility of creating the position of a "person of culture" (cf. Bibler), a person who does not so much follow the models accepted in the existing ready-made culture (what may be assimilated during the process of some instruction), as create his or her own models of the new, emerging culture (which fundamentally cannot be a subject of *instruction*).

From education-as-instruction to education-as-dialogue [fragment updated in the spring of 1997]

I shall parenthetically note that now the fond references to John Amos Comenius as the founding father of the modern school are not entirely correct. The model Comenius proposed for organizing academic activity was simply the system of formal education—which had been created significantly earlier, in the heart of the Middle Ages—taken (and taken brilliantly!) to its logical conclusion.

And it would appear that today, this essentially medieval system of education has become completely irrelevant.

I insist that today, human civilization is on the edge of a fundamental transformation from education-as-instruction (which is deeply medieval in its roots) to a radically new type of education: an education in which the education of the person, the education of the individual, will occur not on the basis of some *instructional programming*, not as a result of the child's having mastered some *learning instructional program*, but on a process of dialogue-based personal self-realization, self-actualization in the sphere of constantly emerging human culture.

Today, the objectives of education-as-instruction and the objectives of educating an intracultural person capable of broad and unprogrammed dialogue with the culture are diametrically opposed objectives. The task of education-as-instruction consists in educating the individual in accordance with a predesigned plan, pursuant to some a priori, universal and impersonal knowledge of what kind of person this individual should be. In some sense, this also means to create a person "in the image and likeness of God," to which one might add that each specific historical or philosophical model of education has had its own "God." For such education-as-instruction, the

individual is only raw material, clay, an object to be educated—that is, molded. In other words, the child who enters this kind of school is not yet a person, but only the material for creating a person that has yet to be and about whom the school knows something in advance. We can speak of some model of education-as-instruction only to the extent that it specifies an educational ideal as the ideal of an individual instructed in something, as the ideal of a person possessing some set of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Some anticipated future is specified. So is the idea of just what the “product” should be upon exiting the educational system. So is the educational standard.

Conversely, education that is not instruction but takes place as self-realization, self-actualization of the child’s personality resulting from a dialogue with the culture is a fundamentally open situation. And in this sense, a genuine dialogue is fundamentally not education—that is, molding in some preset image.. The participants in a dialogue (if this is a genuine dialogue, and not a schoolish pseudo-dialogue) do not educate each other at all, but engage in a mutual expansion of their respective positions, which results in mutual education and mutual development of these positions. For these mutual positions require a mutual hearing, and by no means any educatory correction. If a participant in a dialogue adopts the position of an all-knowing “teacher,” or all-knowing “expert,” the dialogue breaks down. The correction of a position in a dialogue is simply and always autocorrection, self-correction. Where dialogue exists, there is a fundamental equality of positions (cf. Bakhtin, 1999).¹⁹ There is no instruction in this case, one participant does not mold, form (*obrazovyyvat’*) the other. There is no transmission of information or knowledge from the more knowledgeable to the less knowledgeable (cf. Vygotsky). There is no unilateral ascendancy of one over the logic of the other (cf. Hegel). And it goes without saying there is no program that imposes such an ascendancy (cf. Davydov). But this means that education-as-dialogue has no educational ideal of specified preset knowledge and abilities that are to be mastered by the “student,” nor can it have one. For educational ideals of this kind of conventional schooling are devised only by one side in the educational process—the side that does the instructing, and not the side being instructed.

All education-as-instruction has a generally clear understanding of what the “instructing party” wants, how the educational process must end, and where the “educated” must end up. Such education must have a fundamentally *predictable* result. On the other hand, the crucial nature of a dialogue is that its result cannot be predicted, because two (or more) *equal* participants are involved, each of whom pursues his or her own subjectively fanciful line. And the result of a dialogue between two participants always gives birth to a *third*, which belongs to neither the first nor second.

Education of geniuses [fragment updated in the spring of 1997]

Every historical age has some who can be called the most educated people of their time. These are people who best correspond to those implicit educational standards

that have been sown in the atmosphere of the age. Every historical age also has people who *demolish* educational standards, creating cultural dimensions that were entirely unintended by any educational standards.

Of course, such people are also not among those who “*received* an education.” Genuine education, education-as-dialogue, cannot be given or received.

The nature of genuinely educated people lies in not ever fitting in with the education they *received*. They did not so much follow some preset educational standard as engage in an ongoing battle with it. These are the “geniuses,” “talents,” “architects of culture,” “people of culture,” and so on. It is precisely they who demonstrate the kind of interaction with the culture that can be called dialogue. They recognize the existing ready-made culture as an equal interlocutor, and the culture itself is forced to deal with their independence. *They are least of all an object of education*. With respect to their own education, they maintain a pronounced distance, never fitting in with the education they received.

Strategically, up to the present, the educated person has been the educational ideal—in other words, a person who stands at the peak of his or her existing ready-made culture. Someone who is capable of representing his or her own ready-made culture. But this is a person who is not capable of representing *his or her own individual, unique authorial world*. Such a person has no genuinely personal position. *An impersonal, ready-made static culture speaks through this person’s lips*. Educational ideals and curricular standards change just like patterns in a kaleidoscope, but one thing does not change in traditional school: the principle of a person’s conformity to some (one or another) educational ideal. And when two educated people representing the same culture interact, it is as if the culture is mumbling to itself without much movement.

So what does it mean “to have one’s own position?” If I draw uncritically my own position from books that I have read, it will hardly be a sufficient basis for a dialogue with the position of another. And even if it does so serve, it will do so with significant reservations. This will not be my position, but the position of that book, that author, whom I am representing in my position.

The question of a radical change in the ontology of the school is one of transitioning from a culture of education oriented toward the *educated person* (a person capable of successfully following someone else’s position) to a completely new culture, a culture of education oriented toward the person capable of having his or her own position. “Own,” not in the sense of having received it without any external influence (i.e., autonomously), but as a result of a genuinely authorial and critical position in a rigorous dialogue with the culture. This is fundamentally the position of the “person of culture” (cf. Bibler). To date, the right to possess such a position has been considered the prerogative of genius. The school I am talking about is one that considers such a position as the potential norm for any person.

Doubtless, the culture of all times has, one way or another, valued the ability of a person to create and hold such an authorial, nonconformist position—to “go against the flow” in some sense. But only as the destiny of selected geniuses who

break out of the educational standards of their time—and most likely, only in hindsight, closer to centennial and later anniversaries. On the whole, the strategy of contemporary conventional education turns out to be completely incompatible with the idea of nurturing a genuinely independent cultural dialogue. And whoever hazards such a dialogue is perceived as part of the cultural fringe and more likely evokes feelings of bewilderment and suspicion than those of admiration and joy. While alive, in any event. And this is the key to understanding the thesis expressed above regarding the need to transition from education-as-instruction to education-as-dialogue.

Notes

1. Eugene Matusov (EM): I wonder if there are other and deeper reasons for that as Davydov and others pointed out. He argued that contemporary society may not need creative thinking out of the box for the great majority of people because of economic, political, and social reasons. What do you think?

Alexander Lobok (AL): I agree.

2. EM: Since their studies, there has been both empirical and theoretical research undermining their claims. In my view, you do not need to address this point, but just to be aware of it.

AL: I agree. And to be frank, for me these twenty-year-old reflections of mine seem rather superficial. The meaning of these reflections can only be understood in the context of my internal argument with “Developmental Education,” which at that time was considered by many educators in Russia as the only sound alternative to traditional (again, traditional for Russia!) models of education. This was my internal conversation, internal argument, and honestly, it does not seem to me that this internal Russian story would be of great interest to the Western reader. What greatly disconcerted me personally at that time was observing, among a countless number of so-called sophisticated Russian educators, a hunger for a new educational totalitarianism—a hope for some “magic bullet,” some universal template that might help to solve automatically a range of accumulated academic problems. And so the Developmental Education” (DE) ideas of Davydov became this kind of saving hope for very many educators. This was one of the strangest and most formidable paradoxes of posttotalitarian Russian education. An educational concept oriented toward the development of thinking was raised as the flag of a new educational obscurantism. You just had to see, to observe how many hundreds of educators tried to create a new educational totalitarianism, their eyes brimming with a fanatical certainty that Davydovian DE was the only and absolute path to the educational development of the school.

EM: In my view, Piaget and Vygotsky were decontextualized structuralists who significantly limited their empirical approaches. It is also interesting that Vygotsky as a theoretician challenged Piaget’s decontextual structuralism but as an empirical researcher followed Piaget’s paradigm. What do you think?

AL: This would appear to be true. Overall, it really is one paradigm. But in Vygotsky, I sometimes find breakthroughs to another paradigmatic reality. It seems to me that Vygotsky is actually on the cusp of another paradigmatic reality.

3. EM: So, what is different in today’s society compared with that of eighty or ninety years ago, that would cause agreement on this shift in school ontology?

AL: It seems to me that this is largely a consequence of the experience of totalitarianism that has been lived through, lived out, and has, to some extent, been eradicated. Two large-scale social catastrophes of the twentieth century—Soviet and Nazi— both of them

delusional post-Enlightenment projects, appear to have somehow “put our heads right.” But these are purely external events of the era. As concerns internal events, it appears to me—and this is important—they have nevertheless paved paths for fundamentally different types of philosophizing. It is just against the background of the totalitarian catastrophes of the twentieth century that existential-dialogical thinking was acutely laid bare and manifested itself: thinking oriented toward the humanistic idealized self (with its deep-seated feelings) and thinking oriented toward dialogue (i.e., listening attentively to the other idealized self).

4. EM: The Russian literary critic Victor Shklovosky (Shklovskii and Sher, 1990) wrote that at the beginning of the twentieth century the results of wrestling championships were secretly prearranged among the wrestlers to financially benefit from the public’s bets and gambling. But once a year, the wrestlers secretly met in Hamburg, Germany, behind closed doors and curtained windows, to determine the real champion among them. When their scandalous secrets were discovered by the press, the term “Hamburg account” became synonymous with “a real, fair test.”

5. EM: This is a reference to Communist China’s “Great Leap Forward” in economy under Mao Zedong’s leadership that ended up in the human tragedy of a new holocaust and an even bigger economic decline.

6. EM: This is a very important and original point because it seems to me common to many psychologists and educators viewing childhood instrumentally, as a step toward adulthood, without its self-sufficiency and self-value.

7. EM: It is interesting to me how people’s experiences, feelings, relationships, and practical and particular judgment are sacrificed to generic ability to think, regardless of the content, context, and particularities. What do you think?

AL: To be honest, I still believe that “school must teach how to think.” But by “thinking,” I do not at all intend or presuppose some totality of generally and universally applicable “rules of thinking,” but primarily some total of individual existential stresses, of perceptions and fancies, and of individual contexts—and then only based on all of this, thinking as an individual ability to create new content and new knowledge. True thinking is thinking that is deeply individual and private, and for that reason is productive and contemplative of the reciprocal efforts of an awareness that listens attentively. In this way, “to teach how to think” means to teach how to be truly individual, productive, and dialogical.

8. EM: It is a bit unclear to me. You wrote above that a traditional school is about the transmission of knowledge and skills to promote the existing societal division of labor and reproduction of the society.

AL: By “about nothing at all” I mean from the perspective of the task of the goal-directed creation of thinking abilities. “About nothing at all,” from the point of view of the logic of Davydov’s “Developmental Education.”

9. EM: And authorial?

AL: For me, genuinely creative is always authorial. Even when authors block out and hide their authorship and attempt to reduce themselves (at the level of their ideology) to, say, an instrument in the hands of God.

10. EM: Can you please clarify?

AL: A child’s thinking is not so much “exploratory researcher’s thinking” (in the sense of the task of rebuilding the world in its true foundations) as it is imaginative thinking and thinking in fantasies and myths. The child is not so much studying the ready-made world as creating the world, filling it with subjective fantasies that do not presuppose any need whatsoever for conscientious investigatory validation, but are fully self-contained.

11. EM: And most probably will never be because the “adult future” traditionally designed for children in schools is an approximation of the children’s future by the adults’ past and present.

AL: Only a child is really open to the future with its unknown nature. A child is ready to

accept the future with its unknown nature, and the child is not afraid of this unknown future, in distinction from adults, for whom the future is always related to a number of concerns, which is why adults so persistently attempt to create various schemes for a refined (or even distilled!) future. And each such scheme becomes, in the final analysis, yet another pitfall.

12. EM: Or, at least, quite a lot of things?

AL: Mythologically, precisely anything, because in a myth, anything is possible. There are no fundamental formal logical constraints in fantasy. Everything is possible and depends exclusively on the scale and resources of fantasy.

13. EM: A transition? or addition? or both?

AL: This is definitely a transition that is valid solely to the extent that it holds and functionally “removes” (keeping in mind the Hegelian term) the value of a subjective-nonuniversal perception of the world.

14. EM: See *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January–February 2009); no. 2 (March–April 2009); and vol. 49, no. 2 (March–April 2011).

15. EM: This is a reference to a famous Russian fairy tale “Go I Know Not Whither and Fetch I Know Not What,” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_I_Know_Not_Whither_and_Fetch_I_Know_Not_What/).

16. EM: This is a reference to the famous play by a Russian writer of the nineteenth century, Aleksandr Griboedov, *Woe from Wit*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woe_from_Wit.

17. AL: In this regard, I would like to point out the fundamental difference between the two types of possible dialogues with the future: a dialogue based on programming and a dialogue based on projection. Programming assumes clear knowledge, preset in advance, of what we want to achieve and when. Programming is used to plan the future as a result that is known beforehand. But this means there is no future, as such. The future appears as a direct projection of our knowledge. Projection is a much more complex activity that proceeds from the important assumption that the future cannot be inferred from the present by deduction, and that the actual future is much more complex than we can anticipate. We can only forecast the future, with a certain amount of likelihood, and thus rely on this stochastic forecast in the design of our project.

18. AL: Here, “subject-based” is understood to be only what has been devised before the actual educational process begins.

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ALEXANDER LOBOK

The Writing Person

In this chapter, I share my empirical pedagogical experience of working in the framework of probabilistic dialogic pedagogy in the area of teaching literacy and language arts in elementary school. I show that the writing person emerges from a communicating author engaging in poetics and supported by the teacher and the peer community rather than from learning writing mechanics as they are often taught in a conventional school.

If the notebooks of my first-graders were to be reviewed by an exacting inspector of recent Soviet times, he or she would certainly suffer a stroke. I can vividly imagine the drawn face, the sputter, and the hands shaking those notebooks under my nose. “This is monstrous! Disgusting! It is indecent! What are you teaching these children? You should be prosecuted for this!”

And, to be sure, they would have it done. And they would find something criminal to charge me with . . . Incidentally, even today, one often encounters educators who begin to shake with indignation when they learn *what* and *how* these children write while mastering the skill of writing.

When a stranger asks, out of curiosity, to leaf through my students’ notebooks, I decline. And not only that, but after having passed through a thousand hands (and enough people are ready to take a look at these more-than-strange notebooks), they would be worn to bits. It is also because it is simply not possible to understand the content of these notebooks without special commentary. This content does not look like anything at all. And the leisurely reader is often too lazy to think about the fact that these notebooks have a completely different essence as compared to normal first-grade notebooks.

English translation © 2013 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Russian text, “Chelovek pishushchii,” from the book *Veroiatnostnyi mir: Opyt filosofsko-pedagogicheskikh khronik obrazovatel’noy eksperimenta*, published in *Nachal’naia shkola*, 1994, no. 17, a supplement to the newspaper *Pervoe sentiabria*.

Translated by Alex Lane.

Several times I have had to observe how passersby would take these notebooks—which are invaluable to our experiment—and start to browse through them with an overt show of ill-tempered bewilderment on their face, and presently start to comment on them without betraying the least desire to understand. Or to indifferently place them to one side and take their leave without having asked a single question. Or to address a dismal collection of complaints to me and these notebooks, without suspecting the degree to which such complaints have nothing to do with the essence of these notebooks.

You do not have to go far! When the teacher newspaper *Pervoe sentiabria* (September First, the official day of the beginning of the school year in the Soviet Union and modern Russia) published a photocopied fragment of the notebooks of my students, Maksim Sgibnev and Alesha Savvinov, the first reaction I met was overtly belligerent: “Oh, what a thing to be proud of! They don’t know how to write at all! And the grammatical and spelling errors, the errors! And, in the final analysis, what kind of nonsense are you teaching them to write?!”

Meanwhile, the thought would not occur to our belligerent critics that, in actuality, what they had seen was a miraculous, *authentic miracle*.

The point is that in all existing conventional educational systems, children *from the beginning* learn writing mechanics—how to write individual alphabetic elements, followed by letters, syllables, and words offered to them by a primer or copybook, followed—for a long time—by writing using only the words, graphics, and spelling that have somehow become known to them.¹ In our class, everything begins with an assignment that is completely insane (from the perspective of traditional didactics): make up and write down any expressions that come to mind (provided they are interesting), regardless of how complicated these expressions might be. On the contrary, the more complex, the better.

Let us imagine the degree of complexity of this assignment for some six-year-old, who has come into our class with completely undeveloped hand movements and lots of psychological problems. This six-year-old is asked to start writing entire texts “out of the blue”—not to copy them from some example, but to pull them out of his or her own head. Can you imagine how this is possible? A six-year-old child, who is barely learning to read, is given the task of writing some text that he or she has thought up, all on his/her own? And in written form, no less! And using words, too, that the child has as yet surely never even seen! As a matter of fact, when a child is truly composing, words whose graphic images are already familiar tend to be used least of all. Consequently, the child must also think up how some word might be written!

And what qualities must such a child possess, if he or she soon turns to the performance of this task—which is, frankly, beyond the child—without the slightest shadow of embarrassment or fear? And spends the entire lesson stubbornly scrawling something in his or her notebook, incessantly looking at a copybook page that is hanging over on the wall, serving as the only graphic guideline that has hung in the classroom for some time—like part of the background—and whose study we

have not even contemplated during the preceding week? “Have not studied” in the conventional school sense, that is, but have assuredly paid attention to. As if we had incidentally worked with this sheet, visually demonstrating to the child that, when writing down some thought-up expression on the board, it is always possible to relate the graphic image of whichever letter is being written to the examples shown on this “copybook” sheet. Every time the teacher wrote some children’s sentence on the blackboard (or on sheets of drawing paper, or on the wall, or even on the floor!), the teacher, without fail and with emphasis, would look at this sheet and point out in every possible way the fundamental correspondence of the writing to the specimens of penmanship. In doing so, an important thing was for the penmanship of the teacher’s writing not to be identical to that of those specimens, there was always some visible “author’s license,” and it would become evident to each child at some point that the teacher was not blindly following the penmanship specimen, but engaging in, one might say, a “creative dialogue” with it. That empowered the child to not blindly mimic a penmanship specimen, but to create an individual penmanship, or in any event, to understand that nothing is wrong with individual penmanship. And this is what allows the child to feel quite calm about the process of mastering unattainable specimens of penmanship.

And in fact, this was a child who, at one time, had come to class frightened, trembling, and on the verge of tears over any trifle. This was a child who could not maintain academic discipline at all, could not focus his attention on the blackboard, and the only thing that the child did with pleasure was to roll a toy automobile on his desk and mumble, under his breath, something known only to himself.

True, today, this is a completely different little boy. He is calm and confident, ready for the most unexpected turns of events in the class, prepared to engage in difficult and diligent effort even on assignments for which he cannot even guess the procedures needed to complete. And it is precisely to such a class of assignments that what has been described above applies: the teacher said to write something, but he does not know what, and write it in such a way, but he does not know which way. Only that it should be interesting and written down. The rest, I leave to your conscience and initiative . . .

Here, I must take a step back and explain something about reading instruction in our experimental class.

The point is that our class simply had no reading instruction, as such. We did not “go through” the letters. We did not learn to read, syllable by syllable, all sorts of sentences that were standard in Soviet and Russian primers, along the lines of “Mother washed the win-dow” and “Ni-na has bal-loons.” We did not fill our heads with some scholastic linguistic material obtained from the *Primer* or some other book. We simply thought up *interesting words and situations that were interesting to children* and the teacher would write these interesting children’s words on the blackboard (or even on the wall) *in an interesting way*.² Then, in all sorts of situations—after one, two, or three days—the children would be quizzed on where which word was written. And suddenly, children who had been considered “unprepared for school”

adopted this game with the writing surface of the board or walls and began to figure out, for themselves, where what word was written, relying initially on their visual memory and later engaging their analytical capabilities as well. You could say it this way: initially the word was perceived (and remembered) as its own kind of “long hieroglyph,” and only during the second stage did the teacher pay attention to the components of these hieroglyphs—the syllables and letters.

And so, everything turned out topsy-turvy (or turvy-topsy, however you prefer).

First, the children discovered that any word and any expression of their day-to-day language could (with the teacher’s help) be written graphically and turned into written text.³

Second, when the quantity of such kinds of texts written down with the teacher’s help exceeded several hundred (and everything was done to preserve what had been written on various surfaces and not destroy it, even if this meant writing on the floor or on the walls) it suddenly became clear that the graphic patterns of these words had become firmly imprinted in the children’s consciousness, and they “read” these verbal hieroglyphs without difficulty, and not syllable by syllable, but in their entirety.

Note that we are talking about texts that were not brought to class by the teacher, but composed by the children themselves and immediately written down by the teacher in full view of these children. And since everything took place in an exciting, game-like manner, the children developed a motivation to initially remember the place where some text was written and the locations of individual words. After a sufficiently large number of written texts had been created came the ability to recognize identical words that were written in different places and to identify the graphic appearance of words. A reading effect appeared, but not reading as the combination of individual graphic elements into a whole word image, but reading as the recognition of a whole graphic word image.⁴

And finally, third, when the number of words read independently by a child became sufficiently large, each child turned out to be able to identify word elements such as letters without any help at all, and to start reading unfamiliar words made up of familiar letters.

It may be objected that such a path to learning how to read takes longer. But on the other hand, it is more independent. Furthermore, it is possible that acquisition of reading using this path can make reading more engaging and more exciting from the very start, than what occurs in the majority of cases where teachers and parents “harness themselves to” their unhappy offspring, like barge-haulers on the Volga,⁵ and still are unable to create in them the smallest spark of reading passion.

On what is traditional instruction in reading and writing based? It is based on the idea the one must first learn the letters, then learn to combine these letters into words, the words into sentences, and then reading, as such, then proceeds from that point.

True, there are times, during the process, when the perception takes shape that if children, in the end, do learn to read, that this occurs not so much “thanks to” as despite the described technique. Because the letter is a symbolic sign, which

very, very approximately corresponds to the phonic substance of a word.⁶

And it is strange that traditional didactics begins to teach a small child to read specifically starting with letters, which essentially is nothing more than a senseless calligraphic abstraction.⁷

The educator Zaitsev, who is popular among Russian parents, starts with a “syllabics,” in an attempt to bypass the absurdity of the traditional, letter-based beginning. But even the Zaitsev “syllabics” is also an abstraction that lacks semantic denotation, although this abstraction is more proximate to the substance of words than are letters.

Yet at the same time, it is perfectly well known that the majority of small children who have mastered the art of reading at an early age on their own, without special instruction by parents or teachers, immediately begin to read in words, as if underscoring the collateral nature of the letter. If traditional formal education contemplates a child’s scholastic “bottom-up” motion along the “letter–syllable–word–sentence (phrase)” path, then those children I am referring to quite clearly demonstrate that the instructional approach used in school is not completely natural, and that a completely different path is much more natural, that of “phrase–word–syllable–letter.”⁸ In this case, the small child’s gaze initially grabs and remembers large graphic pieces of the text that are loaded with some kind of meaning. The child remembers the pattern of individual words (whenever a word, in distinction from a letter, carries subject content, which means it can possess some kind of semantic significance for the child) and only later does the analytical effort of the child’s gaze commence, noticing letters in the word and discovering patterns in the letter-symbolic writing of words. An effort takes place that very much resembles what the child has already done previously in life, during the process of assimilating spoken language. In both areas a holistic, synthetic view preceded the analytic, and never the other way around.⁹

Therefore, in the educational model we created, specifically words and meanings were made the foundation of teaching reading and writing.

Generally speaking, the technical side of the business of writing and reading consisted of, first, having all words and phrases with any meaning at all that appeared in the spoken language of children in class converted into writing, and second, creating school situations such that the written children’s language would become personally meaningful for each child in the class.

A curious consequence of this system of instruction was that children discovered in themselves a sort of fully formed ability to read. In other words, they began to read without suspecting that they were already reading. And they caused their parents some confusion when suddenly, unexpectedly, seemingly without having mastered either letters or syllables, they started noticing certain words in newspapers or books. “Oh, mama! I see the word ‘author’ in what you’re holding!” is how Tonia Gainullina frightened her mother, who until that moment had been certain her daughter did not know how to read.

Alesha Savvinov discovered his ability to read in an even more original manner.

One of the subject areas of our joint activities with the children during lessons was (over a fairly long period) thinking up and writing down crossword puzzles. As concerns Alesha, it appeared that he did not pay any attention to this activity; he would sit by himself at his desk and play with toy automobiles. And suddenly, he himself, in his own hand, using printed letters, scribbled his own crossword puzzle, consisting of eight words. He had to “conceptualize” all eight words by himself, and very simply, so that, for example, the word “tigrnok” (tiger cub), which was the answer to Alesha’s own riddle, “He’s mean, but can be nice,” had been written with invented spelling as “tigrnok” in reverse, that is, “gnokrit.” And yet who would doubt that a miracle had occurred? The boy’s parents remain certain that Alesha does not know how to read at all, Alesha himself remains inscrutably silent in class and plays with his toy automobiles, and suddenly, it turns out that he is already capable of writing!¹⁰

And once there is an ability to write, it must be actualized. But not in the sense of copying texts written by others, but in the sense of creating and writing down one’s own. Moreover, preferably using capital letters (it is a good thing the big sheet showing the penmanship standard for writing each letter has hung in front of everyone’s eyes for a long time). It is just that, at some point, the teacher should sense that a particular child is mature enough to make a transition from dictating text to adults and teachers who know how to write to writing on his/her own, however difficult this may appear at first.

In our view, it is generally crucial to suggest some kind of assignments to children without specifying a definite procedure for their fulfillment. It seems to us that, in solving any problem, the period during which the child flounders in its requirements, attempts to find a way “at one’s own peril and risk,” and eventually devises his or her own—possibly unwieldy and awkward but his or her own—solution is extremely valuable.¹¹ And at that point, one might propose various learning techniques. Such techniques should follow the child’s personal experience and not be imposed on this experience as an alien and unconditional truth. One way or another, by this time, the child will no longer be a tabula rasa. The child will master a procedure that has been devised by someone else to solve a given problem, incessantly keeping in mind his or her own path of trial and error, and this personal path will provide an invaluable power charge to scholastic activity.

How can you write down what you think if you have absolutely no experience in writing on your own? Yet on the other hand, there is a completely incredible motivation to say what you are thinking out loud.

And so, the historic moment has arrived, and Alesha picks up a pen, opens his notebook, and . . .

Here it is, I have before me the first page of the first notebook in Alesha’s life. By any stretch, could one call these strange scribbles “writing?” When you glance for the first time at the opening lines of Alesha’s text, your eyes start to ripple and you get the feeling that it is simply impossible to read this. The boy writes implausible words using implausible letters. You want to throw the notebook aside. But . . . the

boy spent the entire lesson writing this one line of his! And take a look at just how many problems he has managed to solve in this one line!

First, he's come up with his own way of writing each of the written letters, and in a number of cases, his ideas are very convincing (this concerns primarily the letters "sh," "o," "l," and "n").¹²

Second, he won a great victory over his student helplessness; after all, he managed to retain in his mind—during the entire lesson (!)—the sentence that he painfully and slowly attempted to write.

Third, on the following day, he returned (!) to this unfinished sentence of his (although he just as well could have not done so) and made yet another heroic attempt to finish it.

Fourth, the fearlessness with which Alesha writes this very far from simple sentence is astounding; the boy shows no uneasiness at all about not having been taught to write individual letters and words.

Fifth, in this, his first written sentence, Alesha already exhibits an undeniable freshness: "There was Aleksandr Mikhailovich [the name of his teacher, i.e., the author—Ed.], and he went into the forest, and he made a big jump, and he jumped into a golden forest . . ." This is beautiful, this is mysterious, this is intriguing, and it absolutely looks nothing like those stubby sentences that first-graders normally start to write in a conventional classroom.

And finally, sixth (and this is the main point for us!), every word Alesha wrote in the sentence was conceptualized by himself! After all, he had no specimens for writing these words! These words were not taken from a book, they had not been written earlier as specimens. They were taken in their entirety by Alesha from his own head, and he thought up a "spelling" for these words—special and different from what is accepted, but spelling nonetheless. Perchance gravitating to the orthography of Old Slavonic: "Zhyl AlkhadorMshaevch i onposhol vles i on Sdel Bshoi Pishai i on vsrpil vzlpoi vles" ("Was AlkhadorMshaevch and hewnt inthfrst and he Mad Bg Jmp and he jmpdin gldn frst"). That is just how Alesha's sentence looks in his notebook, but, unfortunately, I cannot convey the graphic details of his writing.

No, of course, this is not Old Slavonic orthography. It is the personally invented orthography of Alesha Savvinov, which a teacher might not understand, unless its author were to help in making sense of his own text.

Incidentally, to speak of "spelling errors" in this text is as senseless as it is to speak of orthographic errors in Old Slavonic using the orthography of today's Russian language as a standard. Fundamentally, this text of Alesha's *contains no errors* because he is completely unacquainted with the accepted standard, and is not resisting this accepted standard. Alesha painfully fashions each word using the capital letters that are displayed before him and it stands to reason that to compare the resulting text with accepted spellings is simply senseless. In truth, Alesha immediately comes up against the problem of the *communicative closedness* of his text. And it turns out that the teacher (Aleksandr Mikhailovich), for whom this text

was intended, was not capable of reading this text on his own, without Alesha's help. And this communicative dissonance appears to be very productive, as it gives birth to a need to find some standard, some norm for spelling. And, again, this will not be a search imposed by the teacher, but Alesha's own search. If children develop a fear of making spelling errors in a typical first grade, then in my experimental class, children arrive at a point where they assert *a need to correct their own errors*.¹³ And if this need is understood in a timely manner by the teacher, if adequate forms of activity are offered in response to this need, the child will develop a kind of love for spelling, a desire to correct his own errors . . . When children catch this disease of reviewing their own texts for spelling errors, they may become so captivated by the process of checking the spelling of these texts that they may decide to skip recess. Have you ever encountered such a thing in first grade? I have not. And I will not attempt to predict the consequences this may lead to, two or three years down the road . . . The "writing person" is a great mystery, and no, this is not the "transcribing person," that is, someone who only uses a pen to follow behind a line written by someone else. Such a person does not belong to him/herself and such a person's written work is the essence of negating the self. On the contrary, the writing person is the essence of a person who is continuously creating him/herself anew in the written world. The writing person is one who is in constant dramatic dialogue with him/herself. This is a person who has invented his or her own written idealized self and who pokes fun at him/herself with temptation and, simultaneously, the impossibility of reflecting him/herself in the mirror of the written word. The writing person is one who has given rise to his or her own "second birth." The writing person is one who is responsible for him/herself before the world. The writing person is one who dares to be not only inside him/herself, but outside as well. The writing person is one who is ready to be heard by others. It would appear that something similar is taking place in our experimental class.

(March 1994)

The art of slowing down

So if the "lofty" texts of our children are not taken from the "lofty" words of teachers, then where, in this case, are they taken? I will attempt, in a most cursory and schematic manner, to describe the phenomenon of text creation in our experimental class.

The principal technical element in our experiment is the artificial slowing of children's oral speech. This means that during the first phase, the task of the teacher is to simply be a mirror for children's oral speech. And to be a slowing mirror. A mirror in which the child *both hears and sees his sentence*, exactly, the way it was uttered, but as a sort of slowed-down utterance.

The key words here are "exactly" and "slowed down."

Words imposed on a child are, in my view, the principal error that our teachers make in primary school with respect to the newly arrived first-grader. These

teachers truly see their task as one of imparting something to the children, to tell them about something important, interesting, or wonderful. I conducted my author's educational training sessions and seminars with many, many hundreds of students and teachers and each time, the views of the teachers were dominated by this completely romantic idea of the substance of educational work: "I walk into my class, where thirty pairs of wide-open eyes await me . . . And each time, I must come up with something that does not disappoint their expectations!"

While the teacher as broadcaster may turn out to be helpful later, it is extremely dangerous at the very beginning. And today, I am sure that the less a teacher can say or relate to children at the very start of their instruction, the better results that teacher will achieve.¹⁴ Moreover, this applies to both language and mathematics. The teacher must not be a *broadcaster*, but an *instigator*, someone who invents technically effective and creatively provocative academic assignments. And then educational success can be achieved with any children, even the most difficult.

Therefore, I now describe the process of artificially slowing down children's speech, step by step.

The first thing the teacher must achieve is to encourage the child to say something. And then to repeat what was said—word for word!—using his or her own oral speech and in writing on the blackboard. I believe this is the simplest element of this technique. Children who have entered first grade, as a rule, express themselves easily and with great willingness. Although, incidentally, we have had children in our class—such as Maksim Sgibnev and Zhenia Sokolov—whose speech activity seemed impossible to arouse using any means. They looked at everything that was going on around them with frightened and sad eyes, and at times I would get a bad feeling and wonder, "Do they know how to speak at all?" Nevertheless, there came a moment when even these children thawed and they began to form words that I could write down.

In the second phase, if the child's speech activity has been awakened, the task consists in teaching the child to *moderate* his or her speech. Technically, this is very simple. As soon as the child manages to blurt out the first five or six words, the teacher stops the flow of speech and asks the child to pause. "Wait a bit, I need to catch up!" And, continuing to write, the teacher clearly and audibly repeats *every* word of what the child has just said, so that the child can distinctly see the correspondence between each word and each successive fragment of written text. And only after the first fragment has been written is the child permitted to continue.

Naturally, during the initial stages it often happens that, during the interval of the first written pause, the child outright forgets what he or she was going to say. After all, the child does not yet know how to maintain a formal stream of words in the mind, which is so necessary for the writing phenomenon to appear. However, if a motivation to support this kind of activity is maintained on a daily basis, soon, every child, without exception, develops the ability to slow down his or her own speech.

What are verses?

The third specific point consists in how the child's oral expressions are written down. No matter how unlike poetry this text may be, it is very important for it to be written as poems, broken up into lines. And it should be read later out loud, also as a poem.

Here is an example.

Nikita P. is a superneurotic, hysterical little boy who is very belligerent and very whiny. Here is a sample of one of his earliest "poetic" texts, expressed by him and written down by the teacher using the described slowing technique.

During recess, Nikita, who has only just appeared in class, got into a fight and came up to the teacher, sobbing. The teacher asks the boy to describe what happened. Nikita speaks, and the teacher repeats what the boy says, word for word, out loud, and writes it down on a piece of paper, moreover, written in poetic lines in a little column:

He came up to me, / and hit me, / and it started to hurt / and I hit him too! / But why, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, / does he hate me? / And why are you / writing all the time?

And then and there, the teacher reads this text out loud, to the entire class as a poem. That is, intoning each line as much as possible and using his intonation to give this text a deep philosophical sound. This shakes Nikita to the depths of his soul! Like Molière's well-known hero, who was unaware that he was speaking in prose, Nikita, in the same way, is shocked to learn that, as it turns out, he speaks in verse! And this had never even occurred to him! And it is not surprising that the tears in his eyes instantly dried from surprise,¹⁵ for in the final analysis, what the teacher did in this situation may be interpreted as an elementary psychotherapeutic procedure, which in essence, it was.

By the way, I highly recommend this completely fantastic (in its effectiveness) procedure for resolving various interpersonal, dramatic conflicts within a collective of children. *A dramatic painful experience (perizhivanie) that is translated into written form is a dramatic conflict that has been halfway resolved.*¹⁶ Writing is something that is generally extremely effective in helping with situations involving various dramatic conflict experiences.

Recall, in this regard, that an adolescent develops a spontaneous need for active written language when he or she first falls in love and suffers. It is then that the adolescent discovers this surprising psychotherapeutic property of writing: it turns out that when I write about some histrionic episode (e.g., in a diary), I feel better. And if I am able to couch this episode in poetic form, the therapeutic effect¹⁷ is simply fantastic.

Thus, the first step in the pedagogical technique I describe, the first link in the motivational chain, consists in intrinsically slowing down the everyday (yet necessarily emotionally charged!) speech of children, and is accompanied by a

very speculative assertion that the resulting transcription consists of verse.

It may be objected, “Why deceive the children? What Nikita Petrovskii said out loud, what kind of verse is that?”

And, nevertheless, in my view, in this—the genuine expression, in words, of something experienced by a child—is more poetry than in the rhythmic lines of an adult graphomaniac.

But the point is not even the experience. In some sense, and with some reservations, one might assert that *any written text* (i.e., any text written such as a letter, which has a potential Reader), exhibits poetics—a structure organized in a particular way and a special kind of semantic rhythm. And the only thing the teacher does in our class is to show the children this mysterious poetics of text, revealing it through his or her intonational reading. Not with explanations—heaven forbid!—not with commentary, but only with intonation, so that the children are left with room in which to think and reflect further about what verse is.

And this is the essence of the described process. In our class, verse emerges as an element of psychologically intense authorial expression, but elevated¹⁸ to the writing category. And the first Reader of this children’s text is the teacher, who writes it down and in so doing, allows the “author,” the teacher, and other children to *hear* this text. And to hear it specifically as text, as a completely separate, writing-mediated way for a direct emotional spark to exist.

This *elevation of spoken language to written form and its division into line intervals* is that key intervention that the teacher in our class allows him/herself with respect to children’s speech.

Incidentally, does it not seem that, by the same token, we have withdrawn too much from the traditions of the culture itself? “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” resounds the first verse of the Bible. And nobody is surprised that we call this sentence a “verse.” But it is certainly a verse because it has been constructed.¹⁹

So the teacher is not deceiving Nikita when the boy’s speech is written as verse and this is demonstrated to the boy with the aid of the written text. And a miracle occurs. In less than a year, at the end of the first grade, that same Nikita, whose pen simply did not obey his hand at the beginning of the year, has begun to write with uncommon grace and ease. And he is writing text that you would have difficulty describing as “not verse.”

Night. / And a puddle, like cut glass. / And raindrops fall on the asphalt. / And a light burns in the distance. / And it becomes more distant. / And look, it turned into a red dot / and has slipped away from me completely. / And only the wet, black asphalt / shimmers with its red light. / And the puddle has turned scarlet: / life is reflected in it.

Today, Nikita has everything—motor activity, penmanship, orthography. But the basis for all these scholastic skills is the same: the complex image that is invariably rendered through his written language. We will discuss this a bit later, however.

And so, at first, the teacher acts as an echo. And at first, almost all children's speech is repeated and written down, with no screening at all. The main thing is for the slowing effect to take place, so that the beginning first-grader learns to listen to his or her own language. To listen so as to preedit it. In other words, this is not a simple echo, but *an echo that revises itself*. The most important thing about this is that the correction is not done by the teacher, but by the child, who is listening to how his or her own words sound when they are slowly repeated by the teacher and committed by the teacher to paper *and* that this now is essentially the effect of literary defamiliarization.

I have written about this several times: if you repeat every sentence uttered by a child word for word (and make no comment about it while doing so), a reflective effect will occur very soon—the child will recognize how the sentence is structured and, more precisely, how it is not structured, and this will be the first step down the road toward the development of writing poetics. The main thing is for the child to learn to utter some personal oral texts, pausing while doing it, so that the teacher has an opportunity to repeat these texts after the child and to write them down. Meanwhile, the child, who has learned how to slow down his or her speech, becomes a child *who has learned how to write*—one might say, *how to write in his or her mind*. For all intents and purposes, the child begins to write—not using his or her own hand, but with the help of the teacher's hand.

This period continues for four or six weeks, and as a rule, this is sufficient for the child, who consistently observes how the teacher is writing down uttered texts, *to acquire the alphabetic toolkit of writing*. And the main thing in this acquisition is that it by no means consists of identifying the image of a letter, as is assumed by many parents who start to teach their children how to read and write by showing letters. For example, "Remember, Masha, this is the letter 'A,' and here is the letter 'B.'" In any event, all parents who have already gone down this path well know that an abyss lies between learning the letters and actually reading. I myself have spoken dozens of times with perplexed parents, who say "He learned the letters when he was three, but still has not learned to read!"

In fact, the main problem is for the child's eyes to learn to fundamentally orient themselves toward the graphic plane of a sheet of paper or slate—the surface upon which the sacred ritual of writing is practiced. After all, operating with symbolic character structures—for these are the specific means of writing—requires a completely separate concentration of attention and a completely distinct means of orientation with respect to that plane. Because it is purely and simply convention for us to say, "Here is the beginning of the word, and here is the end." It is pure and simple convention that we write from left to right and from the top down (or from right to left and from the bottom up). Finally, it is purely and simply convention that our phonic sequence in some way coincides with the sequence of characters and symbols in our writing.

So, when a text uttered by a child is written in verse lines, that is, divided into

small intonationally significant fragments, this suddenly simplifies the child's ability to become oriented in what has been written down—after all, the child cannot yet read his or her own text! However, the child relatively quickly and easily establishes a correlation between the lines and the semantic chunks intoned by the teacher. For this reason, the child immediately begins to learn to track down any line of his or her own.

At the same time, a special probabilistic game—"guess where?"—is played with the child. It is played as follows.

After the teacher has written down Nikita's utterance, broken into lines, the teacher asks Nikita, "What do you think, where does it say 'He came up to me?'" It might seem there is nothing complicated in this question; after all, it is clear that it is at the very beginning of Nikita's utterance! But this is clear to an adult. A small child, especially if that child has the problems Nikita has, makes no effort at all to follow how the teacher is writing down what was said. And it is absolutely not a requirement for the child to be aware that the beginning of the text is the line at the top. For that reason, the child may point a finger anywhere. And then the teacher starts to play a game of "hotter-colder" with the child, until the required line is found. This continues with the second line, the third, the fourth, and so on.

It is important that this game of "guess where?" be played in front of (and with the participation of) other children, which gives rise to motivated excitement. And if this state of motivated excitement is created sufficiently effectively, then after a couple of sessions, any child will learn to identify any lines written in this manner, even if these lines are written upside down or crosswise on the board.

It is a more complex problem to identify the words in a line. This is because although we make clear intonational pauses between lines, the same cannot always be said for words. Moreover, day-to-day speech is perceived continuously, and not as individual words. And the fact that we separate our words with spaces is a giant convention. By the way, remember that this is a rather late cultural invention, and that the ancient Greeks, for example, did not insert spaces between words, and nobody thought this strange or inconvenient. (By the way, we also observed this curious effect in our experiment. Many children began writing continuous lines, with no spaces between words, and spaces began to appear in the writing of various children only after four to six weeks of active writing activities!)

In any event, a certain patience is required while the eyes of a child who is unable to read learn to identify words in a line, and to guess where a given word is located.

So the teacher points out some word to a child in something that has been written down after the child has said it, and asks: "What do you think, what is this word?" As a rule, even if a child knows how to read a little at the time instruction begins, he or she will not be able to recognize the form of a written word. And so, the "guess where?" game is needed again.

However, having understood what I require, this child will pay ever closer attention in the future, keep track of my hand, and try to remember where a given word is located.²⁰ I only have to do one thing: write down each successive word, loudly and intelligibly sounding it out as I write it down.

Initially, the child will identify words only in those utterances that I wrote under the child's attentive gaze, and then, these same words in other utterances. And finally, in the last phase, the child learns to identify the beginning, middle, and end of words. You slowly read a word and the child "underscores" it using a finger, at the same speed at which you are reading. And this means that the child has already begun to identify the parts of words—syllables. So in the word "flower," which the child has already learned to consistently identify in any personal utterance, only the first syllable is read out—"flow-"²—and the child is asked to point to only this first part of the word. After a handful of unsuccessful attempts, the objective is taken. And after the child learns to identify syllables, recognition of letters occurs almost automatically. Except that what is important is that they be cursive letters.

But this means that the letter phenomenon occurs in this form of child's graphic and symbolic praxis not as an end in itself and not as some kind of senseless abstraction required by adults for some reason (and that is exactly what happens in traditional methodologies for teaching reading and writing), but as a working tool, and in this case, mastery of letters occurs "on its own" for any child. And since the effort occurs in class, in the presence of other children at various levels of advancement, the speed of learning, naturally, increases. And if this form of activity takes place regularly, then even the child who does not know how to read at all will eventually learn to identify not only the shape of a previously written word but also the image of how it is written, particularly, whenever the subject consists of words that this child has thought up personally.

After almost no additional time at all, and suddenly, children who do not know how to read discover unexpectedly that yes, they do, even though not a minute was spent with any primer. And then only a half-step remains to overcome a psychological barrier and begin to write down one's own verbal constructions by oneself.

This might resemble the following.

The teacher says to the student, "Okay, that is it. I cannot write things down for you. I am tired. Write it yourself." This places the child in a state of shock. "But I do not know how to write!" The teacher, however, will not listen to any objections. "All the letters of the alphabet are in front of your eyes. Look at them and start writing!"

The child is thus placed in an inextricable position. After all, the child has something to write. The child is pleased with what has been thought up. But this insidious teacher suddenly refuses to write it down! And then . . . the child picks up a pen, and begins to write—immediately, in sentences; immediately, original material. And that is because before picking up a pen, the child has learned how to write in his or her mind.

The art of building

So what happens at the moment a teacher succeeds in teaching a child to slow down his or her utterances and to block it out with drawn-out pauses? When the child

learns how to slow down utterances, the child learns to peer into the language, and then to construct it in a special way.

Because in actuality, the typical preschool child generally speaks “turgidly,” and therefore “does not hear” what he or she is saying. And this is good for maintaining communication, but utterly worthless for written language because written language is by its nature slow language, and therefore, in distinction from day-to-day oral speech, it must be first constructed as a definite sequence of specially selected words.²¹ And the phenomenon of written poetics arises as a result. Poetics as a way of formally organizing words. After all, one can say, “I loved you, and love, perhaps, has not completely faded in my soul.”²² An alternative might be, “I loved you, and in my soul perhaps love has not completely faded.” It would seem the only thing that has changed is the word order, but as a result, the very essence of the language has changed. Its poetics has changed. An even greater change will occur if one says “the same thing” using completely different words. It stands to reason that it will not be “the same thing.” “Anna Petrovna! Please be informed that I, at one time, loved you, and it is fully conceivable that my love has, to some extent, been preserved in my soul.”

In oral speech, I am not required to come up with a particular word order. I can speak haltingly, in a muddle, and my inarticulate explanations about love will be saved by my sincere intonations. And even the opposite is true. Heaven forbid that I begin to explain my love in such a way as if I am reading something, as this will instantly create disbelief. The oral genre is the oral genre because a previously drafted structure may leave the impression of falsity.²³

Written language starts with my first having to construct—to imagine in my mind—a certain word order, which I will transfer to paper using a pen or other writing tool. And this means that the most important condition for written language is the maturity of some internal editor capable of *screening* that stream of words that is ready to escape my lips. The supreme importance of that training lies in slowing down the spoken utterance we are talking about.

No “lofty topics!” A mirror is simply created for the child’s everyday speech, when every sentence uttered by the child is repeated by the teacher like an echo and written down on a sheet of paper or on a blackboard. And it turns out that the child must slow down the stream of words or there will not be enough time to write them down.

At the same time, the most important condition for this slow training to be successful, is for the transcription to be done word for word. For example, if the child says “well, I, then, uh, went there, okay, and there he, uh, hit me hard!” the teacher follows what the child said and writes down this, and not some other word order. In other words, the teacher does not edit children’s utterances at all. The teacher is always only a mirror. And then invariably and soon, the moment arrives when the child becomes the editor.

If initially, the teacher must repeatedly stop the child and slow the child down by saying, “Wait a second, I need to catch up!” then very soon the child will begin

to personally listen to the mirror-like echo of the writing, and being to personally slow down his or her speech. Thus, in very simple terms, a moment arrives when the child begins to consciously dictate what he or she was going to say. And this will be an utterance that has been preedited in the child's mind.

And I will state that this constitutes 90 percent of success.

A child who in this way learns to slow down his or her own spoken language is a child who is fundamentally ready to write. And then the degree of development or lack of development of fine motor skills in the hand becomes completely immaterial. In our experiment, children start to write despite a lack of motor skills. And these children exhibit improved motor skills not as a result of cross-hatching squares or other fad methodologies, but due only to the advancement of writing.

If they have learned to slow down their spoken language and, by the same token, to create spoken raw stock for their written language, they will write. Moreover, it will be their own writing from the beginning. It will be clumsy and crooked, and unaware of any standards of penmanship or spelling, but it will be done with tremendous enthusiasm and great passion.

Only after this happens does the teacher begin to introduce some criteria for selecting and distinguishing poor text from good text. Interestingly, however, the criteria introduced at this stage are not at all directly aesthetic criteria.

I will begin by noting that as early as the oral, preparatory phase of the formation of written language, the children in the experimental class had found that some phrases they came up with pleased the teacher more than others did. However, the teacher did not explain why one was more pleasing than another. And anyway, can one explain such things at all? The main thing is to offer the children the opportunity to figure out, on their own, why the teacher liked one phrase more than another. And as a result, these evaluations served as rich food for reflection for the children. This was manifested, in particular, by the appearance of a special game in the class, in which the children try to predict and second-guess the teacher's evaluations. And if initially these predictions are extremely inaccurate, then after some time, they begin to increasingly hit the mark. And this means that the children have succeeded in figuring out their teacher's axiological coordinate system.

The ability to write complex text

So what are these unclear criteria that the teacher uses to evaluate children's lines, and that, in the final analysis, the children figure out successfully? This may appear strange, but the principal criterion we introduced was the criterion of complexity.²⁴

Why? Well, at least because writing complex text is a lot more difficult than writing simple text.²⁵ And we want the written language to be a tool and method for the effective development of children. That is the purpose of the criterion of complexity.

The child figures out on his or own that complex text is valued more highly than

primitive text,²⁶ in attempting to understand why one text delighted the teacher, while another made no impression at all. But for this to happen, the teacher must be honest in his or her emotional assessments. If a child writes something primitive and uninteresting, and the child's sentence contains no hint of any subject structure,²⁷ the teacher is obliged to bear witness, and say it is bad. No slobbering or playing along, distinct evaluative markers must be set.

One of the most important principles of sound pedagogy is that the teacher must be as honest as possible with the child, and must create a system of distinct evaluative axiological reference points for the child, and if the child writes something weak and superficial, the child must be made directly aware of this. And this is completely consistent with the principle of educational humanism because humanism does not contemplate falsehood. The only important thing is for the child not to feel degraded by the teacher's evaluation.²⁸ It is important that the child feel that he or she can really write in a more complex manner, and can write better.²⁹ Such an evaluation, curiously enough, raises the child in his or her own eyes and will eventually lead to a moment when the child will make a breakthrough and write something that really delights the teacher,³⁰ and then that composition will be read aloud dozens of times and with different intonations. And this will be a great day of celebration for this child, as from that day, the child will be a copywriter, a member of the writing trade.

Each child in our class had his or her own day, when the child wrote something significant. Some experienced it after a month, others, after three months of instruction. The fact, however, is that no matter how different the children are in class, without exception, sooner or later, they started to write brilliant texts.

The appearance of image

What criterion is used to decide that the child composed a brilliant text?

Naturally, *it is the appearance of image*.³¹ This is because only when image appears in text does it become really complex. It becomes multidimensional, capacious, and deep. And only when this occurs on its own in the child's text can a true victory be celebrated: "But do you know what you wrote? You wrote real verse!"

It is never possible to predict in advance which child will develop text image structure. The child must mature for this to happen, and the time required for this is deeply individual for each child. Thus, Lena Gordeeva, who in her current texts provides often dizzyingly complex images, had—until the middle of December (!) in first grade—written exclusively primitive stories along the lines of, "He went, she went, he saw."³² I agonized and suffered and once more returned her notebook with the sad, "That is not it, not it, not it!" In the class, the verses of other children were coming in a strong torrent, but Lena still could not understand at all what it meant to write verse without rhymes—she could not get a feel for the mystery of the image.

I saw how she was suffering and agonizing, but how could I help her? The only indicator that I allowed myself to introduce during the early phases of instruction was as simple as it was inexplicable and mysterious: “Children, try writing verse but without using rhymes!”

Naturally, this assignment completely bewildered the children. “What is a rhyme?” “Well, a rhyme is when such-and-such and so-and-so!” Again, utter incomprehensibility: how can you have verse without rhymes? Can that happen?

And you can understand the children’s surprise because the idea of verse without rhymes contradicts their entire short acquaintance with the world of poetry. After all, it is no secret that our Russian children’s literature offers examples of exclusively *harmonious* prosody. As a result, the child develops a long-standing settled conviction that verse is something with both rhyme and rhythm. And because of this, even after achieving adulthood, they will be perplexed when they read, say, Japanese haiku or the poetry of Gennady Aygi. And they will not believe that this is verse. Just as the parents of our children did not believe, for a long time, that the texts composed by their children could be called verse.

In fact, rhythm and rhyme are only tools of verse, and that verse is rooted in something completely different. That is why the rhyming experiments of a graphomaniac are not verses, although free verse and prose poems find wide distribution in culture.

Incidentally, none of this need be explained to first-graders. Nor the fact that the principal material of verse is image. Just give them an assignment to *compose verse without rhymes*. And the children will search for a solution to this assignment and offer different text alternatives, until one of those texts lights up with some hint of image.

Incidentally, you might ask what is so important about prohibiting rhyme and syllable-accented rhythm (i.e., rhythm that clearly alternates accented and unaccented syllables)? It is because both of them are extremely complex and subtle verse tools. And it is no accident that in a culture, such tools of prosody appear at a rather late stage. And we believe that a child’s full-fledged mastery of these tools is possible only after the image structure of the written language has become sufficiently firm.

Poetic image as life

As soon as the child guesses, in his or her word experiments, what the teacher wants to see—as soon as the child gets a feel for the phenomenon of poetic image or poetic metaphor—that child becomes unstoppable. And if, in the traditional primary school, any child steadily aspires to simplified written language, then the children in the experimental class demonstrate, month after month, an ever more highly developed³³ striving for complexity.

And complexity is not only complexity of syntactical sentence construction but also complexity of image. And for this reason the universal striving for complexity

inevitably leads to the eventual appearance of some image structure. And the task of the children is not to miss this moment but to give voice to it. And the child will very quickly come to understand that *long* is not the same as *complex*, and that a short line may be much more complex in structure than a long one.

Thus, for a long time (almost a whole month) Masha Glazkova diligently wrote texts that filled half a page at a time, but were extremely primitive.

Here is an example of what her very first written text looked like: “One small fly grabbed a sandwich and started to eat it. And then a mean fly flew up and says, ‘Fly, give me the sandwich!’ And the other answers, ‘I won’t,’ and the other says, ‘Give me the sandwich right now!’”

Naturally, I do not have the capability, to show here either Masha’s penmanship or spelling, but keep in mind that this is a little girl who had not been taught to write using a copybook, and for that reason, is composing her writing on her own.

In the original, her text looked something like this: “one small fly grabed a sandwich anstartdtoeatit and then a meanfly flewup and says fly givemethe sandwich and the other says iwont and the other says givemethe sandwich righnow.” I might add that the penmanship is not reproducible, definitely resembling nothing at all.

And yet, exactly a month later, Masha wrote a text of only two lines, but one that is fantastically put together in terms of its image structure. “Tears pour in an autumn stream. / It is me, crying.”³⁴

And naturally, such a complex text—from the perspective of image—evoked a flurry of delight in the teacher, and Masha felt herself to be a champion.³⁵ From that time on, she finally understood what was meant by complex writing.

To conclude, even if a child writes with syntactic complexity, if no image emerges, the child is still at an insufficient level of complexity. And only when image structures appear in the child’s language does full-fledged writing begin, whereupon children begin to imbue what is initially *proto-writing* and then writing with poetic images or simply nonstandard semantic constructions. At the same time, only the children themselves are the suppliers of the verbal materials in their texts, not the teacher.

One result is that each child writes in his or her own voice. And the poetic image becomes, for these children, truly their life.

Where do words come from?

But in this case, where do the children find the words for their writing if the teacher is not imposing any “lofty words” on them, and is simply reacting in a certain way to what the children write? From their surroundings, naturally. From music snippets. From fragments of television broadcasts. From all of the verbal material that surrounds them in everyday life. Because each child that comes to school has a gigantic vocabulary that has been extracted from the surrounding linguistic environment. However, the child is completely unable to make use of these gigantic

resources, since in the child's day-to-day life, the absolute majority of such words are of no use to anyone. The everyday family or courtyard lexicon reduces to 300 or 400 hundred words, while the actual number of words that a seven-year-old child can use is about 1,000.

So here, in our class, a motivated environment is created that forces the child to constantly rummage in his or her verbal archives and actualize, in writing, ever newer words from memory—that is, the words that are of no use to anyone in everyday life.

Thus, the task consists in activating the child's own verbal potential. One result of this progress is that children quickly develop a need for a rich linguistic background outside the school. They begin to consider all words they hear in their surroundings as singular construction material for their own creativity. And since each of the twenty children lives in a unique linguistic environment, they hear different things and use different words in their poetic creations.

This diversity of initial linguistic elements becomes the basis for poetic dialogues among the children, and they positively can adopt words from each other and love doing it, while never forfeiting their poetic sovereignty in doing so. If, say, an image created by Lena Gordeeva appears several months later in text by Vladik Kuliashov, then it will do so in a completely different context using stylistics that are individual to Vladik. And what is most curious, is that when children begin to exhibit such creative variations among themselves, they always remember which theme originated with whom.

The “technique” of inspiration

I understand that for adherents of romantic education it must be more than strange to read what I am writing here. After all, that “the teacher should inspire” is the common position of all of our pedagogy. And if a teacher does not inspire, and is a pure technologist, it is as if this is not a real teacher. For a teacher in our ordinary understanding is . . . who? Well, of course, primarily a sower, in the sense of the “sensible, kind, and eternal.” Moreover, this seeding time is understood as the direct transmittal from the teacher to the children of knowledge, values, ways of dealing with the world, and so on.

Indeed, at one time, this was my ideal as well. Now, however, after a year and a half of our experiment, I am adamantly convinced that the true objective lies elsewhere. It lies in being able to build high-quality techniques for motivating the child to engage in complex forms of written self-expression. And as far as what the specific material of this self-expression will be—“lofty” or “lowly”—this is no longer the teacher's business. Children will themselves determine the content of their self-expression,³⁶ and themselves select that linguistic material that will underlie the individual poetics of each child.

But if the teacher did not introduce the “lofty” in the class, where did it come from?

And this is what is most interesting. In attempting to deal with the teacher's strange assignment to write verse without rhymes, the children themselves developed a feel for and brought "lofty" material to class—only not in their oral speech, but in their writing. They themselves felt that written text is a special reality, in which you have to speak using a special language that does not coincide with the language spoken in day-to-day life. They themselves felt that writing is structured and organized in a special way, and thereupon, with great enthusiasm, they included everything outside the scope of everyday life in their writing—whatever they happened to hear—in songs, movies, adult conversations, and so on. And I will confess, this was a great surprise. I will confess honestly, I did not at all like these "spiritual injuries" and "beauties of nature" that increasingly began to appear in the children's texts. They seemed too primitive. To me, the teacher, it was cheap poetic romanticism.

But what could I do? After all, this was an enterprise that had originated not from teachers, but from the children!

I recall how Vladik Kuliasov had somehow, in the course of a month, composed around thirty variations on the subject of a "suffering soul." And although each time, he managed to find some new twist to the subject, it became almost unbearable.³⁷ However, the only thing that remained to do was to resignedly wait until this romantic poetry disease ran its course, for he was correctly achieving the technical objectives: his texts were complex, and the images in those texts were adequately three-dimensional.

Therefore, for me, one of the most unclear moments in the experiment to this day remains the question of why children were able to get a feel for the material of images and metaphors principally in verse related to "suffering." Not a single child failed to go through this phase—in different form, using different words, at different times, and yet for every child in the class, acquiring the phenomenon of metaphor and poetic image was colored in tones of sadness, sorrow, and existential tragedy. And only much later in these texts did images appear that were permeated with rays and colors. More often than not, however, the transition was from the tragic to the dramatic.

Again, I emphasize, to avoid misunderstanding: these phases were not at all simultaneous for the entire class. Each child passed through these stages at his or her own pace, and this seemed strange to me, since it appeared to be some kind of pattern. One of the assumptions that I could make in this regard is that metaphor is easier to display in tragic-dramatic experience. And perhaps in this we find one of the origins of Greek tragedy.³⁸

Self-actualization versus imposed creative imitation: A might-have-been dialogue with the School of the Dialogue of Cultures

I will permit myself a small deviation toward the School of the Dialogue of Cultures, which is a school in dialogue with and in dispute with which my pedagogical experiment was born.

Possibly one of the main results of the Krasnoyarsk experiment of S. Yu. Kurganov was the discovery of the fact that early primary school students possess a brilliant ability to imitate adult style. And if they were to read, say, a great Russian Jewish poet of the twentieth century, Osip Mandelstam, for a long time, they would, in the end, astonish you and paraphrase Mandelstam *in their own words*, and this can often result in very unexpected effects.

However, I would not be too quick to call this imitation of adult style a dialogue. Here we are dealing precisely with the compulsive nature of adult style, and for this reason, the child is completely unable to retain it for any length of time as a field for his/her own self-expression. In this case, then what kind of dialogue is this? And that is the problem, in my view, with the Kurganov pedagogical experiment. In my view, his children, in imitating various literary styles over several years, were never able to form the main thing: their own authorial idealized self. Moreover, if some kind of literary individuality did peek through during the early grades, then year after year, it became increasingly diluted by *someone else's individuality*. It was diluted in those masses of particularly adult literature that was dropped onto the heads of these children. Thus, imitations of Sophocles or Euripides, which were written by Kurganov fifth-graders, for all intents and purposes were indistinguishable from each other. Try as I might, I could not identify the writing style of, say, Valery Maslov and recognize him exclusively from text.

But the main problem of the School of the Dialogue of Cultures (SDC) Krasnoyarsk pedagogical experiment is not even this. The main question that I ask Kurganov and his colleagues is: Can you state that the pedagogical experiment succeeded in creating the effect of *a writing person*? A person for whom written self-expression had become a normal means of being?³⁹ And if not, then what kind of *person of culture* can we speak of in this instance? Alas, if we speak of the results of the Krasnoyarsk experiment precisely from this point of view, the results are more unfavorable than favorable. In demonstrating a brilliant ability to imitate adult style, these children would appear not to have formed a pronounced need for writing over the course of their entire primary and intermediate school careers. The continuous imposition of adult cultural styles on these children likely did not arouse in them an attitude of culture as the sphere of personal authorial self-expression. In my view, many of them remained imitators of culture—absolutely brilliant imitators, of course, but imitators nonetheless. And consequently, the request for a dialogue with the culture remained, in this class, just merely a request. Allow me to illustrate my statement with the following example.

The sounds of music

As the story was told by Sergey Yur'evich Kurganov, a teacher at the SDC, he placed on the record player a recording of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, written in response to World War II, and the children had a discussion (under the teacher's supervision) and then wrote compositions—about war. In this regard, the

interpretation, of course, *was imposed* by the teacher. About four years ago, I recall, I was completely astounded to learn that the children had drawn German swastikas on the subject of this Symphony. I asked Sergey, "So how did the children get the idea that this symphony was about the German invasion and about war?" "How? How, indeed?" fidgeted Kurganov. And the next evening, he invited me to his place, put on the "Seventh," and put on a completely brilliant pantomimic portrayal of an ancient Greek faun, guileful and seductive. He himself required just one evening to abandon the stereotypical perception of this well-known music and to hear in it something that nobody had heard previously. And his extraordinary pantomime was brilliant proof of the actual depth of musical images created by Shostakovich in blockaded Leningrad during World War II.

Indeed, I had never entertained doubts that Kurganov himself was a *person of culture*,⁴⁰ a person capable of reading any cultural text with his own deeply individual, authorial vision. Then why did the children in his class understand the "Seventh" with absolutely identical perception? Apparently, because the music was preceded (or immediately followed by) a discussion, during which all of the stereotypical words related to this symphony were sounded out—provided, naturally, by the teacher: here you have blockaded Leningrad, says the teacher, and the German invasion, and life that vanquishes death, and many other *lofty trivialities*.

And now, some words about "the reverberations of music" in *our* class.

Indeed, music is played in our class. Moreover, sometimes the children actually write "about the music." But I have placed the last few words in quotes for a reason, because to a great extent, this is a convention. In addition, to some extent, such writing about music emerges in my class as a unique form of diagnostic procedure, a complex test of the ability to write under unusual conditions.

Believe me, if you ask a small child—a first- or second-grade student—to write "about the music" he or she has heard for the first time, and in doing so provide not a single word of your own commentary on this music, the child will, more than likely, not write anything. In the best case, you will get primitive formulas heard at some time from adults: hey, over here, that's a bear walking, and over there, that's a rabbit hopping. And if you allow yourself to provide your own commentary to the music you plan to play for the class, the children will write something *about your commentary*. Because the music itself contains no verbal texts at all. Therefore, expressing an independent self-contained text interpretation of musical sounds in poetic form is a much more difficult task than simply authorial writing. A child will be capable of such an interpretation only if the child has already developed an inner authorial style. In other words, the music not only does not provide any "writing impetus" (about which Simon L'vovich Soloveichik, the well-known Russian educator and journalist wrote), but actually has the opposite effect—it impedes *authorial* writing.

Of course, if I accompany music with some words of my own, I am providing an impetus. But it will be an impetus related specifically to my words, and not to

the music at all. And the twenty children in my class will harmoniously write *a composition on the subject of my words*. And they will be approximately the same compositions, in the same way as occurs with Kurganov and 100 other teachers who impel their students toward “lofty style.”

But I am not interested in having children write using *my* words. I am not interested in having them repeat what I say (or what any of their other teachers say). What interests me is that they feel themselves in writing, and that they experience, as early as possible, the joy of their written dissimilarity from others. What interests me is not imposing some subject on them, but making it so the children can thematically discover music, and while this may seem very much earthbound and far from “lofty,” the point is that they would do so on their own. And then a miracle occurs. Twenty children listen to the same piece of music, and twenty children write something completely *different* about this music. And after all, they had come to me in first grade with a perception that was more than banal. And in music they heard only what had been imposed on them: in one place, how a bear was walking, and in another, how rabbits were hopping . . . And whatever music they would be exposed to the picture remained the same. It was as if some embedded conventional reflex had been reproduced in kindergarten. “Well, kiddies, let me strike these piano keys for a bit. What does that remind you of? Ri-i-ight! There is this bowlegged bear, walking along! What about this? Cor-r-rect! That is a hopping bunny!” Moreover, what is surprising, is that the children attended different kindergartens, but demonstrated a uniform idiocy of musical perception. Naturally, they tried to define music in terms of ursine and lapine tones based exclusively on good motives; that is what they were taught, and they believed that this was the *correct* answer.

So what is a teacher to do in this situation? Hundreds of teachers do the following. They explain to the kiddies that the whole thing about bears and bunnies is not correct, that it is really about, say, a restless soul and high feelings. Or about the tempestuous ocean. Or about eternal rest. And tomorrow, the children will—with the same enthusiasm that yesterday they used to tell stories about “bunnies”—tell stories about the ocean, in chorus!

But we do not need a chorus. Our objective is for their texts to be different. This means *we do not have the right to our own interpreting word*.⁴¹ Moreover, if children’s perception of music involves a series of banal associations, we must do away with the music. And then wait for the moment when the child’s written language matures to the point where he/she can be free with respect to music.

In December 1993, when I played a recording of Alfred Schnittke’s Fourth Symphony (without mentioning that this was a “symphony” or who this Schnittke fellow was, or actually saying a word about the music at all) for my first-graders (among whom were four children who were almost a year short of their seventh birthday), all twenty of the children wrote texts about completely different subjects, and moreover, *every* text engaged in obvious dialogue with the heard music. And

from the very start, it was fundamentally important for me to not give the children any “informative” directives and never propose any “subjects” for writing. The assignment was always the same, “Well, shall we start writing?” And the children would open their notebooks and start to write. Each child wrote something of his or her own. Whatever might pop into the child’s head. And I would only sometimes randomly select something written by some child and read this “written something” out loud, expressing my attitude primarily by my intonation.

As a rule, the writing task was assigned at the start and at the end of the school day. And when it happened that I turned on some music, the assignment appeared as follows: “Well, then, let’s listen to some music and do some writing!” And that was *all*.

Of course, one could make a number of complaints about these texts. Many of them are rather simple in terms of image structure. Many of them are infinitely far from what these same children are capable of writing with ease today, one year later. But the main thing is that even here, one can see that the child’s thinking is unique, and that each child is writing his or her own text that is unlike anyone else’s. And this also means that an author is maturing within the child—that uniquely individual authorial position, without formalization of which no dialogue with the culture is possible.

Here are some examples of those compositions written long ago by those children using impossibly crooked penmanship on unlined (!) sheets of white paper.

Thunder and lightning / this morning / kills all the houses / and the people die.
(Pasha Zel’din, seven years old)

The music overflows into thunder / and the thunder dies in response / and the music rises again / and they begin to live happily. (Tonia Gainullina, seven years old)

The lanterns shine / with radiance at night. / A snowstorm. / A blizzard has arrived.
/ Bells. / A glassy wind has blown in. (Masha Glazkova, seven years old)

The gold gleams / the gold glistens / the gold sings. / Snow is falling. (Sasha Mineeva, seven years old)

Dizziness / Death is being torn apart. / One person made an echo, / and another person made an echo. / A disruption occurs. (Alesha Savvinov, six years old)

Music. / Merry snowstorms take wing and whirl in the air. / The snowstorm razes houses and courtyards. / And now the snowstorm is ended. / The poor people! / The snowstorm yet again and again / Glass panes fly and strike / panes fly into people’s eyes / And tears fall from people’s eyes. / The people died. / But the snowstorm became ever stronger. / The snowstorm goes back. / Vehicles exploded. / The ground shook. / People are leaving this country. / They left this country forever. (Dania Nazarov, seven years old)

A rose bloomed in the middle of a river / And not an ordinary rose / not red, not pink, and not white, / but black. / And everybody hated it, / because it brought many misfortunes. / But that’s only what they thought. / Actually, / it was just the same, / only a different color. / A rose bloomed / in the middle of a river. (Lena Gordeeva, seven years old)

Morning in the courtyard. / And the bells are ringing. / And suddenly there's darkness everywhere. / And suddenly, there are bells again. / And the same flowers. / And verses lie on the instrument. / And time stopped. / The flowers dried up. / Twelve prior bloodstains on my face. / But there is no life. / But the birds, the birds, / who remained, / they died while flying. (Vladik Kuliashov, seven years old)

Text therapy

Of course, if we begin with the traditional assumption that everything written by a first-grader has somehow been suggested by the teacher, then I should be excommunicated from the teaching profession for life for those lordly verses about “bloodstains,” written by seven-year-old Vladik. Incidentally, I recall that is precisely how the question was posed at an academic collegium of the Institute for the Development of Regional Education (where I was an associate lecturer in some department, occupying myself in parallel with my experiment in one of the Ekaterinburg schools).

However, in fact, all text surprises demonstrated by the experimental children can be very easily explained. Having learned to write in the first person, these seven-year-olds very quickly felt the enormous potential that written language contains within itself. After all, up to that point, they had only one cultural means of freeing themselves from inhibited fears: drawing. And now it turns out that writing can emerge as an even more effective means of this kind. And so they threw themselves into writing, in their texts, the deepest and most secret of their fears and worries, while at the same time dressing them in the form of *literature*. And this, of course, relieved them enormously.

Incidentally, only now do I understand the extent to which I was careless and naive in publishing children's texts that resembled those above in the mass educational press. For our teachers have become accustomed to a situation in which everything written by small children has been somehow imposed by the teacher. So when they came across texts written by a seven-year-old child about a “suffering soul” or about “twelve bloodstains” on his face, they were absolutely certain that this had been *initiated by the teacher*. They said, “The teacher taught them this”; how else do you explain it?

And for that reason, in commenting on my publications, when I wrote, “Take a look at the strange things that work their way out of a child when the child learns written self-expression at the age of seven!” nobody believed that the words the children used in their writing had appeared without any kind of direction from the teacher. “Don't try to fool us, you taught them this!” is what the eyes of my colleagues told me.

Thousands of other teachers certainly thought and continue to think this! Because such is the stereotype—a *first-grade child cannot write on his or her own*. Cannot create a writing vocabulary on his or her own. Cannot determine, on his or her own, what to write about. “Hey!” they say, “This can only happen with some direction from the teacher.”

Yet what do children do when they take paints or markers in hand and start to draw? Do they ask adults on what theme they should draw? Of course not. They simply draw, and look at what they have drawn. And a clever adult psychologist can tell you quite a lot about the psychological problems of a child based on the child's drawings. And if the child draws sharp-toothed monsters that devour each other, or if the drawings are filled with black colors, then this will most probably indicate the child's psychological ill-being. Just as do *nightmares*, which are not accidentally dreamed by six- and seven-year-old children, for this is also a channel by which children are relieved of fears that have taken root in their subconscious. So what must a teacher do in such a situation? Forbid the drawing of sharp-toothed monsters? Hide all the black paint? Or . . . help the child with his or her psychological problems, and then the nature of the drawing will change on its own?

Essentially, the writing of a first-grader from the experimental class was that same *diagnostic* tool. And if various monstrosities and bogeymen emerged from children's texts, if "bloodstains" and a "lonely, suffering soul" made their appearance, then that was the crux of the matter—these were images of their subconscious, and not at all images of what had been conceptualized by the teacher in class!

But what is most surprising is that free writing of this kind is not only a diagnostic tool but also a profoundly therapeutic one. Today, I can say with absolute confidence, in giving voice in their texts to their deepest fears and concerns, these children gradually *rid themselves* of those concerns—which means that a singular form of *text therapy* was going on.

Freedom from fears

Can you show me a school in which the acquisition of the art of writing not only did not add to children's fears and concerns, but actually relieved them of their fears and concerns? And there, in our experimental class, that is exactly what was happening. The more these children wrote down of themselves, the more they were freed of their secret fears, the more their self-confidence grew, the more able they were to adapt themselves to the world, and the more comfortable they felt in the most diverse environments—on the street, among their peers, with children much older than they were, in their families, on public transportation, and so on.

In this regard, it is curious to hear what the parents of these children have to say. Over a period of eighteen months or so, the children had experienced a tremendous psychological change. And when they meet children with whom they had just recently attended kindergarten, there is a perception that they belong to different age categories.

No, they have by no means lost their children's spontaneity. You can see that in the matchless passion in their tag playing with each other during recess. But, at the same time, their own movements have a surprising refinement and self-confidence. They move about the class with furious speed, while simultaneously demonstrating the marvels of coordinated movement, even those who yesterday were called

“clumsy.” Upon my soul, to watch these children during recess is to experience true delight. It is at once fantastically risky and fantastically beautiful. For example, when Vladik takes Irina by the arms and starts to spin her around him, so that her feet leave the ground and she is flying, and he does it with such inspiration that you wish you could capture it on video.

When teachers from other classes glance in during recess, they flinch and place their hands on their chests. Or immediately start to put the children in their place with: “What have you gotten into! You’ll fall! You’ll hurt yourself!” But all they have to do is just observe a little longer, and they suddenly realize that these children are remarkably *disciplined*. But it is not that twisting and breaking discipline that the school normally imposes on children beginning with the first grade, when, during the first months of instruction, the frightened child sits at a desk like a short-handed garden implement and then later—closer to the middle of the year—“goes off the rails” in trying to gain freedom, yet not knowing how to do so.

No, the children from the experiment, if one may be permitted, glow with discipline, a kind of discipline that comes from somewhere within. During lessons, this is a discipline of thought. During recess, it is a sharp discipline of actions. Even in Igor Nesterov, who spent the first half of first grade in an ordinary school, and whose classroom teacher (who told me this herself) persistently dreamed of ridding herself of Igor.

These children exhibit absolutely no looseness or laxity. They are filled with freedom. And what is most interesting is that if, at the start of first grade, we had more conflicts and tears than in normal first grades (related to the presence of pronounced neurotics in the class, who had been rejected by ordinary schools), then today, such conflicts and tears have been reduced to a minimum. If communications problems occur, the children resolve them with almost no aid from the teacher.

Or take this example: Boys from the upper grades of the school where we are performing our experiment dragged our Vladik into the bathroom and attempted to sexually abuse him—such are the times we live in. I was amazed by how philosophically calmly and ironically Vladik himself spoke on this subject. “Oh, well, what can you expect from jerks like that?” he said, concluding his monologue about what had happened. His eyes showed no hint of fear, only the confidence of a person who knew his own worth, and I think one of the reasons for such surprising confidence in himself was Vladik’s writing, through which he freed himself from his own fears.⁴²

Almost all of the children in the experimental class went through a period where *something scary* emerged in the images of their verses. But this period eventually ended (in some, it lasted a month; in others, much longer), and their texts began to glow with surprising clarity and candor. And, in addition, their very existence in the world began to glow with surprising clarity and fearlessness.

It is recess. A boy and girl have constructed a very complex structure of chairs, desks, and wooden boards, and are scampering on it, one after the other, as thought they were on fire. But at the same time, they demonstrate a surprising sense of balance, not only physically, but also—if one might express oneself this way—

spiritually. They are romping about and playing like ordinary children of their age, but their mutual interaction is reminiscent of a fantastic dance. This dance is stunningly beautiful and demonstrates the surprising ability of these two children to interact with each other. An interaction that is permeated with the spirit of innermost mutual respect.

Where did this come from? Because *we did not teach it to them!*

I know from where. From their writing, in which they first heard themselves and heard the other. And perhaps this is the principal result of our experiment.

(March 1995)

Notes

1. Eugene Matusov (EM): I think this is the key of any conventional education: to teach instruments bracketed from students' desires so later on, outside of the school, the former students can use these tools for their own purposes. The problem, however, is that this tool becomes a tool only within the context of an individual's desire. What do you think?

Alexander Lobok (AL): Exactly. And this is the key cause of why I, in my pedagogical experiment, was concerned primarily about how to set up such an educational interaction between adult and child, in which the written language would not be imposed on the child as the sum of the external and superfluous (for the child, personally) requirements of instruments, but would specifically *originate* as a personal, organic need for children's self-actualization (and consequently, actualization of children's secret imaginative mythology, built on a set of rules completely different from those used to construct adult educational discourse, and which conform to the child's inner self, the idealized self that is fundamentally imaginative and engages in fantasy.

2. AL: To invent a situation that is interesting to children, and to do so in such a way that the situation includes certain interesting words thought up by the children, is the most difficult objective in this educational technology.

EM: Do you really mean "technology" and not practice or approach? [The word in question, *tehnologiia*, may be translated in a number of ways, including "technology," "technique," "practice," "approach," and "method." The former is used in this translation so that EM's comment makes sense.—Trans.]

AL: Actually, I am referring specifically to a pedagogical technique, that is, the sum total of completely technical elements that may be fundamentally mastered and reproduced by another educator. As concerns the task of "to write in an interesting way," this is simpler.) The main thing is not to be afraid to use any surfaces for writing (including the most paradoxical) or any writing instruments. Chalk on a blackboard, wall, floor, or school desk; a twig in the snow; a finger on a frosted window pane; or a marker on the arm. You can even use what I consider the doubtful method of virtual, intangible writing, and so on and so forth. The more diverse the tools used, the more interesting it is to the child. The main thing is to arouse the child's feeling of amazement that anything can be used to write anywhere. As long as there is something to write . . . as long as a text worthy of being written is thought up!

3. AL: The only important thing is for this to be an interesting word or expression; something interesting to others and worthy of being captured in writing. Because writing is a sacred reality, and it is sacrilegious to capture every kind of verbal garbage in written form. You have to find or think up words that would be meaningful and significant for writing.

4. AL: I must note that the hypothesis of mastering the reading process using the model described here requires a great deal more thorough experimental verification. Apparently, this approach may be successful for some children, and possibly not for others.

It is understood that the task of maintaining an entire graphic word image is an incredibly difficult task from the perspective of a small child. Nevertheless, the actual instances are well-known in which children begin to read starting with words, bypassing the stage of individual letters, as it were.

5. AL: This is a reference to seventeen- to nineteenth-century barge-haulers, who pulled heavy vessels laden with goods upstream along waterways such as the Volga River, using heavy, monotonous, and unremitting labor.

6. AL: And this symbolic sign does not precede the word at all in the historical genesis of written language. Historically, writing appears not as writing letter by letter, but as writing word by word with the aid of letters. This is far from the same thing.

7. AL: That is why the idea of an “alphabet” comes about, in which an attempt is made to relate an abstract letter image to some kind of thing: “A” is an “apple” or “ant,” “B” is a “baton” or “balloon,” and so forth.

8. EM: It seems to correspond to the Western “whole language approach.” Have you heard about it?

AL: It is completely possible that at the time, in the early 1990s, I “discovered the slide rule,” being in actuality unfamiliar with any already existing Western approaches or practices; however, having “discovered” this “slide rule” at my own peril and risk, it would appear that I thought up and implemented, as a minimum, a fundamentally new variant of this “slide rule,” in which the main element became productive work with structures of children’s imagination and poetic children’s authorial language.

9. AL: With one not insignificant change: some children are better “analysts” and others are better “synthesists,” assuming that both of these sides are present to some extent in every child without exception. (EM: What about dyslexia?)

10. EM: I think this is an interesting example of “peripheral learning.”

AL: I am completely in agreement. There is this rather widely known story in which the older child is being intensively taught how to read, “to get the child ready for school,” while the younger child simply “hangs around underfoot,” playing with toys, and in the end, it suddenly turns out the younger, who had not been subjected to the pressure of responsibility or to parental attention, had learned to read better and faster than the older child!

11. AL: It is only important for the problem to be interesting to the child, so that the child develops an acute need to solve it (EM: I refer to this as “ontological engagement in learning material”), and for the problem to be feasibly solved within the scope of the child’s actual capabilities. It is not important if we are talking about a problem in linguistics, mathematics, psychology, or any other area.

12. EM: Why do you think he came up with these particular letters?

AL: I think this was fairly accidental. Just as the first words uttered by any child who is learning to speak are fairly accidental. But in principle, in this case it would be useful to introduce a scanned copy of Alesha’s text, and then the subject of this discussion would be more understandable. However, I am afraid that today, it is doubtful that I could find this specific text in my voluminous archives.

13. It is important not to miss the moment at which this need arises and to propose activities that address this need. Otherwise, the need may fade away and lose its urgency for the child.

14. AL: It is important to hear the child’s words and not replace the child’s words with one’s own. This is so the first-grade child feels that his or her own words (and not the teacher’s) are the most important words in the class!

15. EM: What about the teacher’s sympathy and help in solving the child’s interpersonal ethical problem and addressing social injustice? Is this not a pedagogical exploitation of the child’s drama and pain? Can you please address this issue?

AL: Without doubt, it is *intonation* that is specifically very important in sounding out such

text. This is not intonation that debases the child in any way. On the contrary, it is intonation that *elevates* the child's human dignity. This is not intonation of indifference, but intonation of infinite respect for the child's experiences, intonation that listens attentively to that experience, intonation that conveys real children's pain, but at the same time, rendering this pain into a "detached" text format. And this, perhaps, is one of the most important discoveries the child will make with the aid of an adult: a feeling presented in the text is one that no longer masters us, but one that we are learning to master. And for this reason Nikita's situation—this is, of course, not at all a situation of "exploiting" a child's experiences "for the sake of the text"—is a discovery of the very phenomenon of "literature" *as a means of managing one's own feelings*. Managing them by elevating and "detaching" them (an astonishing phenomenon that is well known to any writing person). I translate my experiences into text, and by this means, deal with the purely emotional "groundswell" of my own experiences.

16. EM: What about the second half?

AL: Obviously, the expression "halfway solved" should not be taken literally. I have in mind "partially solved," or partially addressed. At the same time it seems a matter of common knowledge and self-evident that while the literary transformation (or sublimation) of experiences into text does not deliver one from those experiences, it does endow them with a different, "cultivated" form. The experience is "removed" and as a result, its direct emotional impact is weakened; I now have the ability to view my own experiences as if from the side. And this, I repeat, is the key reason for the widespread passion for diary entries and verses during adolescence. In verbalizing one's feelings, the adolescent partially releases his or her own emotional pressure and experiences a feeling of singular relief.

17. EM: What about an ethic, relational aspect? Can you please address this issue?

AL: To write, or not write a diary or verses is an absolutely intimate, internal affair for an adolescent, involving personal initiative and personal responsibility. And for this reason, the widespread practice of children's diary-keeping or poetic work can hardly evoke any ethical qualms. The phenomenon of adolescent written self-expression as a special kind of self-therapy has existed, exists, and will continue to exist regardless of our relation to it. And the ethical risk and ethical terms of reference arise only then when adults attempt to interfere in this intimate sphere and start to publicly read out loud and comment on what had originally not been intended to be read out loud or commented on. As concerns the situation I have described, it somewhat concerns something else. In any event, it does not touch upon the child's written verbalization of the intimate, but on slowing down the written text of any open experiences and emotional reactions. In the described case, the teacher does not turn the intimate experience into writing, but the child's public hysterical episode, and in effect *elevates* this public hysterical episode to the level of poetic text. At the same time, it is important for the teacher not to write down this text dispassionately or in an aloof manner, but with expressed empathy for the child and stressing the significance and value of this child's treatment and suffering. But in subsequently reading the written text aloud, the teacher allows the child to view his or her own experience as if somewhat detached, from the side. And it is precisely this that turns out to be extremely productive, including for the cultivation of relations among the children, for it is via such textual vocalization of emotions that children gradually begin to recognize each other not as "externals" but as "internals."

18. AL: In other words, it is sublimated.

19. AL: Because it contains poetics, a mysterious internal rhythm. And the whole point, within our capability (or lack thereof), is to see this mysterious poetics in both our speech and that of others, to see that language is not simply a means of transmitting information but something always immeasurably greater—a comment from 2001.

20. AL: The principle of fervent excitement operates particularly effectively if this search problem is solved using small teams into which the class is divided.

21. AL: Any writing person is well acquainted with this mechanism of first constructing

a written text in one's mind. When initially, it is as if you are biting down on a composed phrase, as you would a coin to make sure it is genuine, except that what you do is to say it out loud (or mumble it under your breath), and only when you hear that the phrase works, you write it down and commit it to paper.

22. AL: From the poem *Ia vas liubil* [I loved you once] by the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

23. EM: I respectfully disagree with you about that. I think oral speech has no less poetics than writing speech. Even more, often oral speech is more poetic due to authorial intonations. I wonder if we, mostly literate people, have a prejudice against oral culture. I wonder if orality is much more inherently poetic than writing.

AL: I will note that I am not saying oral speech exhibits "less" poetics. Heaven forbid! Oral speech doubtless has its *own* poetics, but I do not think anyone is likely to argue that it is a *different* poetics. The poetics of oral speech is poetics that includes, as an evident basic element, *living intonation*, which is fundamentally absent in writing. This is exactly why oral speech that is disconnected, emotionally laden in its disconnectedness, and that occurs in our presence can exert a spellbinding force on us, but as soon as that same speech is recorded on a machine and transcribed *word for word* onto paper, its living poetics and living energy immediately disappear somewhere, and it will require special effort to do special, "literary" processing of such a machine recording, to model a special kind of "literary poetics," where "intonation" of the text is not the result of intoning through the use of the voice, but specifically *the word order*, which may also be called the "authorial stylistics" of the text. At the same time, we must keep in mind that in the history of culture, there exists the phenomenon of "oral literature," in which specifically a *word order* is handed down from generation to generation. In this case, we can undoubtedly speak of the creation of what is precisely a *literary* text long before it is written down on paper. And in this sense, any oral epos handed down from generation to generation as some "sacred" order of words is, naturally, already literature. For example, both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are undoubtedly *texts*. But these texts were already texts long before they were written down on paper. The same also relates to many sacred religious texts or archaic myths that were handed down from generation to generation "word for word." This is, of course, *literature*, although literature that was unaware of the additional existence of its own written form. On the other hand, we can hardly consider the lively dialogues between Socrates and his students as literary texts, but the written records of those dialogues as set down by various students of Socrates are, naturally, a fact of literature.

24. EM: What about a criterion of poetry or a criterion of emotionality or a criterion of X . . . ? Why should a teacher pick one, preexisting criterion? Can you elaborate please?

AL: Well, first, what is key is that I do not write about what a teacher *should* do. In principle, I am not writing in the genre of "methodological pedagogical recommendations." I am simply describing that *particular* process that *took place* in our experiment, and writing that just in our case, it was the criterion of "complexity" that *worked* as a criterion that was effective and understandable to the children. Moreover, it was in no way a "preexisting" criterion. Not a criterion that had been introduced previously or discussed in any way with the children. This is, more likely, my personal, individual, internal evaluation criterion that I am reconstructing from hindsight and I am trying to understand why it was that I reacted with greater and more enthusiastic emotion in response to certain children's texts. Thus, in the text there is a distinct notional error when I write of the "criterion we introduced." And in fact, when I now look through these children's notebooks from twenty years ago, I plainly see that, yes, *complex* tests, including syntactically complex ones, elicited a definite reaction from me, one of elevated emotional delight. But this was especially true when it was not simply syntactical complexity, but metaphorical complexity.

25. EM: Why are difficulty, complexity, and efforts good and simplicity and easiness are

bad? Is it your personal (and cultural) bias? Can you reply and elaborate on that please?

AL: Apparently, we are speaking of a different “simplicity.” Russian poet Pasternak’s “unheard-of simplicity” is, in actuality, fantastically complex. Like the fantastically complex “primitivism” of Georgian artist Pirosmiani or the world of the “primitive cultures” (about which, by the way, I wrote in quite great detail in my *The Anthropology of Myth* [Antropologiiiia mifa]). It a completely different thing, this “simplicity” of standardized templates that are usually employed to begin children’s mastery of writing. That is, with extremely limited templates that have been stripped of any hint of authorial semantics or syntax. “I went to the store today. Father bought me a toy. I liked being in the store.” That is a typical example of templated texts that are offered to children as a specimen for beginning writing. To me, it is incredibly important for the child’s own language—with its original syntax and individual, authorial semantics—to begin to emerge in the written language. That is when the text generated by the child becomes *interesting to the reader*.

26. EM: This is a rather contested statement of a taste.

AL: Undoubtedly, it is a matter of taste! And I fundamentally insist that the teacher who aspires to a really dialogical position is precisely a medium for that “matter of taste” and not a representative of some unconditional and absolute (i.e., extrasubjective) criteria. And for me it is incredibly important that in the first grade, the child meet not with some “absolute,” but with the originator of certain *particular* taste judgments. And precisely this becomes the basis for real partnership and dialogue. From the very start, the child must understand and feel that the teacher is only a *particular entity*, and that it is precisely this particularity, this individuality, that is valuable. As other people are valuable, with their other criteria and other points of view.

27. EM: Is it what makes you excited? Is it your bias?

AL: Naturally, here I am describing my own structure of preferences. At the same time, it was important for me to see the extent to which my completely individual preferences evoked in very different children a really venturesome desire to write. Yes, I was truly delighted by the appearance of complex syntax, unexpected pronouncements, and metaphors in a child’s writing—yet it was precisely this that “fired” an insatiable *passion for writing* in children that I, in the end, had to confront. And this is what, to this day, puts me in a state of investigative excitement: what it is that I have been able to intuitively grasp so that every last one of the children in my experimental class experienced this acute desire to write, and to write in an interesting and unborning manner—to *write with the presumption of a reader*.

28. EM: Yes. So, what would you do if you do not like a student’s poem? Can you explain and give an example please?

AL: Well, let us start by saying that as early as the first months of our work, such a great amount of text was generated that I simply did not have the physical ability to read *everything* that had been written by the children out loud (keep in mind there were twenty children in the class). The only thing there was time for was to browse through what had been written and seize upon, for reading aloud, those things that caught my eye—things that for some reason seemed to me to be interesting, complex, unexpected, and unconventional. I always reacted with fireworks of delight to such bright bits, naturally, in those cases where *in fact* I found something I liked (I will repeat myself: the most wretched thing in the educational business is falsity). And if I did not find anything interesting in a notebook, I would leaf through it and put it to one side or read out something with some inner doubt and comment roughly as follows: “Mmm, yes . . . This isn’t like you at all! Now that piece you wrote yesterday, that was really cool! But today, this is just a pale shadow of you! It would appear that inspiration bypassed you today!” And it was curious that often, immediately afterward, the child would take the notebook, sit down at a desk, and literally within five minutes, would compose a true masterpiece, clearly demonstrating that inspiration can be attracted and domesticated. Incidentally, the children would often begin to vigorously discuss how various people were able to attract this inspiration to themselves.

EM: Also, do you have humbleness or doubts in your own taste, interest, and attraction? Are you concerned that your negative taste evaluation may kill a student's enthusiasm and style that is alien to you but worth developing?

29. EM: But is it your personal taste bias?

AL: Well, naturally, as a teacher, I introduce a certain bar of "cultural taste." And of course, "cultural taste" is always an individual matter, but at the same time, we can speak of the degree of elaboration and cultivation of this cultural taste. Just as when we cultivate some agricultural crop, we do not at all strip this crop of its individuality, but on the contrary, allow it to manifest its individuality to the greatest extent possible in the process of its cultivation and harvest. [Apparent wordplay, as *kul'tura* can mean both culture and crop.—Trans.]

30. EM: Why should the teacher, and not other people (e.g., the other students, peers, siblings, parents) be the most important audience for a student?

AL: Well, because I am describing the situation in an *academic class*, where precisely the teacher is the being who is already to some extent the "culturally cultivated" being. Outside the classroom, naturally, this may be a completely different person—mother, father, a random acquaintance, or adult friend. It is particularly interesting when some adult observer is in the class, because then an *additional taste judgment* enters the game, and this, needless to say, can be extremely productive. And this is one of the reasons why I so loved it when some other adults would appear at the threshold of my classroom, because it always afforded an opportunity for the occurrence of evaluative polyphony, that is, a polyphony of interpretations and commentary.

EM: I wonder how different your approach is from a conventional school approach well-articulated in the film *Dozhivem do ponedel'nika* [We'll Live till Monday]. In the movie, a high school student explains that a conventional school promotes the "U2" approach, "*ugadat*" [to guess (what the teacher wants from the student)] and "*ugodit*" [to please (the teacher)]. How is your pedagogical approach different? It seems to be you, not your students, who set the criterion of "good poetry"—they just learn how to get it and imitate it in their work. How is it different from the School of the Dialogue of Cultures? Why do you not allow students to develop their own criteria of good poetry, similar to what Bakhtin did with his (although much older) students? Can you briefly address this issue please?

AL: Unfortunately, this question has no brief answer. Essentially this question concerns why the child nevertheless *meets* culture and does not simply create culture from within. At the same time, it stands to reason that children, of course, *create* culture from inside themselves (I analyze the questions of how this occurs during the preschool years in some detail in my *The Anthropology of Myth*), and are always the authors of *their own* culture and *their own* view of the world. However, the basic historic purpose of the school (and again, I analyze this in detail in *The Anthropology of Myth*) is precisely to provide for a *meeting* between the personal, deeply authorial, and individual culture of the child and the world of the "Big Culture." Here, the problem with the traditional school over many centuries has been, in my view, that it has least of all attempted to be a *meeting ground*, and has attempted to build itself up as a domain of dictation. But a key educational task consists precisely in making the Big Culture a place for meeting with the individual culture of the child. And in so doing, the Big Culture should not lose its selfness, should not lose its social self. Otherwise, the child may simply become stuck in a position of naive narcissism, which occurs in many educational systems whose authors attempt to simply "follow the child." The purpose of the Big Culture is nevertheless to *challenge* the growing child and activate the child's internal assets for growth and development. This does not work the other way around. The child challenges only the educational culture and activates its assets. As concerns the Great Culture itself, it has still other motive forces for development.

31. EM: Hmmm, what about imageless poetry of the Russian innovative poets of the 1920s, the Aberiutovs, for example, or Khlebnikov, or the Dada poetic movement, or Primitivism?

AL: As a matter of fact, in this fragment, I am not saying (nor do I state anywhere, nor could I state even in my darkest dreams) that image is the only criterion for poetry. While what I am saying about image is that it is the “principal material of verse,” I am not stating that it is the *only* material. All that I am saying is that, in my experience interacting with children of *this* class, the appearance of images turned out to be a key point in their appropriation of active written language, and that precisely the appearance of children’s imagery became for me a key event in understanding how and why their need for written language came about. In my much later and academically respectable article “The Psychology of Children’s Poetic Language” [Psikhologiya detskoi poeticheskoi rechi], I attempted to show that poetic image and poetic metaphor tend, in their own way, toward the idea of enchantment, and just for this reason are commensurate with the mythological thinking of the child. However, the praxis of my work plainly shows a number of examples of children composing brilliant verse that is completely lacking any metaphors or images. And I must again direct attention to the article “The Psychology of Children’s Poetic Language,” where I collected and analyzed an abundance of observations made by children themselves about what, in their view, it was in their texts that made them verses.

32. EM: The text of Pink Floyd’s album *The Wall* is very primitive based on high redundancy and rather primitive ideas—but in my view, holistically, it is a masterpiece.

AL: I profoundly disagree. The text you refer to is fundamentally complex. It is contextually complex. It is *intraculturally* complex. And for this reason, one can travel within it infinitely. And this text can be infinitely *interpreted* and analyzed, which is what creates its superpowered impact. And I can say exactly the same thing about any Japanese haiku. These are surprising and infinitely complex texts composed using minimalist means. And that is why one can dive into them forever, and repeatedly make striking discoveries in their depths, including discoveries about oneself. And conversely: graphomaniac text is, as a rule, garrulous, but it is so primitive as to make your teeth hurt, and “as sophisticated as a bag of rocks.” It has no depth, nothing to get into, no place to go, and so on. I think that behind our “argument” there is a fundamentally different interpretation of the basic categories of “simple” and “complex.” Cultural complexity is not calculated using mathematical quantities. So-called primitive cultures are *infinitely* complex, and again, I must cite my *The Anthropology of Myth*, which over the course of 800 pages expands on this assertion, in particular.

EM: “Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2):” “We don’t need no education / We don’t need no thought control / No dark sarcasm in the classroom / Teachers leave them kids alone / Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone!” What do you think?

AL: I think this is exactly an example of an extremely subtle and daintily profound multidimensional text, embedded in an abundance of cultural contexts and powerfully coming through this abundance of cultural contexts.

33. EM: Again, this is a value-based notion. Are you following Hegelians like Davydov assuming that values defining development are objective in their nature?

AL: Well, naturally, I have in mind “highly developed” *from my point of view*, but certainly not from the point of view of God Almighty. This is my *personal* fixation, and in this case the strange collocation “highly developed striving” means, most likely (to the extent I can recall myself from twenty years ago), that this is not simply a striving instigated by an educator, but a striving born of the personal initiative of children, of children’s own personality.

34. EM: I feel that you are imposing your values on the students. I can appreciate both texts and see both *poetic* and *prose* potentials in both of them. What do you think?

AL: Well, yes, it goes without saying that I meet with children not as a culturally anonymous being—I carry within myself my *own* axiological world and my own sense of culture. I might add, this is in distinction from ordinary school teachers who, as a rule, normally hide their intracultural subjectivity behind the universal provisions of a scholastic program, for I maintain that true education takes place when dialogue occurs just as the child meets

an abundance of these kinds of really different subjective words. A true meeting—a true dialogue—is possible only when the teacher is not afraid to assert his or her own axiological subjectivity, while at the same time refraining from making it seem as if this axiological net is the embodiment of some Absolute Truth. So if I were to create a religious sect and represent myself as the earthly embodiment of Divine Revelation, and if the children would truly believe that my axiological judgment was absolute and the sole possible judgment, that would be really scary. Incidentally, even if the teacher were to claim to be the embodiment of God Almighty (and this is exactly what happens when the teacher interacts with children not in the teacher’s own name, but in that of some Academic Program That Absolutely Knows the Correct Way), any sane child will react to this zombifying bullying by creating an internal, subjective distance. And the same thing occurs, by the way, in developed religions that do not organize themselves along the lines of psychozombifying sects; in such religions, there is always room for heresy—that is, development. Only in psychozombifying sects can one more or less achieve an ideal of the complete elimination of human personality. So, as concerns the “potential for prose and poetry,” it goes without saying that it may be found in almost any linguistic expression. Yet the fundamental question remains: how and why does a literary text originate that evokes a strong reaction from a reader? I understand the educational and psychological value of literary graphomania, but I do not like it when literary graphomania—when inarticulate, banal, and pointless language—is placed on the pedestal of “dialogical equality” with Dostoevsky or Brodsky.

35. EM: So, the tacit goal is for a student to please the teacher? Is this the goal of education?

AL: Not just the teacher, but any significant adult person as well! In addition, I will be so bold as to assert that exactly the same occurs with the child who begins to walk or talk—such a child will without doubt please the adults in his or her environment. And if we strip the child of this approving support from the adult world, the child’s development will be hindered.

36. EM: But the final judgment of “the good poetry” is the teacher’s, right? Please reply and elaborate as necessary.

AL: A book I am reading never assumes the status of “the final word” for me, unless I’m a zombified idiot. And not one person from among those I have met over the course of my life has ever been a bearer of ultimate truth for me, even though I have been fortunate to meet people who are truly brilliant and newsworthy. Why should we consider our children to be less able-minded than we are? Is my judgment authoritative for children? Of course it is authoritative. Is it absolute? Well, it goes without saying, no! It seems to me that the pitfall you find yourself in, here, is that you have interpreted this text as a variant of a “methodological instruction,” that is, you have taken it out of my philosophical context and the context of my personal educational discourse, which does not call for any “methodological instructions” at all. If I, as a teacher, hide my subjective taste from children (as is done in “objectivist” educational models), I am committing a crime. If, on the other hand, I honestly assert my subjective taste to the children (which means I honestly argue with myself, honestly develop and make more complex my subjective taste in the children’s presence) this becomes the basis for the appearance of really productive dialogical pedagogy, and a basis for the establishment and development of a reciprocal children’s subjectivity that fundamentally does not coincide with my own.

37. EM: I wonder if this theme of “suffering soul” was tacitly imposed by your emphasis on “complexity of the image” and on your students’ desire to please *you* with their texts. Can you reply to that please?

AL: To stay on the safe side, I will again repeat myself. (1) I never made known to the children any “criteria” that governed which of their texts I would like or not like. In addition, it simply would not occur to me to sit down with seven-year-old children to discuss and make known any criteria that were implicit in any of my judgments. It was later, when

I tried to figure out why such a clear and powerful dialogical interaction process had come about between me and the children and why there appeared such a pronounced diversity in the texts and such a large volume of texts (the “bursting dike” effect) that I attempted to reconstruct some criterial basis for my evaluative delight or lack of comprehension. And if we were to have asked those same children why, in their opinion, Aleksandr Mikhailovich liked or did not like some text, I am sure not one of them would say even half a word about “complexity” or “imagery.” (2) It is noteworthy that, when this “poetic passion” I describe was awakened in children, they would generally stop orienting themselves to my emotional evaluations. Just imagine the situation. *Every day*, the child brings yet another text from home, and also writes some text during class without fail. There are twenty children in the class. Consequently, every day, another forty texts (as a minimum) are added in the class. And of this quantity, in the best case, I can read out loud (and, correspondingly, relate emotionally to) only five or six, selected at random. Meanwhile, not one of the children has the neurotic desire of “Read mine!” And that is because they, for sometime now, have been writing not for me, but for themselves. And my positive or negative evaluations are, for them, merely reference points of taste, and not guiding rails.

38. EM: So where was your pedagogical “technique?” It remains unclear to me.

AL: As a matter of fact, I must again repeat: I had and have no fundamental “pedagogical technique” or “pedagogical method” that I would necessarily repeat or reproduce during any successive meeting with the children. For example, what is described in this article is an attempt to describe the “basis for dialogue,” that I formed with a specific class in 1993–94. Of course, however, one may describe general *principles* on which my interactions with children were and continue to be built. And these are precisely those principles that have been described rather thoroughly and presented in my article, “The Next-Generation School” [Shkola novogo pokoleniia].

39. AL: Or has culture become, for these children, a form of hair shirt and chains?

40. AL: See V.S. Bibler, “The Foundations of the School of the Dialogue of Cultures Program,” *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January–February 2009), pp. 34–60; and I.E. Berlyand, “A Few Words About Bibler’s Dialogics: The School of the Dialogue of Cultures Conception and Curriculum,” *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January–February 2009), pp. 20–33.

41. EM: Yes! But how do you introduce the interpretations of others to the children? Or do you think it is not important or even dangerous? Can you briefly reply to that please?

AL: For a long time, until the child’s own speech gained strength, I suppressed any and all interpretations of children’s texts by others. I would give my own emotional reactions, but never the reasons or basis for a given emotional reaction. And it was this way until at least the end of first grade.

42. EM: What about the teacher’s responsibility not only to see the student’s poetic and philosophical response but also to interfere and help the student through actions? Can you address this issue?

AL: But I am not writing here about those moments in a child’s life when there is no adult nearby to help the child. Like it or not, such moments will inevitably occur, and children emerge from such situations with honor and dignity when they have internal strength.

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The Next-Generation School

(A Tentative Conceptual Sketch)

This educational manifesto represents my philosophical essay focusing on the nature of genuine education in contrast to conventional educational practices. In this essay, I have conclude that education is about launching a unique expanding universe for each student-learner. Genuine education is dialogic, ontological, multicultural, agentive, authorial, and emotional, based on students' initiatives, questions, interests, and inquiries, and involving the exploration of students' goals and values.

The question of the next-generation school concerns the fundamental challenges of developing schools in the twenty-first century given the fundamental sociocultural changes occurring before our eyes and, in particular, those related to the appearance of what might be called an Internet civilization and the final exhaustion of the resources of the “educating project.” This article attempts to describe the next-generation school as one that defines a different philosophy: a fundamentally new format and a fundamentally new sum of educational milestones with respect to currently existing schools. What are the educational priorities that underlie the activities of the schools coming into being before our eyes, and whose existence allows us to speak of dealing with a truly new educational reality, in the same sense as when we speak of the appearance of a “next generation” of computer or any other technology?

The next-generation school is one that cannot be “constructed” as some kind of educational utopia. It is a school that tangibly emerges within the innovative activity of currently existing schools and within the innovative activity of the most talented school teachers. This is a school that has workably come into being over the past twenty years in the activities of very different teachers. The challenge

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Translated by Alex Lane.

is to recognize and support the existing shoots of these next-generation schools and use this as a basis for creating organizational conditions to allow the next-generation school to become a more pronounced factor in Russian educational life. This will allow the plans and proposals of the school to be implemented within the format of some organizationally formalized whole, thus becoming the basis for creating certain system-level precedents for this kind of school and, in the final analysis, the basis for the appearance of a fundamentally new global educational structure and order.

Properly speaking, we are speaking of a changed educational paradigm—a replacement for those mysterious “rules of the game” on which the praxis of the modern school is built, a replacement for the whole of its basic values and objectives—and on this basis, a replacement for those types of activities that weave the fabric of its educational routine.

By the same token, a question arises regarding a shift in perceptions about norms of educational effectiveness and the development of fundamentally new objectives and measurement procedures that allow educational effectiveness to be addressed.

However, the most important element is the definition of those fundamental educational priorities and types of educational emphasis whose existence and implementation allow us to say we are actually dealing with a *next-generation* school.

In our view, three groups of educational priorities specify the format and define the specific aspects of this next-generation school that is now being born. These are priorities directed toward the development of three key vectors: *agency*, *dialogue* (communication), and *development*.

The agency vector is directed toward maximum development of human individuality, toward the development and comprehension of the self as such, toward the comprehension and development of the child’s “selfhood,” the teacher’s “selfhood,” and the “selfhood” (individuality, distinctive character, authorship) of the educational process, as such, to be a process that in some special way posits an interaction between the individual and the culture.

The dialogue vector is directed toward the establishment and development of an interaction ability among the subjective “selfhoods.” The developed self embodies a basic need to be heard: the more developed the self and the more developed the human agency, the more special educational activity is required to develop an “effort toward the other,” the more the creation of a dialogue interaction is required between different subjective experiences, and the more the school must become a dialogue space to allow individuals and cultures to engage in dialogue. Here we understand as well the creation of the child’s dialogue interactions with the culture, with adults, and with other children’s subjective experiences as well as the creation of networked dialogue among schools as individual educational organisms.

Finally, the *development vector* is an integral vector that indicates how ongoing sophistication of individual development and interpersonal interactions, as well as the ongoing development of school-based educational practices themselves and of schools as holistic educational organisms, occur in the education process.

We examine the principal priorities of the next-generation school within the framework of each of these vectors.

The agency vector

The priority of thinking over knowledge

The next-generation school is a school of thinking. The principal, leading emphasis in all of traditional Russian schooling is the emphasis on knowledge. Moreover, not on thinking or on creative and subjective knowledge, but on ready-made knowledge, which must be transmitted to the student as the sum of ready information that must be accepted blindly, on faith. As to thinking, it is precisely the thing that “demolishes” faith in information and reveals a person’s individuality and agency—the ability to be oneself while traveling in any cultural world. But besides being an apparatus for thinking, it is also an apparatus for responsible agency. Only in this case does human culture become a space inside of which a child can live a genuine life. If the most important objective of the school is to enable a productive meeting between the child and different worlds of human culture, then individual thinking is a key instrument of this kind of meeting.

The principal question is this: what is more important, the sum of assimilated ready-made knowledge or the very ability to think, allowing the creation of new knowledge?

Academic ready-made knowledge is what is fundamentally common to students in conventional schools,¹ whereas thinking is what individualizes the relationship between the human and knowledge. The more developed the thinking, the more personal, authorial, and individual the knowledge. Thinking² is the instrument of individual, idiosyncratic knowledge. It is specifically for this reason that a person with developed thinking is not a slave to knowledge, but its master. Such a person does not receive “common knowledge” along with everyone else, but his or her own, individualized version of knowledge. And the more developed the thinking, the more individualized a person’s knowledge. Any external, ready-made knowledge is perceived using one’s own individual ideational perspective. And that is why ideational individuality is the most important value in the educational process.

The traditional school is oriented toward the idea that the highest value and the highest result of formal instruction is student mastery of some sum of academic ready-made knowledge that has been predefined by society (and more precisely, the Ministry of Education, in Russia). And it is not by accident that September 1—the first day of the academic year—is called “Knowledge Day” in Russia, and that a student’s mastery of standardized ready-made knowledge is the principal object of customary examinational testing in school, including the newest measurement procedures of the Uniform State Examination.

At the same time, the current conventional school proceeds from the basis that knowledge is what already exists in the culture. Knowledge is the product of the

cultural history of humanity, and the strategic impetus of the current school consists in selecting and translating for students the “most important,” “most valuable,” and “most significant” knowledge from what has already been amassed by humanity. Ideally, this knowledge would be the same for everyone.

But the greater a person’s degree of thinking, the more that person will perceive this external knowledge on a personal, internal scale, and a world will be created of one’s own knowledge³ that is subjective and authorial with respect to any external informational transmissions.

On the other side of the coin, the amount of “most valuable” knowledge grows exponentially, and with each year humanity adds new knowledge to its overall cultural baggage in a geometric progression.⁴ From here grows an inconsistency between the overall quantity of knowledge created and accumulated by humanity, and the ability to figure out what part of this knowledge can and should be included in the foundation of general education.

One of the obvious consequences of this growing inconsistency is how the idea of developing common scholastic curricular standards based on information and knowledge comes to a standstill. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, in practice, it has become more and more evident to Russian designers of academic curricular programs⁵ that defining a scholastic curricular standard by specifying some baseline sum of knowledge that must be mastered by “every educated person” is not very productive.

In this connection, a paradigmatically different view of what should lie at the center of formal education assumes a more well-defined formulation, not a sum of knowledge fixed beforehand in some standard (essentially, a sum of information intended to be mastered by the student), but the very ability to develop new (individual) knowledge, and consequently, the ability to think.

Thus, a key educational question for the next-generation school consists not in how well or successfully the student is able to master some academically specified system of ready-made knowledge, nor in the volume of knowledge mastered by the student, but in the extent to which educational interaction with some specified knowledge or other (and exactly which is not important!) creates an ability in the student to think, to develop his or her own, personal knowledge, to conduct productive exploratory activity, and to construct his or her own, personal path in the world of human culture. Consequently, the central object for the expert evaluation of educational quality should not be the “sum of knowledge,” but the “sum of thinking”—the extent to which the school’s graduates develop productive abilities to think, to create new knowledge, and to work in open informational and cultural environments. Not the “sum of mathematical knowledge,” but the extent to which mathematical thinking is developed; not the “sum of linguistic knowledge,” but the extent to which language (linguistic) thinking is developed; not the “sum of natural science knowledge,” but the extent to which natural sciences thinking is developed; not the “sum of knowledge about literature,” but the extent to which literary thinking is developed, and so on.⁶

In the final analysis, where is various knowledge obtained in a culture? From the ability of the individual to bring forth and create new (individual) knowledge, relying on experience. And the instrument for bringing forth new knowledge is thinking. It is through thinking that humans, coming across some information, not only “download” it but convert it into personal (individual) knowledge. And for this reason, the same information, refracted and reworked in the course of thinking processes going on in various heads, is converted into various personal knowledge. A person makes incoming information subjective⁷ and assigns to it his or her own meanings and interpretations, and the more developed the person’s thinking ability, the greater the individualized nature of the knowledge developed in dialogue with the incoming information. And the greater the individualized knowledge developed by a person, the more that person appears independent of the incoming information and the more that person appears to be free.

Thus, thinking is an instrument of human freedom.

A person is free precisely to the extent that he or she has developed the tool of thinking—a tool allowing subjective interpretation of incoming information streams, a tool for incorporating information into a system of subjective meaning, a tool for incorporating one’s own vision of information streams.

A person who is simply the sum of some offered information is a person who will find success only within the boundaries clearly delineated by this information. If a person has mastered the very tool for developing individual knowledge—the tool of thought—this person can be successful in any previously undefined sphere of activity.

The very ability to generate new knowledge is the ability to work with inconsistencies. The ability to work productively with problems. The ability to engage in rational analysis.

Today, we say a great deal about how an educated person is a person capable of performing an independent search for information. But an independent search for information is possible only to the extent that it originates in the space of subjective, agentive, and authorial meanings and interpretations: in the space of personal knowledge. The basis for a meaningful search for information is, again, one’s own thinking. It is what specifies the coordinates of the search, and it is thinking that filters the information to select what is subjectively significant and what shapes this information into the form of personal knowledge. The subjective nature of the thinking process is what fundamentally distinguishes humans from computers. Human knowledge is far from the sum of faceless, externally assimilated static information. Human knowledge is always personal, idea-laden knowledge. Individual thinking is the hauling force of such knowledge.

An independent search for information, requires intellectual problematization of a person. If a person has no questions of his or her own, no developed individual analytics, no internal experience with some problem, there will be no need to search for information. If a person’s own thinking is not developed, then any knowledge he or she assimilates is dead knowledge. This is because humans are not soulless

computers that perceive and assimilate all incoming information, but beings mediated by meaning. And humans only perceive what has meaning to them. Humans systematize and conceptualize all incoming information in one way or another. Which is to say that humans create some kind of meaningful context for it.

One of the most important problems in working with information streams is the ability to distinguish accurate information from inaccurate information. This is particularly acute in an informationally open civilization—the Internet civilization. And the only tool that can be used to make this distinction is, likewise, the tool of thought.

Assuredly, pedagogical practices exist in today's school that are oriented toward supporting and developing thinking abilities. However, the priority of the existing school is seen as something different: the sum of information assimilated from without. This is precisely the object of traditional evaluation, and not at all the thinking individuality of a subject interacting with information streams.

The other part of the problem is that currently, no sufficiently effective tools have been developed to enable us to test and track the development of thinking. Existing examinational procedures are predominantly oriented toward testing how much transmitted information the student has assimilated. If the principal educational emphasis is to be transferred to thought development then it remains an open question how the quality of thought development is to be tested.

In addition, we must clearly understand that it is precisely the sophistication of individual thinking that must be the absolute priority in an educational expert review.

The priority of questions over answers

The next-generation school is a school of questions. This is a school that values the students' questioning state as an absolutely essential state of a person, as a state without which and beyond which real individual development is not possible. And it is the parameter that significantly distinguishes the next-generation school from old traditional schools, in which questions possess a value that is purely conventional, limited, disinterested, and relevant to purely academic testing. In this conventional scheme, a question is valid and has the right to exist only to the extent that a more or less definitive answer already exists for it. Thus, when a teacher asks questions of students, he or she already knows the answer that must be provided. And this kind of question is not a form or method for individual development of the student (or teacher) or for a genuine dialogue.

On the contrary, a real educational process consists of a question that does not—and cannot—have an unequivocal and predetermined answer. And for this reason, it is a question that promotes an exploratory situation, both for the student and the teacher, and consequently, a situation in which both can develop.

Therefore, the key issues in an educational expert review should be the extent to which the educational process produces and supports a questioning state in the child, the extent to which children's questions branch out and become more

complex, and the extent to which the child develops a state of “questioning dissatisfaction,” which is the basis for individual exploratory activity and individual exploratory searching.

The priority of creativity over prompt obedience

The next-generation school is a school of imagination, a school of creativity. This is a school oriented toward the development, in the child, of the ability to create something new (including new knowledge), and not simply to master existing examples. This is a school that consciously emphasizes the priority of human creativity. This is a school that sees and underscores the possibilities of a creator in a person, and not just the possibilities of a performer.

And this philosophy of next-generation schools significantly differs from that of the traditional school. The traditional school is one in which the principal emphasis was on drilling prompt obedience. Per the philosophy of this school, an “exemplary student” is one who diligently performs all of the teacher’s assignments and gets “excellent” grades.

Without a doubt, the ability to perform well on others’ demand is an important human ability. But if we simply drill for the ability to obey promptly, if we train the child, above all, to obey promptly, and if we place our primary educational emphasis specifically on prompt obedience, then strange as it may seem, this ability is not promoted at all. This is because pure prompt obedience ignores the student’s own subjectivity and diminishes the child’s human dignity. And for this reason, training the ability to obey promptly often causes protesting behavior in the child. And the child becomes the most notorious slacker, a result of degraded self-esteem.

On the other hand, if the need and ability to initiate one’s own activity is supported in the child, if a feeling of activity-based dignity is supported, if the ability to create (and not just reproduce) is developed in every way, and if these are the human abilities that are given activity-based emphasis, then the child will perform even a routine task with ease and pleasure, provided that such routine tasks are built into the child’s subjectivity, individual questioning nature, and individual thinking.

The ability to generate one’s own knowledge, the ability to see the world with one’s own eyes, the ability to understand the world with one’s own understanding—these constitute the most important human ability, and the extent to which this is developed affects what may be called the individual’s “inner success,” that is, the extent to which the “inner person” achieves realization.

A child develops successfully when he or she not only assimilates the ready-made experience and knowledge of others, but knows how to create and produce personal knowledge of the world. Encountering “ready-made” knowledge and lessons in the experience of others, the child—or any person, for that matter—will always make them subjective, generate his or her own personal knowledge of the world, and create a personal understanding.

Fairly often, unfortunately, our system of formal education does not develop

this ability as much as hamper it. For example, this is the case when we require a child to simply learn and recite the knowledge of others, where there is no call for the child to have his or her own view, interpretation, or understanding. After growing to adulthood, these people become accustomed to having the world pass by their ears and eyes. "Tell me what I need to remember and I will remember it, but I will not even try to understand or interpret anything!"⁸

And this is the question that we, as educators, must ask ourselves: does our education help children develop the ability to see and understand on their own, or to (subjectively) interpret incoming information? In other words, does our education help the child develop his or her subjectivity? The ability to see and understand various academic subjects in one's own fashion? The ability to create one's own knowledge about the subject under study? The ability to create, and not simply to reproduce?

Naturally, today's school also speaks of the need to develop creative abilities in the child. But the key lies in the emphasis. And the leading emphasis in today's school is, nevertheless, not on creativity but on prompt obedience. Those educational practices that, in today's school, are oriented toward supporting and developing subjectivity in children, toward supporting and developing creativity, are "extra" practices, as it were, and not the main ones.

The next-generation school is one in which the child's own activity-based experience and the child's own knowledge (created over the course of such experience) is immeasurably more valuable than the mastery of the experience and knowledge of others. And developing the child's ability to originate his or her own activity and to create personal, individual knowledge of the world is a key vector at this school.

The next-generation school is one in which an absolute priority is placed on creativity over prompt obedience, on the ability to originate new knowledge over the ability to assimilate knowledge.

Thus, we can speak of the birth of the next-generation school to the extent that the main emphasis at this school is on the development of children's creativity, while the ability to obey promptly has moved into the background.

The priority of children's initiative over adult initiative

The next-generation school is a school that creates the broadest possible space for the display and realization of children's initiative. The traditional school is entirely organized on the initiative of the adult world and its objectives are strictly subordinated to the ideology of this adult world. Children assimilate various academic content because they are "supposed to" and not at all because of any blossoming of personal, internal initiative or in response to any internal question. And conversely: the child may be full of thoughtful questions and thoughtful initiatives, but the school has no time to deal with these questions or to create conditions for implementing such initiatives: there is a program to follow, after all.

At the same time, it is well known that real education is effective only when it

can pursue children's questions,⁹ initiative, and subjectivity. For this reason, the next-generation school is one that is not afraid of thoughtful fluctuations resulting from children's questions and initiatives. The opposite is more likely: it attempts to construct all of its content around such questions and initiatives.

We can speak of the appearance of the next-generation school to the extent that it is oriented toward children's questions and initiative. This is a school that is prepared to pursue children's initiative and to expand its educational content while relying on this children's initiative. And this task—using children's initiative as a starting point to expand a comprehensive and multilevel dialogue with the culture—is obviously an extremely difficult one.

***The priority of the personal educational wants over the sum of
“educational necessities”***

The next-generation school is a school for developing educational needs. The traditional school proceeds from the position that educational content is determined by the needs of society, and not the desires of the individual. However, in the modern world, a fundamentally new trend is emerging: society is interested in a flexible, dynamic individual, whose education corresponds to his or her own deepest wants, where education is not imposed as an external social functional capability, but is a method for personal self-actualization and self-realization. Only in this case do we obtain a truly educated personality that, at the same time, has not been made neurotic or unhealthy.

For this reason, the next-generation school is oriented toward the creation and development of the child's educational wants. A graduate of a next-generation school is a person with a developed system of educational wants. It is a person whose educational wants have not only not been extinguished, but have, over the course of instruction, become branched and more complex, exhibiting a richer, multilevel nature. Moreover, these are his or her personal and individual educational wants, exhibiting an absolutely inimitable individual profile.

The most important criterion of the effectiveness of the next-generation school is the extent to which the child's educational wants are developed and made more sophisticated. The extent to which the number of child-like educational exclamations of “I want to!” increases and becomes more sophisticated. The extent to which the educational interests of children expand and become more profound. The extent to which the cultural world becomes more interesting and fascinating.

Unfortunately, in the traditional school, much occurs in quite the opposite manner. And its most important result is that, having burdened the child with a mass of academic information and having more or less prepared the child for accreditation procedures, it also effectively suppresses or narrows to a minimum the spectrum of his or her real educational wants, the spectrum of the child's educational exclamations of “I want to!”

The next-generation school is a school whose effectiveness is determined by the extent to which the child's educational wants undergo a branching, expansion, and sophistication as a result of the educational process.

It is clear that we can and should also diagnose the effectiveness of this kind of school not through "knowledge examinations," that is, with examinations oriented toward who has assimilated what knowledge. What is required is the development of fundamentally new ways of accrediting and monitoring effectiveness.¹⁰ The most important gauge should be the measurement of the level to which educational interest has been created, as well as the profundity and sophistication of the created educational interests.

The priority of the emotional over the intellectual

The next-generation school is a school in which the most important value is the self's emotional life and experience (perizhivanie) in the culture,¹¹ both as a student and as a teacher. Here, we speak of the absolute value of one's own emotional life and experience.

The most important educational question concerns the extent to which a person is immersed in the culture or in a dialogue with the culture, the extent to which journeys among various cultural worlds affect that person's deep-seated emotional structures, and the extent to which that person's emotional self is actualized.

Today's school is an intellectualized school. Moreover, what dominates is not a thinking, resilient intellect,¹² but an inert intellect that depends on ready-made information and knowledge. And it is precisely this informational-knowledge intellect that is traditionally the object of educational quality diagnosis and expert review. The task, then, is to move the diagnostic indicator from the question of what the child has assimilated while interacting with various academic scenarios, to the question of what the child has experienced in this process, and the extent to which his or her emotions and spirit have reacted.¹³ Consequently, the ability of emotional reflection must be developed, along with diagnostic tools that are applied, first and foremost, to the emotional state and experience of the child and teacher as an absolute educational value. Moreover, here we are speaking of the priority of personal emotional experience in response not only to various works of artistic culture but also to emotional, personal experiences in any academic courses—history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and so on. And if the child has mastered a scholastic course in physics, but quietly detests it, or has mastered a course of scholastic literature, but remains emotionally unenthusiastic about the assimilated works of literature, we must clearly and unequivocally show that this child has received an utterly wretched education.

Education is unquestionably valuable only when it leaves positive emotional impressions in the spirit of the child (student), when the scope of the child's emotional experience develops and becomes more sophisticated during the educational process. And it is just this scope of emotional experience that should be examined as an absolute priority during an educational expert review.

The priority of the “inner person” over the “outer person”

The next-generation school is a school of the “inner person.” This is a school oriented toward the development of those internal personality qualities that cannot be verified by any external examinational procedures.

All of traditional schooling is directed at creating an “outer person.” What happens with the child’s “inner person” is not a significant issue for traditional schooling. After all, the “inner person” cannot be diagnosed using external means. The internal person is a sovereign personal space.

The internal person is some mystery that takes place in the depths of the human spirit. The internal person is not directly revealed to the world. This is a person accessible only to the selfsame individual. And accessible to the selfsame individual only to the extent that his or her reflective capacity—the ability to peer into himself or herself—is developed.

But in this case, how are we to understand where and how the inner person develops in the children we teach? Only through the actualization of reflection mechanisms. Only through the child’s own look into the self and by living and experiencing what is occurring in his or her spirit. Only through the child’s own effort to understand the processes going on within. And by the child’s expression of his or her internal states in various forms.

Luckily, the inner person cannot be thoroughly diagnosed nor can the inner person be evaluated (it is inconceivable), but adults working with children must by all means understand and demonstrate that specifically the development of the inner person is the highest educational goal, and not at all the sum of that external educational outfitting a child receives—or does not—in the course of study.

And if the school is able to grasp this truth, if it is able to recognize the supreme value of the “inner person” living and breathing within the depths of the individual, if it is able to proclaim the absolute priority of the inner person over the outer person—this will be a truly new school, truly a next-generation school.

The dialogue vector

The priority of dialogic effort over a priori communication schematism

The next-generation school is a school of effort to understand. A school for ascending from one’s own subjectivity to that of another.

The more human subjectivity and human individuality is developed, the more complex become the problems of communication, of understanding, and of listening and interacting.

People who have become accustomed to the life of the militarized educational model in military barracks and on the military parade ground, so to speak, where all actions are determined by powerful others, are people whose intrinsic self is either

undeveloped or atrophied. And they need not make any personal effort to engage in communication interactions among themselves. Their interactions are comfortably housed in a prescribed communication scheme.

If the educational process is oriented toward maximum development of subjectivity and agency of the participants in the educational process, this inevitably creates a problem of dialogue as a particular way of ascending to another, as some kind of special effort to understand, as a special type of activity that allows bridges of productive intersubjective communications to be built.

The priority of dialogue over monologue

The next-generation school is a school of dialogue. It is a school whose philosophy is built on the principle of the commensurate positions of the student and teacher, on a symmetry between the student and the world and the student and the culture, because only an acknowledgment of this fundamental symmetry allows the creation of a full-fledged school of dialogue.

The traditional school is one whose basic educational philosophy and whose principal educational tool is the monologue, which is based on the idea that the adult and child occupy disparate positions and that there is asymmetry between the individual and the world and between the individual and the culture. The task of the teacher is to get certain information across to the student, and that of the child is to assimilate that information. This school is necessarily linear and is oriented toward unambiguous information.

The next-generation school is one in which the educational content is not information transmitted to the student, but the very dialogue that is established between the educator and the student and between students. And the most important indicator of the effectiveness of the educational process in this case turns out to be the very process of dialogue branching, a process in which the dialogic interaction among its participants becomes deeper and more sophisticated. Consequently, the effectiveness of this kind of school must be measured by measuring the quality and depth of the resulting interpersonal dialogue—that is, dialogue between adult and child, between educators, and between students.

The school of dialogue is a nonlinear school. It is a school in which the development of the student's position is a condition for the development of the teacher's position, just as the development of the teacher's position turns out to be the condition for the development of the student's position. This is because dialogue is not simply an exchange of speech. It is a meeting between mutually incongruous positions, yet positions that are attempting to ascend to each other.

Consequently, a dialogue is a movement from a lack of understanding toward understanding. A movement to the other, who is assuredly not you, and who will never become you. Someone who will always retain his or her sovereignty.

But this is in what the value of dialogue consists. It is not the subordination of someone else's opinion to one's own, but the continuous maintenance of distance

between incongruous positions, and the development of one's own position within the scope of the opening gap. And for this reason, the art of dialogue is the most important and the most difficult educational art. And this is why—to the extent that dialogue occurs in school—we can speak of the appearance of the next-generation school.

The priority of multiculturalism over monoculturalism (the priority of a dialogue of cultures over tolerance)

The next-generation school is a fundamentally multicultural school that allows its students to effectively enter various cultural environments and to realize, in such environments, their own cultural individuality, their own “selfness,” and their own “educated self.” At the same time, we can speak of different types of occupational cultures, communication cultures, spiritual cultures, religious cultures, personal cultures, “routine everyday cultures,” and so on.

The modern world is fundamentally multicultural, and its multicultural aspect is becoming ever more complex. This means that the quality of subjectiveness assumes an ever greater significance in that world.

It is no secret that during Soviet times, the ideal of monoculturalism held absolute dominance. This means that certain uniform standards for occupational and domestic life were actively embedded in social consciousness and social behavior, and in such a way that an individual who moved from one city to another or from one school to another, and so on, perceived no particular differences. Identical ideals, identical values, identical ways of interacting, identically structured ways of life . . . Everything was about the same everywhere, while the ideal was for everything everywhere to be identical.

In a democratic, nontotalitarian society, the world inevitably develops toward cultural and subjective differentiation, toward increased cultural sophistication and diversification. And in this regard, the task of developing paradigms for cultural dialogue becomes an increasing challenge.

Today, the word “tolerance” has become popular in Russia. But tolerance is only sufferance, only the acknowledgment of the rights of other cultures and other subjectivities to sovereign existence in the world. The point should not be the feasibility of reaching out in dialogue to other cultures as long as one's own cultural uniqueness is preserved and developed. The point is an “effort toward the other” (including efforts toward dialogic engagement in the other culture)—toward those who do not look like you, and whose existence turns out to be a resource for your own development, but a development that is not a slave to the other and that retains its sovereignty and distinctive character.

Today's school is a school of monologue. A monologue in its textbook and a monologue in its academic program, behind which a monologue of some hierarchy of values is hidden.

The next-generation school is a school of dialogue of cultures, in distinction from current school practices, which are ingrained with an ideology of cultural monologism.

The development vector

The priority of open curricular programs over closed curricular programs

The next-generation school is a school dominated by open curricular programs. In traditional schools, “closed” predefined curricular programs dominate unconditionally. These are self-sufficient curricular programs that are not prepared for students’ self-development and self-change in the process of active interaction between student and teacher. These programs are oriented toward “performance” of the ready-made culture and not toward active mastery.

Open curricular programs are capable of continuous reprogramming during the active interaction of student and teacher. These curricular programs develop and change themselves during the process of their implementation. These curricular programs are not afraid of transformation in response to the occurrence of activity- or education-related effects.

To be sure, working within the scope of such curricular programs requires particular educational professionalism on the part of teachers, as well as a high level of creativity and abilities to maintain dialogue, improvise, conceptualize, and analyze. The school must also be ready to move in response to the logic of open curricular programs, which is an unconditional indicator of a next-generation school.

And a key object of expert review is the extent to which a school’s educational programs are open to and capable of developing and reprogramming.

Priority of real life ontology over epistemological “book learning” and theoretical scholastics

The next-generation school is a school of real actions. One of the key problems of the traditional school is its emphasis on “book learning,” or more specifically, “scholarism” offered in textbooks. The traditional school is bookish.

For this reason, among the key tendencies of the next-generation school is the alignment of its content as commensurate with that of real life in its actual complexity and problematic nature. In this connection, the next-generation school is a school in which the experience of becoming part of real life, of real work and social relationships, and of real cultural communication are developed to the greatest extent. This is a school in which planned activities directed at developing experience interacting with real life and with real problems and culture are developed to the greatest extent. This is a school in which the experience of planned activities with real life and the description of the experience of these planned activities are considered a more important objective than a purely academic existence within the scope of the class-and-lesson process. This is a school in which the class-and-lesson system is overcome in a gradual, planned manner. In any event, it is in this that value and priority are seen, and in this area that efforts are made, and results of specifically this type are valued in particular.

The most important indicator of the effectiveness of this kind of school is its actual productivity, resulting from the interaction of adults and children with real products (both material and intellectual). The more complex, the more diverse, and the more demanding in terms of real life and real culture that products created as a result of intrascholastic activity are, the higher the educational effectiveness of the school. Scholastic research carried out with professional research laboratories via immersion in the range of problems faced by real research institutions; scholastic production activities carried out via immersion in a real, technically outfitted production facility; scholastic publishing activity carried out with professional writers and journalists; scholastic stage activities carried out with and via immersion in the rehearsal process of professional theaters, and so on.

The growing productivity of the child, educator, and school as a whole is the most important indicator of their sound development. For this reason, the most important object of expert review in a next-generation school is the extent to which its productivity grows and also the sophistication of its interaction with real life.

The priority of activity-based origination over pedagogical manipulation

The next-generation school is a fundamentally activity-based school. Pedagogical manipulation occurs when I know the teaching objectives in advance that I, as an educator, must have the child achieve, at which point my task is to force the child to believe that my teaching objectives are his or her learning objectives.

The traditional school is entirely oriented toward external goal setting with respect to the student. A sum of goals and problems have been formulated in advance by someone and placed before the student, and a sum of pedagogical methodologies and techniques are intended to “motivate” the student to achieve these goals (which the student did not establish by him/herself) and to solve the problems (which the student did not formulate and which are external to his or her own agency).

Thus, development in a traditional school can be reduced to travel along a previously laid track to previously established destinations.

The task of the next-generation school is to make the child’s own goal-definition ability and own agency-originated problems a part of the school’s foundation. Only in such case will the manipulative orientation of the traditional school be overcome. And only in this case will the school become a real developing organism.

Development in the next-generation school is a process of continuous goal generation, where the activity-related interaction between adults and children results in a perpetual process of generating new goals and branching goals. And these are not goals that are imposed from without, but goals that originate from the very activity of the participants in the educational process.

For this reason, the most important subject for expert review in a next-generation school turns out to be the extent to which the tree of students’ goals develops organically in the activity of the school.

The priority of the substantive over the functionally formal

The next-generation school is a school of substantive education. This means that it is not interested in the formal performance of some academic programs over others, but in the extent to which academic content develops during the educational process, the extent to which teachers and students are engaged in substantive activity—activity that takes place not because of some formal accountability, but for its own sake.

Substantive activity is activity founded on interest in the very substance, and not on how this activity will be evaluated by someone. Substantive activity is activity that is indifferent to how and by whom such activity is evaluated.

Unfortunately, the traditional school is one in which the cult of the functionally formal predominates, with its priority on formal academic parameters and on formal documentation of results. For this reason, the educational process often contains little or nothing of substance for students or their teachers. However, from the formal point of view, everything is in order, as the children are attending school, receiving grades, and undergoing various kinds of accreditation procedures.

The point at issue is to construct an educational process that depends not on external and formal motivation, but on internal and substantive motivation. Education becomes a space of full development of the child, only when the child has been substantively captivated, when he or she is motivated by substantive interest and not by a combination of rewards and punishments.

For this reason, the object of expert review should be the extent to which the educational process is built on the creation of substantive interest in a subject, the extent to which this substantive interest is deepened, and the extent to which “external motivators” take second place to substantive motivators.

The next-generation school is oriented toward the creation and development of substantive motivation for learning. In this school, external motivational regulators are less important than substantive motivations. The next-generation school is unquestionably interesting to the child, and is able to increase this substantial interest.

The next-generation school is also a school oriented toward a substantive and not functionally formal description of its own activity. It is a school that concerns itself not with the formal performance of a lesson plan or preset academic curricular programs (i.e., curricular standards), but with actual, substantive emergent development in the process of educational activity for both students and teachers. A key issue at this school is not whether a given preset academic curricular program has been mastered, but what actually took place among teachers and educators in the course of mastering a curricular program, what kind of personal changes they experienced, and the nature of their actual development. And this requires not only absolute honesty in describing the actual educational process and the educational effects occurring in that process (both positive and negative) but also systems for developing the means to describe and reconstruct this actual process.

Currently, the language and means for such kinds of description in school remain

completely undeveloped, and theoretical educational science, which should in principle be doing this, is instead doing something completely different—playing a scholastic game in academic categories.

The priority of purpose over expediency

The next-generation school is a school of purpose. It is a school in which a key question is “what is the purpose?” And it is the question that goes beyond the boundaries of pragmatic expediency—that is, of social control.

The traditional school is one that builds its activity around considerations of pragmatic expediency. “I do this because it is required of me.” “I do this because it is expedient.”

An educator at a next-generation school is one whose activities are built on principally moral and purposeful guidelines that cannot be enforced from without. The field of semantics and values is something that is formed from inside, in the process of addressing some final questions (cf. Bakhtin, 1999). And for this reason, the educator who has a well-developed semantic field of activity relies not on external requirements or external custom in his or her activities but on a personal educational philosophy worked out as a result of personal tribulation. This is why such an educator is willing to go against the flow, against the external rules of the game, against the socially formed ideas of expediency based on some higher, semantic, and marginal requirements. And, in the final analysis, because he or she overtakes any external educational requisition. This educator acts, first of all, in accordance with the requirements of educational conscience and educational meaning, and not in accordance with the requirements of some external goal or instruction. The educator’s strategy is primarily humane, and only then pragmatic. Pragmatics and external expediency, naturally, exist for this educator, but they are always moved back to the middle ground or further in comparison with what is most important: the educator’s professed ultimate values.

But these ultimate values and ultimate meanings themselves, naturally, develop—to the extent that they are an object of the educator’s reflection. And development of the educator’s educational activity occurs in accordance with the educator’s notions of meaning.

The next-generation school is one in which educational meaning is developed and a school of development that relies upon educational meaning. It is a school for developing ultimate representations about why it does what it does. This is a school where the moral basis of its activity is developed and its own activity expands with an emphasis on these moral and notional foundations. And continuous reflection on moral values, continuous creation and expansion of a certain educational philosophy, and notions of ultimate values that underlie any educational action—these form a deeper foundation for the development of this school. This school is least oriented toward the external political climate, and it possesses the strength of its inner autonomy.

And because of this, the most important object for expert evaluation in the

next-generation school is the extent to which its moral and educational philosophy is developed, the extent to which its capacity for axiological autonomy and independence of external goal setting is developed, and its orientation toward the space of intrinsic meanings.

The priority of effective self-education and self-development over development along a path imposed from without

The next-generation school is a school with a high potential for self-development and self-education. It is a school with a pronounced need for self-development and self-education. And the key thing here is that we are speaking of self-development and self-education. In other words, the impetus for academic development is not outside the school, but in it. In those problem fields that are created by the very educational routine itself. Any problem that arises during an interaction between an adult and a child is valuable in such a school, as it forces reflection and a search for nonstandard ways to resolve the problem.

The traditional school and traditional teacher value the problem-free child, because a problem-free child is one who more or less successfully fits within standardized forms of the instructional process. And if a child does not fit into an established educational process, there is always the hope that some universal schemes and expedients exist that may be successfully employed to instruct the “difficult” child.

The next-generation school is one in which the problem child (and this may be a gifted child, a nonstandard child, etc.) is an absolute value, for only problems—created for the educator by the nonstandard child—stimulate educational development and educational creativity, and enable the educator to maximally activate all available educational resources. Problems are the bread-and-butter of educational development.

And for this reason, the most important object of expert evaluation in the next-generation school is the readiness and willingness of educators to work with problems, which only leads to the growth of genuine academic self-development.

Notes

1. EM: I respectfully disagree with that. In my view, people *always* know differently. Knowledge is an empty abstraction, reifying the process of knowing, and often misleading one by eliminating subjectivity and individual unique differences.

AL: Here I am speaking specifically of abstracting “academic knowledge,” which is pounded into the student’s head for the purpose of subsequently reproducing it as precisely as possible. Unfortunately, just such an approach continues to dominate in Russian schools. Otherwise the individualized, personal knowledge you speak of is just what is created in a person because of his or her thinking activity. And the higher the quality of thinking, the higher the quality of personal knowledge.

2. EM: But maybe not only thinking? What about experience, aesthetics, personal and social relationships, and so on? Why only thinking?

AL: The basis of true, substantive thinking as a tool for creating new knowledge is specifically that personal experience, aesthetic feeling, and so on—and this applies equally to the thinking of august scholars and to that of any child. The higher the quality of thinking, the stiffer its aesthetic fabric, its “experiential” underpinning, and its personal dimension.

3. EM: And in my view, it stops being “knowledge” (i.e., a noun) and becomes more a form of human personal action or participation in activity. For example, my “knowledge” of Russian or English in ways I speak, read, and write in these languages that promote or make difficult my communication with other people (among other things, of course). My knowing these languages is not a thing referred to by the noun “knowledge.” Abstraction of similarities in ways of acting create a thing as “knowledge.” But this abstraction is empty because one cannot communicate with similarities. Similarities kill language. What do you think?

AL: I want to emphasize that in Russian educational discourse, the word “knowledge” is, for all intents and purposes, identical to the concept of “information,” which is to say it alludes to something fundamentally impersonal and objective, something external with respect to the thinking musculature of the individual who is entering into a relationship with this knowledge. And, correspondingly, the educational ideal is seen to a significant extent to be the subjugation of the individual’s logic to that of some “knowledge universals,” which must be not so much the object of critical thinking (i.e., an object of subjective individualization) as the object of unquestioning faith. And the rootedness of just such an approach to knowledge is related, in my view, to the psychological legacy of the Soviet era, which was largely oriented toward maintaining and uncritically reproducing various ideological clichés. Reflective, individual thinking is the greatest threat to any religious or ideological monster oriented toward impersonal knowledge and faith.

4. EM: Also, when kids graduate from school and live their productive lives, much “valued knowledge” becomes obsolete and new valued knowledge emerges, which the former students did not and could not learn in school, right?

AL: Permit me to call attention to the fact that here, you are precisely holding forth about knowledge that is “external” and “objective” with respect to the individual, because *individual, personal, authorial, thinking knowledge never becomes obsolete as a matter of principle*. This is because “individual knowledge” is not something that a person receives from without, but what that person *creates personally* in the process of reflective interaction with various information streams.

5. EM: I wish it were true . . .

AL: I refer here to the dramatic discussions surrounding the concept of “standards” that, for example, were ongoing during the first decade of the century on the pages of Russian educational newspapers and other professional mass publications.

6. EM: It sounds great to me, except your apparent tendency to reduce human creative activity only to thinking.

AL: Perhaps the point is that “thinking” to me is not reduced to what you call “thinking,” but is a much richer and essential process for human existence. For me, this is the crux of the matter—that true, productive thinking is by nature profoundly aesthetic, intuitive, irrational, and so on, and is in no measure reduced to (and quite the opposite—sharply resists!) any kind of intellectual schematism. Extremely rational thinking, that is, rationally structured thinking, is counterproductive and for this very reason, I do not consider it to be true thinking.

EM: I wonder if Russian language is missing a notion of “agency” that may be useful for articulating your ideas without cognitive reductionism common to the German philosophical tradition and promoted by Bibler, Davydov, Vygotsky (among many) in Russia (and the Soviet Union). What do you think?

AL: I am appalled at the extent to which “thinking” is stubbornly linked exclusively to cognitive processes by a significant number of researchers. Having studied the nature

of creative thinking for some time (and actually, for me, thinking is really only actually thinking when it is creative; in this I am in complete agreement with Bibler), I consider it a process that is fundamentally *mythopoetical* (I discuss this at greater length in more detail in my book *The Anthropology of Myth*).

7. EM: Another empty abstraction, in my view, is it not?

AL: Moreover, this abstraction has a certain rather important meaning. It indicates the existence of some content that is independent of form, invariant with respect to form, and thus, in this sense, extrahuman. It is just for this reason that we can speak of “information transmission.” And the issue of “to whom”—a computer or another person—is not important. The personal form has no meaning here; moreover, no meaning is possible. It is for this reason that we can speak of “information storage,” and in doing so, allude to its changeless nature. And in this, it is noteworthy that the human—to the extent he or she is human and not a data processing machine—does not “store information” but necessarily makes it subjective, endows it with meaning and context, and in doing so transforms any “objective” information into living, subjective, personal knowledge.

8. EM: Yes, probably because it can very dangerous and risky. One’s own interpretation can be socially punished, especially in a conventional school.

AL: I absolutely agree.

9. EM: What about promoting and provoking new questions by the teacher—the questions that the child might not raise on his or her own?

AL: The encouragement of heightened questioning activity in children has always been an important priority of the work for me.

10. EM: But how can creativity—that is, thinking and acting “outside of the box” on a subjective basis—be assessed and measured? Is it a contradiction in terms?

AL: But I am not speaking of evaluation, I am speaking of tracking. I am not speaking of “evaluations,” I am speaking of *mirrors* in which the school can view its effectiveness. Why is the issue turning to “evaluation” at all? It seems to me to be some kind of internal pitfall. I speak of “monitoring effectiveness,” but the reader hears “evaluation.” In what way? Monitoring is the most complicated task of reconstructing and interpreting the processes that take place in the school. This has no relationship at all to the activity of “evaluation.” An example of qualitative educational monitoring is, for example, the reflective educational diary. As, for example, A.S. Makarenko’s *Pedagogical Poem* [Pedagogicheskaiia poema]. The more developed the pedagogy, the greater its need to construct some kinds of reflective mirrors. Monitoring systems, in other words.

EM: Also, do such summative assessments, sorting students’ unique subjectivity on “advanced” and “failing,” undermine trust between the teacher and a student, making learning unsafe?

AL: For me, the task of defining the monitoring of educational process effectiveness is not at all a task of qualitative ranking or dividing schools and teachers into “bad” and “good,” “successful” and “unsuccessful,” *but a task of reflective reconstruction of the individual content of each*. In approximately the same format as exists, for example, in theatrical criticism. You would not object that theatrical (or cinematographic, or literary) criticism is a method for monitoring theatrical, cinematographic, or literary processes. And you and I understand perfectly well that the more varied and rich the critical interpretations of the current theatrical process, the more this serves as evidence of the quality of this process. And conversely: if criticism is dying out, this is valid evidence of a crisis in and extinction of the theatrical process. I used just this model to propose and implement (and describe, in a number of articles) a fundamentally new model for expert review and monitoring of educational process quality.

11. EM: Yes! This is different from an exclusive focus on thinking!

AL: Not at all. In fact, emotional living is the *key* to thinking, the key to human subjectivity. It seems to me that you are reducing thinking to a set of purely intellectual operations.

However, in my view this is a very incorrect interpretation of thinking. Thinking is by no means the sphere of “pure intellect.” Thinking is an integral personal quality that enables the subjectivity, individuality, and productivity of the human self.

12. AL: A resilient intellect is one that is flexible, productive, and promptly reacts to new life experience and to the inconsistencies and demands of time.

13. EM: But is it even more dangerous to try to measure the student’s soul?!!

AL: Mercy! Who is raising this issue? What a ludicrous thought—to measure a soul?

EM: Albert Einstein once said, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” I think measurement and diagnostic creativity is not only impossible but *very* dangerous. What do you think?

AL: If we intend to measure creativity using quantitative methods, this is truly absurd. Where is this idea coming from in the first place? Why on earth must we pose this question at all in such an absurd plane?

EM: What do you mean by “the diagnostic of experience (*perezhivanie*)?” Diagnostic implies diagnosis (and, thus, potential deficits, does it not?). Is it a medical deficit model? What possible diagnoses do you think about? Can you give an example?

AL: I must say, I was not able to find this strange “diagnostic of experience” word combination in my text. What I am saying is that when we diagnose (or perform an expert evaluation) of the school and educational process, when we attempt to understand how good a teacher is and why, we must learn to reframe our analysis from asking how well the child has “mastered” some cultural standards and norms to asking how the child’s spirit reacted in its encounter with the culture. Today, we are inclined to define the school and teachers as “good” when they are able to achieve, in the child, some level of assimilation of the academic program. I am consciously employing a completely different parameter. In my view, a “good school” is one in which a dialogue is developed between the adult and child. And this means the child *encounters* the culture. In other words, an internal self-response occurs to the culture. The *child’s self is actualized* in the culture. At the same time, the teacher plays the role of conductor between the culture and the child, but not the role of information conductor at all. The task of the teacher is to help arouse the child’s subjectivity as much as possible in the field of culture. But this, in turn, will be possible only when the teacher’s own subjectivity is aroused in the field of this culture. And then the educational process will align itself as a meeting of subjectivities. Besides—I will add parenthetically—a meeting of subjectivities is always a mutual diagnostic. (Although, naturally, here the word “diagnostic” should be understood in context, in a figurative, metaphorical sense.) For example, you enter a store and pick up some new educational book, browse through its pages, and then read more slowly, unavoidably performing some kind of “internal diagnostic” as you do so, with regard to its content or lack thereof, its cleverness or lack thereof, and so on. And if your internal “fluoroscope” diagnoses some level of novelty, cleverness, or newsworthiness in this book, there is a good chance you will buy it, no matter how expensive it might be. And you are more likely to purchase a book of belles lettres if your spirit “rises” to it. In other words, if there is some emotional, aesthetic, or reflective response. But in exactly the same way, the book is diagnosing you. For example, if we cast aside some book as self-evident drivel and nonsense, this may also indicate that we have simply not matured sufficiently for the book.

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ALEXANDER LOBOK

Preschool Education Bullied

An Experiment in Establishing a Dialogue with a Kindergarten Educator

This chapter represents my work with educators as a part of my consulting in the Sakha Republic of Yakutia in 2005. A professional debate about educational philosophy and values is among the most difficult discussions because deep down it is not purely an intellectual but rather an ontological debate involving the hidden concerns and aspirations of practicing educators. In this chapter, I document and reflect on my professional dialogue with a particular educator whose educational philosophy has been radically different from mine. My analysis suggests that a genuine dialogue about conflicting educational values is possible when educators delve deeply into their ontological roots. This dialogue can open a new eventful space of contact, in which educational values can be dialogically reconsidered.

English translation © 2013 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Russian text, “Doshkol’noe obrazovanie pod shkol’nym pressingom: Opyt postroeniia dialoga s pedagogom detskogo sada.” This is a fragment from the book *Almaznaia zemlia pedagogiki Olonkho: Opyt pedagogicheskogo eposa* [The Diamond Land of Olonkho Pedagogy: An Essay in Pedagogic Epos]. It was created on the basis of a dictaphone recording of my actual consulting work with a rather large group of educators from Yakut schools and kindergartens in spring 2005 at a republic-wide competition (in the Sakha Republic of Yakutia) for innovative educational projects. I was consulting with the Ministry of Education of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to select innovative educational programs. Around fifty participants assembled in the hall, all comers were welcome to submit their respective projects, and I attempted to understand the significance of the project and laid out my own comments in this regard. The consultation was done in public, and the hall listened attentively and with great intensity to each successive dialogue, while I would request “help from the audience” from time to time, and involve willing participants in the discussion.

Translated by Alex Lane.

The argument over educational values is always the most difficult educational dispute, and no exceptionally logical argumentation will help in such a dispute, because the arguing sides proceed from obviously different premises. So is it actually the case that professional dialogue is not possible in this situation? It turns out that it is.

And the basis of such dialogue is, again, one thing: a thorough and honest adaptation of educational ontological reality, which is what educators do, in fact.

And then the initial dissonance of axiological positions gradually gives way to understanding, and to the identification of actual emotional trigger points and problem areas.

But only if everything is done aboveboard.

And again, I cannot fail to note the unique quality of the Yakut even in such a situation.

I have in mind the readiness of educators to engage in a frank discussion.

And so, this educator comes to you, promoting an “innovative educational program” with a collection of some theoretical clichés that, as it seems to said educator, exactly describe his or her educational credo. And your first perception is that you and this person have diametrically opposed positions, that this person thinks and plans in some completely different value framework. It is as if you are living on different educational continents and speaking completely different languages, incapable of mutual understanding. That your respective ideas of “good” and “bad” do not align because what you think is “good” is not any kind of educational “good” to your interlocutor, while your educational “bad” does not resemble the “bad” of your counterpart. After all, it is so easy to agree with the visiting professor of education (me), to nod one’s head in agreement, to create the appearance of understanding as, after all, it would seem we are in obviously unequal weight classes, for I represent not only a professional authority of educational science for this educator, but I am also the potential “gatekeeper” of the innovative program this educator is offering.

It is immeasurably harder for an educator to “take it” and stubbornly stand up for his or her truth under such conditions.

But only in such a case, if it takes place, is it possible to rise to the truth—to what is hidden behind the individual “truths” of arguing interlocutors.

Therefore, the only thing I can depend upon in such discussions is to demonstrate my position and throw in some seeds of doubt, in the hope that after some time, they will germinate in my interlocutor’s soul.

This is what I attempt to do in the conversation presented below.

How to start thinking pedagogically, or how not to ruin the child’s experience

The main question that concerns the woman I am speaking with is how to prepare the preschool child for school. However, in her opinion, the misfortunes

that befall the child who enters school are rooted in not having formed the skill to think conceptually and abstractly during the preschool years.

In any event, that is just how the problem was stated initially.

The main question of preschool education, contended my interlocutor, is not how to develop the child's own experience in life and understanding life as I think is important. It is not how to develop the child's individuality. And it is not how to develop the child's imagination and fantasy. It is how to create, in children, certain general thinking skills that will subsequently aid in successful academic instruction.

*A child's thinking—after all, it begins at a preschool age, is that not so? And we, in our kindergarten, when we begin to work with children, first think about what can be done so the child will later do well in school and think in abstract concepts, using logic. I believe the root of all later academic problems lies in providing knowledge during the preschool years. And if the child begins to compare, synthesize, understand, and generalize at the age of four, the child will later be a better student in school. For that reason, we must teach the child all of this, provide the necessary package of knowledge, develop cognitive interests in various types of activities, and then by the age of five, the child can be prepared, based on his or her own limited experience, to make use of proofs and much else.**

However, this formulation of the question is one with which I resolutely cannot agree. I cannot agree with this rather prevailing conviction that the key to the child's educational success lies in the knowledge and skills that we have embedded in the child during the preschool years. Unfortunately, as concerns the child's development, such a linearly naive notion does not work. However, it is incredibly difficult to explain why. How do you explain that a child is not a machine that we load with information, but an independent actor that is living his or her own life? How do you explain that development is not linear at all, does not proceed from the "lesser" to the "greater," and that different development strategies apply at different ages? Finally, how do you explain that even among children of the same age, taught under the same educational conditions, development will occur along completely different paths, and that this is not bad, and ultimately is the only source of the main thing of interest in the human world, which is its variety? How to explain all of this when someone is proceeding based on a completely different educational philosophy and understands the very essence of human development in a completely different manner?

Let me ask you to pause, if I may? Now, you said that at the age of five, a child's own experience is small and limited. But in fact, at the age of five, a child's experience is already huge. And not only that, the experience of one's own life and the knowledge worked out independently based on this personal experience, significantly exceeds the child's knowledge of the experience of others—that is,

*Italicized extracts represent the interlocutor's statements; extracts in roman font are Alexander Lobok's.—Ed.

the ready knowledge that the child receives from without. During this period, the child predominantly lives by his or her own experience.

And yet, we educators normally do not take much note of this experience. We only think about how to teach the child something from without, how to give the child some ready knowledge, and not at all how to learn to describe one's own life experience. Yet life experience is always one's own and unborrowed. From birth, a human lives by his or her own experience, observes that experience, and develops some personal knowledge and understanding of life based on that experience.

Right now, at this very minute, in this hall, several dozen people are observing our conversation. Moreover, each has his or her own experience. It is as if everybody shares the same space, but everybody's experience is different! That is because each has his or her own experiences and perceptions of the situation. One person sees and understands one thing; another person, something else. Everyone has a unique point of view, everyone is placing unique points of personal emphasis on the proceedings. And in relating what happened in this hall to friends and acquaintances, everyone will tell his or her own story.

But for quite some time, a child generally requires nothing more than his or her own experience. The experience of one's own life is the main thing that every child possesses. That the child does not know how to describe this personal experience is something else again. But everything is alive inside the child. And all of this is a great deal.

I say, philosophize, yet clearly see that my interlocutor does not find my discourse on the value of the child's individual experience very interesting. She is overly animated by the inner picture she has developed of the linear development vector of children's consciousness from "incorrect" to "correct" forms. And instead of proceeding to tell about her day-to-day educational experience, tell about what specifically she is doing with her children, she theorizes. More accurately, she relates to me those theoretical postulates on whose basis, as it appears to her, she has built her educational praxis.

But day-to-day educational praxis is never built on the basis of theoretical postulates. It is built on the basis of educational intuition and day-to-day observation of a specific child. And theoretical explanations and interpretations are what occur later, much later.

However, in listening to what my partner in the conversation is saying, I am still hearing only a general discussion of what she would like, not any specific description of what she is actually doing in her day-to-day educational praxis. And without a specific description of this day-to-day praxis, no expert evaluation is possible. And the general theoretical discussions that my partner is filled with are more likely to interfere with than help in discerning the crux of the matter.

I look at my partner and I can hear her enthusiasm, and I have no doubt¹ that in her day-to-day relations with her preschoolers, she is far from fixated on the early formation of abstract thinking, as she is currently attempting to assure me. However, in thrall to her own "project ideology," she is trying to describe and explain the content of her activity in just this way; the main thing we can do for a

four-year-old, she says, is to teach him to “compare, synthesize, understand, and generalize,” so that later, in school, he or she can “categorize better.”

I do not want to hide the fact² that I consider this to be a completely false and, in addition, an extremely dangerous conception of the objectives of preschool education. Yet on the other hand, I also understand³ that this is not at all the personal position of the person I am conversing with, that many hundreds of her colleagues think along similar lines, and that this position is fed by a varied array of methodological developments and guidelines.

This is the situation of false theoretical denotations obligingly tossed to the educator by educational science. For example, take the postulate in which some specific thinking operations are established as an absolute priority for preschool development, where the entirety and naturalness of children’s development is replaced by operational training in separate thinking qualities, where this specifically is viewed as the gauge of successful academic instruction, where the child’s own experience in life is no longer important, where linear educational logic dominates, in which the natural path to prepare for the difficulties of formal education is to start that education as early as possible.

Yet I have no doubt (from my own difficult personal experience understanding education and culture) that the ideological framework within which my interlocutor is thinking requires significant revision, and I understand that shattering this framework in my interlocutor’s consciousness will be no easy task, because the explanatory schemes in which we believe are exceptionally strong. And I, as an expert, must apply considerable effort in order to, first, hear and make out what it is that, in fact, represents the innovative educational experience of the person I am speaking with, and second, I must endeavor to bring about its theoretical understanding and interpretation.

In addition, judging by the enthusiasm with which my interlocutor is sharing her theoretical considerations on the essentials of children’s development, she actually does have some important educational experience, about which she is enthusiastic. And if a teacher is enthusiastic about something, it means that in fact, he or she has made some kind of important personal discovery.

What remains is only to really listen and find my bearings, to understand what, in fact, is the educational discovery that has inspired my interlocutor.⁴

The pedagogy of signs

I myself have read certain works that say the following: if we have not formed some kinds of skills in the child by the age of five years, it will be too late to do so later. All of our lapses at this age will lead to a bad outcome later. This means that if we do not develop logical, abstract thinking in the child by the age of five, the child will not be able to solve algebra problems in fifth and sixth grade. After all, that is when all kinds of terminology are introduced and, for example, things are designated using the letter x. That is why I think it is necessary to teach a child how to operate with reference symbols during the preschool years—using

materials that are understandable to the child, of course—for example, the content of a story, in such a way so that the child can tell the story and, at the same time, operate with abstract symbols. And at four years of age, our child will be able to tell a story like this. For example, relating the story of the “Wolf and the Seven Young Kids”⁵ and drawing it using circles as it is told—that is, the mother is represented by a large circle, the young kids, by small circles . . . We play out this story with the children and the children happily repeat it, replacing the characters with symbols. . . . For it has long ago been proven that by the age of one or two years, the child will already take any object, wrap it in a handkerchief, and rock it like a doll. And this must be nurtured in children, this ability to use surrogates in play—for example, a stick to represent a doll—as opposed to an actual doll . . .⁶

At this point, I must say something:

But it is not a surrogate! Why a surrogate? The child is playing with the stick exactly as with a doll. And to a child, a doll is also not a “surrogate” for a living being—it is a living being. Because the child uses his or her imagination to animate and give the doll a spirit, not because the child sees some kind of abstract symbol acting as a surrogate for a real being . . .

My interlocutor, however, is relentless:

But in our understanding, the child specifically makes that substitution. . . . And the use of these surrogates leads to the development of abstract thinking.

Substitute symbols for living storybook characters? Br-r-r-r! If that is what actually happened, then nothing at all would remain of the living, magical world of the story. Fortunately, the imagination of a child four or five years of age can overcome any symbolic gimmicks introduced by adults preoccupied with “Developmental Education.” And the symbols drawn by the teacher do not replace the living characters at all, whatever my interlocutor might think along these lines.⁷

Nevertheless, on this point, we have a fundamental parting of our respective understanding of how children’s consciousness works.

For me, children’s consciousness is first of all a laboratory of the imagination that actively creates and gives life to the world. And it is precisely this laboratory of children’s imagination that, from my point of view, must primarily be developed during the preschool years.⁸ But for the educator I am speaking with, development of the ability, in the child’s consciousness, to engage in abstract schematism is seen as much more important.⁹ And this is a fundamental difference in worldview regarding what a child is, what the child’s consciousness is, and what the priorities should be for its development. This is a dispute over purposes of education, over prospects for education, and over reference points for educational influence on the child.

But it is not our individual dispute, it is my dispute with the whole of educational tradition, which my interlocutor represents (and possibly, is not herself aware of this being so). For this tradition, it is important to pace the development of the preschool child using tasks that approximate formal education and to begin, during the preschool years, to create what fails to be created once school age is reached. At the same time,

there is no confidence or interest in the natural processes of how children's thoughts are formed in day-to-day play and activity. It is as though thinking takes shape only when we dissect it into its operational elements and we create each of these operational elements by employing some special educational activity.

Stop, stop, stop! You are going way too fast! Are you sure that the abstract thought you are talking about is the most important thing that we can and must develop in a child of this age?

But it is there, in the child's nature! And if we work systematically, then . . .

But why do you need the child to think using this same process of abstract thinking?

How else? If it is developed in the child, he or she will be able to prove and compare "how come?" and "why?" But a child who learns to compare and generalize will more quickly find the right answer . . . And the child must be prepared and led to a point where he or she knows how to think abstractly, and not visually.

Of course, there is nothing criminal in the desire to somehow help establish the child's ability to think abstractly. All children acquire the ability to generalize and abstract as they mature. The only question is what educational points should be emphasized at what age, and will our desire to aid in the child's development always actually be a help and not a hindrance?¹⁰

And how is one to show the enthusiastic educator the dangers and risks of his or her selected path? If I begin to argue, it will not be of any use. Faith cannot be disproved by arguments at all. And the only possible path for the dialogue is to try to understand what, in fact, the person I am speaking with does in her work with children. Moreover, by her intonations and expressions, I can clearly hear that there is something really important and interesting lying hidden in what she does.¹¹ But what? And I am trying to lead the conversation from the plane of general theoretical discussions to that of educational specifics.

Very well. Let us press on. What happens later, after you tell the child the story using your circles? You have drawn the nanny goat as a big circle, and the young kids as small circles. Then what? What happens after you have drawn these circles?

I believe that the child, relying on these symbols, can subsequently make his or her story more complete.

And what does "more complete" mean?

The child's language becomes more imbued and the sequence of situations is enacted in more detail. For example, at the age of three, the child simply points to the circles and other various symbols and says, "Mama! Little kids! Cottage! Wolf!" I will not retell the tale. But at the age of five, the child can be taught to give an account of the plot progression by relying on these symbols.

Wow!

The essence of this proposed educational approach finally becomes clear.

The child is simply offered some number of graphical references so that, with their help, he or she can retell a story. Or use to retain, in memory, a story that he or she has thought up. This is a well-known and generally helpful mnemonic technique, which develops the memory and attention span. And I have no doubt that these kinds of symbolic props can actually help the preschool child reproduce the content of a story more accurately and in greater detail. But by the same token, I doubt that any fixed exposure to such a game of symbolic circles and squares will be of interest to a small child. But then what is this theoretical mystification involving the “formation of abstract thinking?”

In actuality, the educational theme being set forth by this educator consists in offering children a particular activity that may be defined as a special type of “proto-writing in signs.” A story is told, and is converted into a series of graphical signs then and there. And later, together with the child, these signs are “played back.” And this may actually be extremely fascinating, developing both the child and the teacher with play. This is what that educational discovery consists in, one that the teachers at this kindergarten are mastering.

And the educational ideology in which they are trying to set up their work is an ideology that does not tolerate any criticism.

This occurs frequently in practical education: some interesting educational process is devised, but then a completely incorrect and false theoretical setup is assigned to it. Afterward, the educator becomes hostage to theoretical schemes that, in actuality, explain nothing but create the illusion of explanation. And so it is, in our case, that kindergarten teachers are engaging in proto-writing with children, but interpret this as the formation of abstract thinking.

There is no doubt that play involving proto-writing is valuable. But only when we understand that the main thing about the thinking of the preschool child is that it is the product of imagination and of fantasy. And then proto-writing is a marvelous means that supports this product of imagination and fantasy. But if we push the idea of proto-writing in labels under the task of forming intellectual schematisms (which is what my interlocutor is attempting to do) or under the task of training a child’s ability to remember and retell, this may be fraught with losses in child development.

Why are stories needed?

In actuality, remembering and retelling are far from the most important thing that we can and should teach a child in the preschool period of life (if we view this from the position of modern educational values). It is by far more important to help the child develop an individuality in his or her view of the world and promote the imagination.

By the way, the original role of the story in the child’s educational establishment consists precisely in the story’s arousal of the child’s imagination and fantasy

and in promoting the child's feelings and experience. If we principally emphasize the schematization of the story and reproduction of its narrative outline, this may degrade the emotional experience of the story for the preschool child and suppress the activity that is so important to the child, that of creation. Because when a child simply listens open-mouthed to a story, it becomes imbued with the child's own images and experiences and unavoidably becomes its creator. And if we ask the child to relate a story that has just been heard, the child will not retell it—instead, it will be as if it were being composed anew. It is much more interesting to compose a personal version of the story, pushing away from the narrative that has been heard, than to reproduce it word for word. And this is the most important natural vector of educational child development during the preschool years.

However, I continue with my careful dialogue.

But won't the story perish as a result?

Of course it won't, on the contrary . . .

And yet, to be honest, from my experience teaching in school, I am well acquainted with how schematization of literary works often perishes when children learn how to identify plot lines, analyze the behavior of the characters, and . . . separate themselves from the actual literary text. They provide all of this on examinations, more or less retelling the plot in detail, but at the same time, these literary works remain completely undigested by them. Is there such a problem? I personally run into it on a regular basis. And that is what concerns me a great deal more than the child's inability to schematize anything. Because this is an issue of the priorities of our educational activity, which is to ask: what must be the main, driving thing in human development? Is it the ability to create schemes and reproduce themes or the ability to feel and empathize?

The second, of course, is the main thing . . .

And so we must very carefully approach situations such as yours, and understand what it is we are sacrificing when we are creating some skill in a three- or five-year-old child.

I believe you have misunderstood me. These are just references that allow the child to calmly, and without stumbling, retell something in order without using filler words. And then, using these references, the child can make the plot more complex. We have tried this even when the child has all manner of verbal impediments and this scheme actually helps. Relying on the scheme, the child can calmly and gradually, without hurrying, retell this story, knowing that he or she will not lose the narrative, and that the story will have some kind of ending.

Well, of course I misunderstood! And, of course, this is a completely different theme. Not about how the preschool child needs all sorts of schematisms to form "abstract thinking," but how we need to be able to help the child to perform such a complex scholastic task as retelling a story. And in this anything-but-simple task, the methodology of references is a very good way to help the child. But only if we do not confuse our emphasis, in the final analysis, and do not begin to struggle for

the formal correctness of the retelling of a story as a supreme educational value. If we do not forget that, in fact, the most important thing in working with the thinking process of a preschool child is to aid in the development of imagination, fantasy, and the ability to create.

What if the child's story has no ending as we understand it?

But it needs to have an end. And we without fail bring the child to this . . .

Exactly. The only question here is, are we not supplanting the child's thinking with our own at this point? And is what we understand to be an "ending" going to correspond to the child's internal impetuosity? Because it very often happens that we, with our correct schematizations and our logic (constructed using adult rules), suppress the creative activity of the child. Because the child's internal world is arranged using a completely different set of principles, a different set of laws!

So where are you bringing this? To a "logically valid" or reasonable finale? From the point of view of adult logic, this is really important. But as a rule, there is a completely different logic in a story created by a child.

Real storybook thinking is thinking filled with many unreasoned jumps and transitions. It is those transitions that are, in fact, the actual magic and wonder. When something occurs with a wave of a magic wand, because that is what you want and not because there is any kind of logical basis for it. And it is very important, during the preschool years, to develop precisely this children's ability to imagine freely and to fantasize freely.

The time for creating formal and logical thinking is yet to come. And then it will really be important to create all kinds of formally logical chains, to create cause-and-effect links between events. But now, at preschool age, it is much more significant to develop flights of fancy and thinking based on images. Because if at this age we neglect to work with free imagination, then this will really be a grievous loss, which cannot be recovered at any other age. And this is the basis for creativity, which in the life of a human is no less important than the ability to perform formal logic . . .

No, I have no objection to developing logical thinking in a three- or four-year-old child, but I am calling on you to exercise some caution, so that the emphasis on this same logical thinking not turn into the suppression of the child's ability to imagine freely. That imagination, which prefers to live illogically.

Besides, when the child begins to create his or her own stories, this is not done for adults. The child creates them for him- or herself.¹² And more often than not, the child creates some stories at times when we do not even suspect it is happening. For example, when children are absorbed in play with some small cars or other toys and are mumbling something under their breath, they are telling some story to themselves.¹³

In a normal child, something must occur along the lines of imagination while playing with toys. This involves a press of images, the actions of some heroes, and the child creates some kind of story. Although from the point of view of adults, this story may seem rather preposterous, with no beginning, with no end, and with some completely illogical transitions. But this is the living laboratory of children's imagination, which must not be subdued, but supported in every way.

And so, there is nothing bad about using some schemes and symbols to support children's imagination and memory. In fact, if we support children's speech using different kinds of symbolic props, aided by particular labels, and a unique form of proto-writing,¹⁴ this will actually help the child to remember, and to construct narratives, and to bring order to the operation of the imagination. As a method of working with children's consciousness, there is absolutely nothing bad about this path. And if my interlocutor had set her project objective specifically on this plane, everything would be remarkable.

But where we place emphasis (and not just educational!) is all-important.

And my interlocutor's unqualified emphasis is on the development, in preschool children, of abstract schematism (although she does not think of it as "schematism," it is, in fact, the creation of a certain formalism). And this is an extremely hazardous emphasis, because if specifically this is placed at the center of educational work with a child, if this is specifically seen as the strategic path for the development of children's consciousness during the preschool years, it may lead to results far from what she and her colleagues are expecting. An excessively early,¹⁵ excessively intense, and excessively goal-directed struggle to develop the child's ability to think abstractly may result in serious damage in completely different areas. For example, in the area of self-expression and daydreaming.

Observe that when we enter some unfamiliar area, our eyes begin to wander about this area, moving completely freely from one object to another, not following any predefined logic. There is no goal-directedness, no special interests at work here, only a free and open voyage through the new world.

So, for example, now I begin to examine the hall we are currently occupying, and suddenly, I begin to notice what I had not noticed before: the beautiful windows with the flaking paint, while over there, the flaking paint looks to me like a chick . . . Is there any logic in this free roving of my sight? None at all! What I see is completely situational, and not subject to any predefined logic.

And the preschooler looks at the world the same way. The preschooler's view of the world is not subject to any rigid logic, it simply draws various fragments from the world along a completely random path. The child simply rubbernecks from side to side, looking for something interesting. And yet the adult world is trying to strictly limit this behavior. "Don't look around! Listen to the adult museum guide!"

We bring the child to a museum and say, "Look to the left, there is such-and-such painting; look to the right, there is another painting." But all the child wants to do is look around!

But the child is told, "No rubbernecking!" And what happens as a result? The museum guide explains everything sequentially, in accordance with a previously devised plan, while at the same time suppressing the child's need to look around, to rubberneck, and to engage his or her unbridled curiosity. The child is being "formed" using previously devised adult logic, and as a result, the child loses the desire to visit the museum again.

A completely different story would unfold if the child were to be simply let into the museum and told, "Go in any direction and look for things you think are interesting! And ask any question you like, while I trot along behind and answer them!"

By the way, today “progressive” museums are increasingly doing just this. The children are dispersed among the exhibit halls and each one looks for something interesting, and then everyone gets together and each child tells about what he or she has found, and leads the group to the place where the interesting thing is located.

In other words, the children are sent off to look for what is interesting to them. They look around freely, and move about the museum without restriction, apart from any previously constructed logic.

And as a result, they find things and report them to others, and this captivates them. They become museum guides for each other. But at the same time, the movement from one exhibit item to another proceeds with no logic. And what? Is this bad?

In any event, this creates, in the child, a powerful interest in wanting to visit this museum again, because this kind of activity is experienced as the sphere of personal freedom, and not a sphere in which the self is coerced.

Naturally, the adult is not abolished in all of this. The task of the adult educator in organizing such an activity is to support, in every way, the cognitive initiative of the child, to respond to such initiative, and to “assemble” these free voyages.

Why are we so afraid of following children’s initiative and the whimsical nature of children’s cognition? It is because we are all intimidated by school.

And here is a child, three years old, and we think, “This child is going to have to study algebra in sixth grade!”¹⁶ And we begin to prepare the child for the ordeals of school in a goal-directed manner.

But that is what suppresses the child’s internal freedom and fills the child with academic anxieties. And as a result of our inadequate educational activity, the child gradually becomes afraid to “rubberneck,” and loses his or her random, exploratory curiosity. The child is stubbornly taught to view the world in an exclusively goal-directed manner, and as a result, the child stops viewing the world, and unbearable boredom sets in. And the preschooler who, yesterday, was open to a world of knowledge, gradually evolves into an adolescent who has lost any interest in learning.

Is this not a familiar story?

And exactly the same thing occurs when children tell their “incorrect” stories.

At some period in their lives, each child is ready to weave sequences of completely incredible and preposterous stories (from the point of view of adult logic) with great enthusiasm and without end. But spending our time constantly correcting these children’s stories from the perspective of logical correctness, does not lead to a good result. Of course, the child will learn to tell a story the way we want it done, but the child’s own creative activity will gradually fade away.

Yet perhaps it is better to determine what a child needs in this state and what makes sense to develop at this age? Perhaps it would be better to just listen attentively to the child? To observe, for a while, how the child plays? To listen attentively to what children mumble to themselves while playing? And to try to write down these naturally originating stories and tales just as the child comes up with them? Perhaps it is not worth hastening to correct naturally occurring children’s speech, however incorrect and illogical it may appear to us.

But we are not imposing anything on the child. We are simply telling some story, to the accompaniment of schematic drawings. And later, the child reproduces the narrative by relying on our reference points. And as a result, the child retells

the story quickly and confidently, without deviating from the narrative, but reproducing it to the letter.

Well, to me, that is proof positive of the child's suppressed creative energies. Because the norm for the child is to characteristically deviate from a given narrative and to think up his or her own plot twists and story lines. And then the child is prepared to tell the story endlessly, and in no way hastens to "quickly" relate its plot . . . The child does not follow the given plot, but his or her own imagination.

And at this instant—and I will admit, I was completely unprepared for this—my partner in the discussion suddenly becomes engrossed in thought. Doubt, and a question appear in her eyes.

So that is what I wanted to find out from you—is such a thing suitable in a kindergarten? At our kindergarten, many educators besides myself use this method when children are retelling stories and relying upon such diagrams. True, they later forget them anyway, but still, thanks to them they learn how to prove, generalize, and classify, in the final analysis.

But are you sure that they are learning to generalize and classify thanks to just these diagrams? It has yet to be proved that children who engage in such activity exhibit greater ability to generalize and classify than ordinary children.

For some reason, we very much like fooling ourselves, especially in the area of early childhood upbringing. There is a strong temptation to consider one's own educational efforts as responsible for any positive changes in a child! But what if we did not exert such efforts, would children not learn how to classify and generalize? Of would their ability to do so be less developed? The assertion that children will develop the ability to think abstractly if we play with these references is overly ambitious. What happens with the child with whom we do not play in this manner, will the child lack abstract thinking?

I have no doubt that kindergarten teachers can be captivated by such activity. And I also have no doubt that this is beneficial for both the child¹⁷ and for teachers. But as to what the actual effects of such activities may be, this is something we must ponder. Undoubtedly,¹⁸ such activities have some real effects, and these can be studied. But the question of whether abstract thinking is formed as a result is a special one, requiring thorough monitoring.

Praise of oddities

Yet our small experience shows that if no such windows, such references, are placed before a child, the child's speech does not develop as well and the child cannot confidently reproduce the events of a story.

Very well, let's try an experiment. Try to create a story using these references as we speak. You will write down your "references," while I write down the story itself.

*Okay, but just do not laugh. I am going to end up with something resembling small screens. And in the first of them, I am drawing a house . . .*¹⁹

Hang on a second! You have not begun to tell the story yet!

Well, okay, I will do it the way it occurs to me . . . In one of the houses that is on a beautiful . . . no, on the main street, there lived a family . . . And in this family, there were three generations of people . . . Oh! Now things will start to get odd! . . .

And why are you so concerned about oddity? A real story is far from being some melancholy academic tale. A real story is always full of absurdity, and it always violates logic. That is why a story is interesting! It is a story precisely because it is being told. And it is being told without any previously prepared plan. Any mother, any grandmother who makes a story up on the fly to her child is completely unafraid of any absurdity, because it is precisely such absurdity that the child particularly likes. And the child will enthusiastically come up with all sorts of absurdities on his or her own, because the child has no use at all for a harmonious plot or a logical structure; what is important is for the child's fantasy to be aroused and for it to start operating. And when mothers and grandmothers endlessly tell various stories to their children, they also do not fear oddities; they say what comes into their head and the final result is not distinguished by its logical coherence. But this does not disappoint the child at all. On the contrary, the more unexpected and illogical the twists, the more interesting the story.

In a broad sense, we professional educators are prepared—sometimes with unaccustomed ease—to snuff out the world of children's expectations for the sake of being able to create, in the child, the ability to make logical constructions. On the other hand, we always have “didactic goals and objectives,” with which we can account for ourselves in front of our auditing superiors. But does the child need our “didactic goals and objectives?” To confess honestly, among the various kinds of methodological handbooks for kindergarten teachers, what concerns me most is the unflinching conviction, on the part of their authors, that any game in which adults play with children must have clearly defined didactic goals and objectives. But day-to-day play and day-to-day stories are like life: always richer than any of our conscious goals and objectives. And only when a game or a story involves an array of uncountable future possibilities is it really of interest to a child. It is boring for children to play “didactic games,” it is boring to read “didactic stories,” and those games and stories that do captivate the child are not easily decomposed into didactic components.

Please note that as soon as we engage our “internal educational editor,” our stories immediately lose their magic and begin to sound like tame scholastic sentences. So the question is, what are we creating as a result? And what is valuable to us?

The main thing that you get is everything is in its place, everything is correct, and everything is logically set forth. Listen to your beginning, as if you are trying to construct everything in advance, and predict the plot of your story—a main street, the three generations—and I am already starting to perceive a correct, logically constructed text . . . But then it is no longer exactly a story.

Well, all right, let this be a tale . . .

Somehow, I have more faith in this. But originally, you said “a story!” And what is a story? A story is what is told. And moreover, told without any previously prepared plan.

Who among us has not experienced this state, when a small child is falling asleep, and we endlessly “spin” something, and we ourselves have no idea where this tale-telling will bring us.

Of course, a story may have some kind of outline, but we create a design from that outline based on our fantasy and inner freedom.

Naturally, this is if we are not reading a story from a book.²⁰ By turning to stories in books, we lose something valuable in our creative dialogue with children. We lose the freedom of our own improvisational art. Although today, parents always have the ability to take a ready-made story and begin reading it. Before, parents had to engage with their children in a completely different . . .

(a voice from the audience) They made them up themselves!

Absolutely right! They made them up themselves.

And the main thing about making stories up on your own is to release yourself to be free. Close your eyes, and let go.

Here, I will try to close my eyes right now and start to tell a story—I am just going to babble and tell some fantastic story without any plot or plan defined beforehand:

“Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Mashenka, and she went into the dark forest, where there lived terrible gray wolves, and these wolves had little fox friends, who went along with the wolves to the clearing and played all sorts of games. The foxes jumped onto the backs of the wolves, and the wolves would carry the foxes around the clearing on their backs . . .”

Now, someone will ask, “What kind of nonsense is this, what drivel?” But this is a story that begins to take shape right before our eyes. And so, as usually happens, when a mother sits next to a child who is drifting off to sleep and is making up some endless tale . . . all the mother has to do is to stop for just a second, and the child, half-asleep, will demand, “And then what happened?” And the mother will continue to spin her fairy tale further. And it is impossible to repeat such an improvised story. And there is no need to. Because every night, this story will branch off in a new direction, opening new possibilities and new plots.

By the way, before there were children’s books, that is what adults did. Mothers, and fathers, and grandmothers, and grandfathers. Some, better than others, but everyone did it. The main thing is that we not have internal inspectors and censors that ask strict questions, such as, “But where is the logic in your story?” “And what is the moral of your story?” And why is it so ridiculous?”

And when these fears—which control our freedom of self-expression—are absent and we are left alone with a small child, we ourselves become “childlike” and unafraid of fantasizing and creating. We are ready to say anything that comes to mind, without fear of someone laughing at our “silliness.”

And indeed, this is precisely what makes a child happy—our inner freedom. And even when we tell a familiar story, we presently think up something else and reinvent it. We relate anything that comes to mind, and the only goal we have in relating tales is that the child finds it interesting.

When the child is three years old, you are not afraid of the child as an editor. You can make up absolutely anything at all. And we let ourselves free. That is where stories are born! That is when the true storyteller in us is revealed, because a real storyteller is not afraid of his or her own freedom.

And by the way, that is exactly what classical tellers of tales do— they take

some well-known story and start out along its outline, and every time, tell the story in a new way.²¹ They absolutely do not repeat, word for word, what they had heard or related before. They start to expand the story in different directions, and this storytelling of theirs can go on forever. And the same thing is true for a small child—if we have not yet convinced the child that a story must have a logical plot, a reasonable end, and so on, the child engages his or her imagination with incredible facility and will literally swim in that personal imagination.

It is curious, that at the time our conversation is taking place, I have not yet heard about tellers of *olonkho*, the epic sagas of the Yakut people, or about the underlying improvisational character of the Yakut language, but in my reflections on the improvisational nature of the story, I am absolutely pinpointing a trigger point in the Yakut educational situation, where the deep-seated and educationally precise traditions of ethnic culture come up against the dead guidelines and templates of educational science, which have been imposed on preschool education through a system of so-called “development programs.”

How to prepare the child for school?

Thank you for your discourse. Possibly we do overload the children . . . Perhaps instead of assigning such tasks on an ongoing basis, we should do so less often, so that the child knows that one can work with such conventions . . .

And perhaps we might not start with assignments at all, but with something else?

But it is in the Venger development programs,²² and other programs also do so. . . . You should understand that we are under pressure from our colleagues in the primary schools, who keep admonishing us all the time, “It would be good if the kindergarten prepared children for school.” They say there should be some continuity. But now, I understand that this is nevertheless unacceptable, that this overloads the child.

It is not that this is “overload,” but that it is not at all a way to prepare children for school!

Here it is, the key moment in our conversation! Here is the real problem that has made its appearance in the words of my interlocutor. Here is what she is really concerned about. Not children’s thinking—in that area, she is prepared to accept it the way it is, as it turns out—but pressure on the teacher “from above” and “from below.”

Both the school and the parents exert pressure on the kindergarten. And the problem that actually torments my interlocutor and her colleagues is not one of preschool education, but formal education, an education that establishes false objectives, fails to achieve them, and then attempts to shift responsibility for its failure on preschool institutions—Hey! they are the ones at fault for sixth-graders not being able to deal with algebra problems!

All of preschool education is subject to this psychological bullying, and it is the source of the many fears that strike at educators at the preschool level.

But then what, in actuality, should a child’s preparation consist of to enter

school, and what, on the other hand, should the school do to prepare itself for the child's entrance?

And so I appeal to the audience for help. I appeal to those educators sitting in the room, who have followed this conversation—what qualities are exhibited by a child who is ready to enter primary school? And the audience absorbedly joins the conversation.

Let's give this some thought together... what is a child who is ready for school? It's not at all a child who has been taught to count or knows how to read. It's a child who...

Is independent! (outcries from the audience)

Independent, of course.

Active!

Noted.

Inquisitive!

Great!

Merry!

Free!

And how can you tell—let's say two children come to you—how can you tell which of the two is better (or less) prepared to enter school? How would you identify this independence, activity, and inquisitiveness?

You need to get to know them!

That is both deep and exactly right. No psychologist is required to do an evaluation. No tests need be performed. You do not have to assess skills and abilities. You simply have to get to know them, in a free and natural setting. And by "simply getting to know them," to understand the child's assets, individualities, and needs. This is precisely what an experienced educator does, relying on his or her own assessment of the child, on his or her own experience and intuition, and not on any kind of process diagnostic.

In fact, that is correct. We can understand quite a lot about a child by simply observing and getting to know the child. Only it is important to understand that, at the same time, particular attention must be paid. For example, how does the child manifest his or her freedom and independence? To what extent is the child's curiosity constructive and durable?

We can posit the following experiment. Specially organize a particular space that is filled with many interesting things—different kinds of games, books, computers, pictures, every type of mysterious knick-knack, and so forth. And then our preschool child is introduced into this unfamiliar place for the first time. How the child behaves in this space, how the child finds his or her bearings and examines things, what turns out to be of interest to the child (and how), and how

the child reacts (and to what)—all of this may provide invaluable information about this child.

Will it tell us how ready the child is to productive primary school education? Well, the whole point is not simply to plant the child at a desk. The whole point is for learning to be interesting to the child. And this means we must see where and how the child manifests activity, independence, inquisitiveness, and those other qualities that are so necessary for successful learning in school. Those qualities that demonstrate the child's actual development, and suggest that the child is ready to engage in active cognitive activity in an academic setting.

My interlocutor takes the floor again:

On the one hand, yes, we agree—the child should develop. But on the other hand, the school, what objectives does it set for us “preschoolers”? We have top-ranked and non-top-ranked kindergartens, and the ones ranked at the top are precisely those kindergartens that set specific ZUN objectives.²³ And children who develop innovatively, free children, they go to school and do nothing but complain. Which means they complain about us. “Your children do not know how to sit still!” “They do not know how to read!” And believe me when I say that such evaluations are typical, these days!

You are absolutely correct. And in fact this is a great problem. The school is all too often unprepared for the entry of children who are actually well-developed.²⁴

A developed child is one that requires a developed teacher. A teacher who is prepared to meet the inquisitive activity of children, to face children's questions, to deal with children's initiative, with children's creativity, and with children's individuality].

Unfortunately, however, our teachers are far from always ready for this, preferring well-behaved children who lack initiative, because it's easier to achieve the lifeless pedagogical objectives of ZUNs [knowledge, skills, and habits—Russian pedagogical jargon—Ed.] this way.

The free child—and let me stress, not the unrestrained child, but specifically a free child—is one who has a lot of questions for the world. This is a child who has a great desire to explore the world. And it is a child who necessarily creates certain problems for the school teacher.

Because what is an academic program? It is something that has been specially devised, in advance, to give the teacher some support. And the more active, the more lively, the more interesting the child—the more developed the child—the more he or she will come into conflict with the standard program, because the child will be asking questions all the time!²⁵

And this will be a test of the teacher's educational groundedness.

Is the teacher prepared to work with the personality, independence, cognitive interest, and self-actualization of the child? Is the teacher prepared to develop the cognitive interests of the child? If the answer is yes, the child will be educated. Otherwise, the child's educational impulses will fade very soon and education will become, for such a child, nothing but a drag and a headache.

The traditional school dreads children's questions because such questions muddle things up. Children's questions lead to a place that exists in parallel with the lesson plan. It is much simpler to follow the previously prepared lesson plan!

But if we orient ourselves to a child who is independent, enterprising, free, and active, this will be a child who constantly creates problems for us. This child will ask questions that have no answer. This child will dream up situations that have no clues as how to solve them . . .

And that is why the more talented the child,²⁶ the more talented the teacher must be, because you cannot work with a talented child using a prepared plan.

That is why traditional school dreads everything that we together consider to be factors indicating readiness to enter school—activity, independence, and inquisitiveness—giving preference instead to the ability to sit still, remain quiet, and promptly obey instructions. And many school teachers actually want to be handed well-behaved, meek students who obey promptly. Students with developed skills, who know how to read, write, and count . . . And who do not ask unnecessary questions! So that everything goes calmly, comfortably, and without any headaches.

But this is not a problem of the *child* not being prepared to enter school, but one of the *school* not being prepared for the entry of developed, inquisitive, and active children.

And this is a completely different view of the problem of continuity between kindergarten and primary school.

And for me, personally, the question is not that the kindergarten should obediently fit the child to some preplanned academic standard, but that the school learn to effectively interact with children's initiative, inquisitiveness, and freedom.

That is what is, for me, a real triggering point in your project. Thank you for our conversation, and for your persistence in advocating your position, which has enabled us to formulate all of these problems.

Notes

1. EM: I wonder what made you so sure then? What did you hear in what or how she was talking about that gave you this belief? Can you elaborate on that please?

AL: Well, we will begin with the idea that *any* educator who *actually* interacts with children on a day-to-day basis does something significantly more interesting and comprehensive than that educator is capable of describing and interpreting with regard to his or her own activity. This is simply because day-to-day praxis is always richer than any theoretical hypotheses. And this is particularly true of day-to-day praxis when interacting with children. This is praxis that requires the educator to respond to the situation every minute, based on a set of immediate factors, and not at all to some ideologized educational plan. And over the years, I have not yet met a single educator (including myself) whose actual praxis was not much richer and more interesting than the way he or she understands and interprets that praxis. Thus, my "I have no doubt" may be interpreted as my *a priori faith* in the educator. But in addition, there is the hard-won knowledge that if some educators actually did work to the dictates of those educational imperatives in whose absolute power they so devoutly believe, their actual interaction with children would not last fifteen minutes. And, in addition, there is real enthusiasm, the really feverish eyes of my interlocutor, that suggest there is some day-to-day educational reality that she experiences with the children, although she attempts to explain and interpret this using false theoretical constructs.

EM: OK, I found it a few paragraphs below starting with the words, "Yet, I have no doubt . . ." Thanks.

AL: To me, "having no doubt" denotes the *hard-won nature* of some insight, and further,

an indication of some irreducible value reference points, essentially, a question of the sum of some intellectual and moral imperatives that specify a kind of “baseline” for our perception of the world. In other words, we may speak of the sum of strategic mythologemes of human consciousness, that is, those mythologemes that define the outermost boundaries of perceiving and evaluating various events and processes. For me, a person is essentially a mythological being in *his or her fundamental principles*. I write about this in great detail in my *The Anthropology of Myth*, to which I have referred several times before.

2. EM: From her?

AL: Yes, including from her.

3. EM: Can you elaborate on why you could not just say to her, “You are wrong because of this and this?”

AL: It is not so simple. To say “You are wrong” is the same thing as saying nothing at all. That is because—let me say this again—this is not my interlocutor’s personal problem or wrong belief, but one of the most widespread pitfalls of mass educational consciousness, and so the task here is (a) to attempt to reconstruct the *basis* for this kind of understanding, and (b) to attempt to find, *among the actions of my interlocutor*, a basis for *overcoming* this kind of understanding.

4. EM: I wonder how your work with this educator was similar to and different from your work with your students (of what, in my own work, I call “an orientation toward collegueship” vs. “an orientation toward learnership”). Can you please elaborate on that briefly at some point in your essay?

AL: There is, essentially, one fundamental difference: with educators, I am working in a professional field and in a field of intellectual reflection, and for this reason, I am much more concerned by what may tentatively be called “the search for the truth.” For example, when interacting with children of preschool or early primary school age, I never “argue about basics” and try to minimize (if not “reduce to zero”) my need for intellectual interpretations of the unfolding processes and creating a predominantly *mythological discourse* with them. As concerns older students and adults, the existence of various intellectual interpretations and conflict and dialogue between them forms a strategic foundation for the educational process. This is discussed in detail in my *The Anthropology of Myth*.

5. EM: A fairy tale by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids”; see www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm005.html.

6. EM: It reminds me of Vygotsky, Elkonin, and Davydov.

AL: I would call it “influenced by” Vygotsky. Vygotsky himself goes more subtly and deeply into this. In Vygotsky, this is a general theoretical step toward considering child’s play with objects and toys as, for the child, simultaneously the establishment of symbolic reality and of symbolic structures. And it is hard to object to this. But then, this general theoretical statement “takes shape,” as it were, in routine educational activity, and we immediately achieve something that is clearly intellectually vulgar and tasteless (for which Vygotsky himself, naturally, is not responsible).

7. EM: Unfortunately, this idea penetrated many U.S. classrooms through the work of Vygotsky and Davydov. I saw a video of a U.S. Montessori school where a teacher does exactly that (see, American Montessori Society and Educational Video, *Imagine a School: Montessori for Elementary Age Children* [Yellow Springs, OH: Educational Video, 1994]).

8. EM: Vivian Paley, a great contemporary American preschool educator, has similarly defined children’s consciousness by the three Fs: “fantasy,” “fairness,” and “friendship” (see, “The importance of Fantasy, Fairness, and Friendship in Children’s Play: An Interview with Vivian Gussin Paley,” *American Journal of Play*, 2009 [Fall], pp. 121–38; available at www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/2-2-interview-paley-fantasy-fairness-friendship.pdf).

9. EM: As if a child is a machine of processing information!

10. EM: For me, this is the key, not “child’s age” and not “pedagogical ascents.”

11. EM: This is a *very* important point in my view, distinguishing our Critical Ontological Dialogic Pedagogy approach from, say, the Socratic method.

12. EM: And probably often other kids? And also for adults but for adults the way kids imagine us. What do you think?

AL: It goes without saying. And yet, a large part of a child’s imaginative effort is not intended to be vocalized to anyone. A great deal of imaginative effort takes place internally for one’s own purposes. I write a lot about this, incidentally, in my book *The Mapping of Internal Childhood*, for example, in comments on the memoirs of Daniil Zhukovsky or Stanislav Lem.

13. EM: This is a very interesting but contested point, in my view. I wonder if what the child mumbling to him/herself belongs to the genre of a story (i.e., narrative) or is much closer to a videogame or it should be defined as its own genre that is not well studied and described yet. What do you think?

AL: To be sure, when I am writing and thinking of children’s imagination, I do not have in mind, in the least, imagination that is necessarily presented as narrative whatsoever! I do not at all have in mind a “story about what has been imagined.” And that is the entire point—the child’s imagination is at work for a long time before the child learns to verbalize this imagination to any extent. The child *imagines*, which is to say, *generates images*, and the task of converting even a small portion of these images into words is a completely different task. For example, I still remember snippets of some of my own childhood dreams, but these are just poor snippets, because my actual dreams were (I remember this well) incredibly rich, multilayered, and had complex narratives, but at that time I did not have the power to verbalize (which means to “anchor” them in memory) even one-thousandth of these dreams, and so they faded away. . . . And in just this way, what has remained is only a pale shadow of those incredibly vivid experiences that accompanied all games, because at that time I simply did not have the language to relate these incredibly vivid fantasy experiences to anyone. And they all gradually dissolved and faded away, “like a dream, like the morning fog.” As concerns narration, this is a very late genre, both in the history of culture and in child development (see *The Anthropology of Myth* on this subject). For that unrestricted imaginative link, which internally accompanies any children’s game, to be transformed into narrative text—into a “story”—requires the passage of an entire cultural and psychological epoch in the child’s development (commensurate in scale to that cultural and psychological revolution that precedes the appearance of narrative in the history of human culture).

EM: By the way, I think Piaget was wrong in describing it as egocentric speech. Rather, as I have claimed in one of my papers, Piaget himself was adultocentrist (Eugene Matusov and Renée Hayes, “Sociocultural Critique of Piaget and Vygotsky,” *New Directions in Psychology*, vol. 18, nos. 2–3 [2000], pp. 215–39).

AL: I again stress that here I am referring to the effort of imagination, which is not manifested at all in speech; of that effort of imagination that is, sooner, *hidden* behind the verbal utterances of the child than manifested by such verbal utterances. I am not speaking of the child’s speech or of the child’s verbal behavior, which may be a subject of study for a psychologist. I am referring to a stream of images that are necessarily hidden from all external observers, to which the child cannot even begin to give voice. Having attained adulthood, we can recollect those image streams and even slightly attempt to verbalize them in hindsight (as is done by the hero of my *The Mapping of Internal Childhood*), but at the same time we must accept that the greater portion of those streams from our childhood imagination will never be able to be constructed. It is to be hoped that, having attained adulthood, we will be able to verbalize one-millionth of those imaginative streams that permeated our consciousness during our preschool years and gave our existence a feeling of surprising fullness.

14. EM: I wonder if this focus on writing implicitly sees orality as a deficit. However,

oral cultures have developed their own mnemonics often through poetic organization of narratives. What do you think?

AL: Actually, the nature of written speech and the origin of written language in culture is of no greater interest to me than the origin of human imagination and preliterate cultures. In any event, *The Anthropology of Myth* is devoted mostly to the occurrence of human culture per se, and consequently, to the occurrence of culture in its preliterate forms. As concerns the term “deficit” with respect to a culture, I see in this a serious risk of failing to understand that any culture manifests itself as an organic whole and fundamentally cannot be measured using the standards of another culture.

15. EM: Again, in my view, the main problem here seems not to be in the young age of the children but in an orientation toward imposing decontextualized, deontologized, disinterested schemes rather than listening to and supporting children’s (or adults’) imagination, play, self-expression, self-actualization, and vision of the world. But I agree with you that this problem is especially dangerous for younger children who may have a low armory of defenses against this harmful imposition. What do you think?

AL: I agree with you 100 percent in this regard. Schematizing and eviscerating thinking is a terrible hazard at any age. I would say that overall, this is the most dangerous civilizational hazard, where people interact with each other using learned intellectual schemes, and not at all using their own vision and content. And this “foundation of strength” that allows the self to be retained and cultivated with respect to all external schematisms, is established, naturally, precisely during the preschool years.

16. EM: Yes! I wonder why people so often use algebra for their imposition of dead schematism and formalism?! Any ideas?

AL: I think this “horror of algebra” is the contrivance of people who, in their own time, never learned to derive pleasure from mathematics, as well as those who do not understand that, basically, mathematics is a game of imagination and fantasy, as well as those who were mathematically traumatized in school by teachers for whom mathematics was a means of self-assertion and of humiliating children, and not a means of personal dialogue and dialogical development.

17. EM: I am not so sure. Where exactly and seriously do you see its benefits? Can you elaborate?

AL: I think *any* game in which an educator is *truly captivated* will be of some use to a child, if for no other reason than to see an adult truly captivated by something. It is a shame if, when this happens, the child is not exposed to other adults captivated by other games . . .

18. EM: Why “undoubtedly?” Just a few paragraphs above you expressed your doubts. Can you reply?

AL: My doubts actually concerned something somewhat different. First, the actual interpretation of this game as a way for forming abstract thinking, as well as the guideline that development of this kind of activity should be principal during preschool age. And if we free ourselves of rigid schematism, this could be a fully substantial game, capable of developing a dialogue between an adult and the child in the latter’s imagination space.

19. EM: Great collective testing of pedagogical ideas! This is what I think Bakhtin probably meant by “internally persuasive discourse” (M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991]).

20. AL: Any “by-the-book” story is, after all, not a personal improvisation, but a progression through a prepared text. A book story is often an oral story that has been *written down* and is now in *written form* by virtue of the fact that it can be reproduced word for word, while oral culture always presupposes a greater range of improvisation.

21. EM: My illiterate grandma did it all the time, which drove many of my literate relatives crazy.

22. EM: Alexander Venger is a famous Soviet educational and developmental psychologist, a colleague of Davydov.

AL: The problem is that this is commonplace for *all* “developmental programs” in Russian kindergartens— develop, and do not think about the child’s own substance, but about what skills the child will need in school and then engineer the development of the preschool child for school. I have a not altogether bad chapter on this subject, titled “Exile from Childhood,” in my book *The Stochastic World*.

23. EM: ZUN—“knowledge, abilities, and skills”—are Soviet and Russian educational standards created for all children of the same age by educational experts without being tailored to individual children and circumstances.—Ed.

24. EM: Yes, the question has to be changed from “whether a child is ready for the universal school” to “whether a particular school is ready for a particular student.”

25. EM: Yes. Some educational research in the United States shows that many conventional teachers are more afraid of their students’ being “off-script” (when students are engaged in the teacher’s learning activity in ways unexpected by the teacher) than being “off-task” (when students do not engaged in the learning activities designed by the teacher) (e.g., Mary M. Kennedy, *Inside Teaching: How Classroom Life Undermines Reform* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005]).

26. EM: I believe that all children and all people are talented.

AL: As a general inference, in terms of their potential, yes. But in reality, one has occasion to deal with children who generally and with pleasure “fit into the standard,” as well as children who recklessly resist any fitting into any standard. And very often, this is a category of “difficult” children who are particularly talented.

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