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# KONSTANTIN DMITRIEVITCH USHINSKY

(1823-71)

*Miroslav Cipro*<sup>1</sup>

## **A synthetic approach**

What we regard as ‘classical’ can be described as something that originated in the past but has retained its importance up to the present day. Thus, regardless of its age, we still seek in the classical a source of valuable inspiration indicating the approach to be adopted to current problems. In this respect, education has also had its classics, such as Comenius, Diesterweg, Fröbel, Locke, Makarenko, Montessori, Pestalozzi, Rousseau and other great theoreticians.<sup>2</sup> Among them, a prominent place is occupied by the famous Russian educationist K.D. Ushinsky. If one of the unmistakable signs characterizing every exceptional scientist is a multitude of enthusiastic disciples, adherents and followers, then Ushinsky was a truly exceptional personality in the field of the educational sciences: the number of his followers and admirers is legion. One of his most talented disciples, Modzalevsky, said that, just as Lomonosov was the embodiment of Russian science, Suvorov a representative of leadership in war, Pushkin the greatest national poet and Glinka a composer of genius, Ushinsky was an incarnation of the ideas of nineteenth-century Russian education.

This comparison does not exaggerate Ushinsky’s significance, for the role of education and its theory is certainly no less important than that played by science and art. On the contrary, its quality influences the standard of these other valuable human activities. And Ushinsky was, indeed, the most important Russian national educationist of the nineteenth century. Naturally, Russian educational thought of that period can boast such other outstanding personalities as the revolutionary democrats Gercen, Bielinsky, Czernishevsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev, the physician Pirogov or the famous writer Leo Tolstoy.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, they only gave passing attention to education. Ushinsky was the only one who, from his thirtieth year onward, pursued questions of education and teaching as a full-time occupation. That is why the Gruzinian educationist J. S. Gogebashvili, appreciating his all-round erudition and exceptional creative gift, called him ‘the patriarch of Russian pedagogy’. He was also called the teacher of Russian teachers, the friend of the Russian child, the founder of the Russian primary school, and the father of Russian scientific teaching. His other ardent followers, V. Ostrogorsky and D. Semyonov, writing about him in 1889, used the following prophetic words: ‘The more our educational literature develops and the more Russian education improves, the greater the importance of Ushinsky will grow.’ Academician V.P. Pitiemkin, the first President of the Academy of Educational Sciences of the USSR, made the following statement about him: ‘Ushinsky belongs not only to the past. He is still a living force in our own time.’

These views of the influence of Ushinsky’s personality on Russian and Soviet education are widely shared. On the basis of surveys of 100 selected synthetic works from different areas of world

educational literature, Ushinsky is considered to rank among the twenty most prominent educationists of all time and in all countries of the world. In the USSR he is, after Lenin and Makarenko, the third most frequently quoted author in educational literature.

It is thus understandable that the prestige of Ushinsky is bound to increase at the international level as the relevance of his work to contemporary problems is recognized. In fact, some ostensibly new fields of education were anticipated by him more than a century ago. At that time comparative education was hardly spoken of, but in fact Ushinsky was already intensely interested in it as can be seen in his comparison of Western European education with the situation prevailing in Russia. Furthermore, the theory of adult education as a special educational discipline had not yet been accepted. Ushinsky, however, contributed to it by his profound meditation on Sunday schools. The problem of mass education and literacy in developing countries was not a prominent one because those countries were still colonies. Russia itself was then in some respects a developing country. Ushinsky was aware of this fact and concerned himself, more than a hundred years ago, with this problem, namely to what extent foreign educational models should or should not be adopted and what role should be assigned to national traditions. In those days there was still considerable prejudice against women's access to education, but Ushinsky believed that women ought to receive the same education as men and that both sexes had an equal right to obtain higher education at university.

Furthermore, the notion of educational science is gaining acceptance due to the complexity of subjects affecting teaching. Ushinsky had already advocated this view in the middle of the last century and had also started to put it into effect in his major work *Man as the Object of Education: Educational Anthropology*. He was also one of the first great educationists to emphasize the immense moral significance of work, as well as the importance of vocational (trade) schools for apprentices. He was the master of didactics at the primary school, drawing on his wide knowledge of psychology; he also wrote textbooks on this subject.

Ushinsky was endowed with the special ability to combine a deep analysis of the object of his investigation with a synthetic view, to express analogies of the educational process with other events using inspiring metaphors combined with a refined, flowing literary style.

His style is somewhat comparable to that of Comenius who was fond of using numerous comparisons and analogies for the classification of his ideas. Ushinsky was criticized by some narrowly oriented contemporaries, who rejected his approach as unscientific. But, after all, does not education really have a great deal in common with other social and natural processes? Even Ushinsky was too much of a pedagogue to be willing to miss the chance of touching on these common aspects wherever they inspired this lucid observer's meditation. As a matter of fact, cognition does not proceed solely along the well-trodden paths of formal logic. Art, too, is a way of perceiving reality, and Comenius' and Ushinsky's methods include a number of metaphoric elements suggestive of this form of expression. After all, Ushinsky expressly emphasized that education was a science.

The charm of his educational personality lay *inter alia* in the fact that he was able to combine a strictly scientific approach, based on his wide erudition in many branches of social science, with the creativity of an artist capable of responding to a unique educational situation in a unique manner.

Ushinsky correctly anticipated what Makarenko much later imaginatively expressed, that education is the most dialectic of sciences because of the very infinite complexity of its subject matter—the educational process. It is for this reason that he did not believe in stereotyped educational instructions and directions, but insisted that the teacher should be able—like the physician—to react in a creative way to every specific situation. He did not believe, however, in the power of a certain mysterious and inborn educational intuition. He propounded an objective knowledge of psychology and other sciences necessary for the understanding of a child's development. He found an example of such a teacher in the erudite Swiss Müller, about whom he

expressed this appreciation:

He has attained that educational level where all methods are swallowed up by the teacher's personality. . . . Such a supreme teacher is no longer governed by methods but creates them; he has reached the source of all methods - a perfect grasp of the fundamental principle of education.

## Life and work

Konstantin Dmitrievitch Ushinsky was not quite 2 years old when the Decembrists' Revolt broke out in Russia and was cruelly suppressed by Czar Nicolas I. A group of aristocrats, who were striving for a more liberal government, attempted to organize a rebellion on 14 December 1825. The leaders were executed, the rest were sent into exile. There then followed thirty years of severe autocracy that intended to turn back the clock and preserve the way of life under the well-known motto: *Samodieržaviye, pravoslavie, narodnost* (autocracy, orthodoxy, nationhood).

Ushinsky suffered from the harshness of this regime. After having completed his law studies, he began to lecture on legal and financial questions at Yaroslavl College, only to be removed from his post. The conservative faction did not appreciate his liberal-minded and cordial approach to students. He had difficulty in obtaining another post and, for a time, was engaged by the Ministry of the Interior as a liaison officer between the Ministry and the non-Orthodox churches. But it was impossible to stifle his scientific and literary talents. In 1852 he started to contribute to the journal *Sovremennik* [The Contemporary], which was in the vanguard of the progressive intelligentsia of those days and expressed their social criticism. Working on this journal enabled Ushinsky to become well acquainted with Western European culture. Because of the subjects studied and the literary aspects involved in this work, it was a very profitable preparation for a new, extremely fruitful period of his life. The situation was also favourable for the expansion of Ushinsky's creative activity because, in 1855, when the autocracy of Nicolas I came to an end after Russia lost the Crimean War, there ensued—even though for only seven years—a certain thaw that brought about an unprecedented development in science and culture, culminating in the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Progress was evident in literature, painting, music and science, while educational problems finally began to attract widespread attention. Ushinsky's entry onto the literary and scientific arena is but one of the manifestations of this general cultural activity.

Ushinsky made full use of this time of grace and published a series of educational papers of fundamental importance, which still belong to the best of what pre-revolutionary Russian education has given to the world. The position from which he approached the problems of education is new and democratic. The logic of his reflections is clear; his language is brilliant, with a rhetorical pathos. It is a profound pleasure to read his educational meditations, because, even while authoring scientific papers, he was a teacher. His talent as a writer made his scientific arguments convincing and, at the same time, his clear thinking made his verbal expression more straightforward.

The success achieved in the Gatchino period destined him for a new, responsible task: to carry out a reform of the outdated curriculum of the Institute for the Education of Aristocratic Girls at Smolny. Ushinsky started his work with enthusiasm, but soon met with resistance from the institute's director and his supporters who accused him of atheism and political unreliability. He was prevented from continuing as editor of the educational periodical of the Ministry of Education, which he had transformed from a collection of heterogeneous proceedings into a truly lively educational journal and, according to P. A. Kropotkin, he was faced with exile. Gercen's magazine *Kolokol* [Bell], issued in London, sounded the alarm of the approaching danger. It rebuked the Czarina Mary for her inability to protect Ushinsky. To avoid a European scandal, the government decided to send him on a study visit to the West, instead of to Siberia. Thus Ushinsky was deprived of the possibility of participating in the development of Russian education, but he did not cease to study and write, although immediately after his accusation a pulmonary disease he had contracted grew alarmingly worse.

He spent five years in the West—in Switzerland and Germany—and gained a remarkable knowledge of problems concerning European education. Even abroad he was thinking constantly about his country and the Russian school, and prepared a great part of his famous *Rodnoye slovo* [Mother Tongue] there, a book that has been reprinted 146 times to date. It is similar, in a way, to Comenius' famous *Orbis pictus*, being a splendid basic textbook on Russian combining the linguistic aspect with matter-of-fact learning, entirely in the spirit of Comenius' educational realism. But, in addition to this practically oriented work, Ushinsky was preparing a great theoretical work, *Man as the Object of Education*, the first part of which appeared after his return to Russia in 1867. The second part was published two years later, while the third part remained unfinished because the insidious disease ended the Russian educationist's life on 22 December 1871.

The collected works of K.D. Ushinsky, issued by the Soviet Government in the period 1948-52, contain eleven volumes, each of which has on an average some 700 pages. They are a rich source of educational wisdom expressed with a clear logic and in beautiful language. In the former USSR and socialist countries Ushinsky was long considered as the greatest Russian educationist. When Western education, which he so intensively studied, becomes better acquainted with his original educational work, there is no doubt that his name will become better known.

An excellent expert on Ushinsky, the author of the largest monograph about his life and work, D.O. Lordkipanidze, described Ushinsky's political ideas as the philosophy of an enlightened, progressive man. Ushinsky belonged to those propagators of freedom described by Lenin in his article 'What Legacy We Are Giving Up'.

Although Ushinsky did not abandon religion, he insisted on the separation of science from religion and of the school from the church. His thinking ranged from idealism to materialism. In his educational works he covers the most varied questions of education, from problems of the goals of education through its content, method and organization to the concept of the teacher and his/her training. This discussion will concentrate on the most typical aspects of Ushinsky's education and their main features.

## Key educational concepts

If we were to express extremely briefly the essence of Ushinsky's education, we could do so by using the following four words: nationality, language, work, science. We could develop these as follows: nationality in the world context; language as a tool of knowledge; science as a basis of art; work as a source of happiness.

The principle of nationality permeates the whole of Ushinsky's educational work, but it is dealt with particularly in the article 'On Nationality in Public Education' which appeared for the first time in 1857 in *Žournal dlia vospitaniya* [Education Journal]. As an educationist Ushinsky became involved in the problem brought about by the dispute between Occidentalists and Slavophiles. Both these movements were critical of the Czar's absolutism, but their supporters had internal differences as well, chiefly concerning the appropriate social remedy. As the terms themselves suggest, the Occidentalists were longing for reform based on the European pattern, whereas the Slavophiles wished to preserve the old traditions. Ushinsky was deeply and emotionally devoted to everything that was Russian but, at the same time, he had an excellent knowledge of Western European culture and education and was seeking a synthesis of both these trends. In his treatise, he presents first of all a knowledgeable survey of the general historical foundations of European education and, in the ninth chapter, eventually finds the answer to the question of the significance of nationality in education:

There is only one inborn inclination, common to all, on which education can always depend: the intuition of national origins. Just as every individual possesses self-esteem, so does every individual love his homeland and this love gives education a reliable key to the human heart and a powerful support for the struggle against man's evil innate, personal and ancestral traits. When education appeals to nationality, it always evokes a response of co-operation in the lively and strong human sentiment that acts far more effectively than the views accepted by

reason alone or as habits formed from fear of punishment.

At the end of his article Ushinsky formulates the relationships between national education and other nations' education in the following way:

There is no education system that would be common to all nations. Every nation has its own specific education system. Experiences of other nations in the sphere of education are a valuable legacy to all, but not even the best examples can be accepted without being first tried by every nation with the exertion of its own efforts in this sphere.

He also warns that education should not be confused with science and that by itself it cannot solve the questions of life, but can only help to put into effect the history that is, in its turn, formed by the nation. The efficacy of education depends on the degree to which it becomes the subject of public interest. This standpoint is essentially true to this day and, at the time when he wrote these words, was a valuable contribution to overcoming the controversy between Occidentalists and Slavophiles.

The second major subject of Ushinsky's education that makes the previous topic more pertinent is language—the mother-tongue. There exist few reflections on this problem as pertinent as Ushinsky's 'Introduction' to the *Manual of Teaching According to the Mother-Tongue*. In the introductory commentary in the reading-book *Children's World* and in the textbook *Mother-Tongue*, he expressed his theoretical credo that gave a characteristic orientation to teaching in Russian schools.

Ushinsky started from the fact that when children learn a subject they always become acquainted with it through language:

The child who has not acquired the habit of trying to grasp the sense of a word, who understands its real meaning either vaguely or not at all and who has not learnt to handle both the spoken and the written word with ease, will always suffer from this basic deficiency in the study of every other subject.

He did not deny the importance of objective teaching and active work by the child. He was, however, aware of the major role of language in the development of thinking and learning and, for this reason, he saw in language teaching an important tool for learning facts. His method is generally referred to as *obiyasnitelnoye cteniye* (reading with explanation) and was one of the main methods not only of language teaching but also of teaching facts in Soviet primary schools. Reading with explanation is naturally a method of teaching the mother-tongue because Ushinsky realized that children do not yet know their mother-tongue well. Even if they know many words, they often do not fully understand their meaning or, on the other hand, they may be unable to name a number of familiar objects correctly. The success of this method depends on the proper selection of suitable texts and that is why Ushinsky gave painstaking care to their choice as well as to their preparation. Thus, *Children's World* was prepared for the higher grades of the elementary school, containing a collection of texts from the sphere of facts, as well as poems and extracts from literature and historical prose. He then produced *Mother-Tongue* as an elementary textbook on the Russian language containing basic grammar for the lower grades.

The third principal characteristic of Ushinsky's education was the stress laid on science as a basis for its method. Education, in the narrower sense of the word, was regarded by Ushinsky not as a science but as an art that cannot, however, depend solely on educational techniques or experience alone, but must be based on the actual research findings of psychology, physiology and other sciences, which reveal the process of the child's development. He compared the art of education with the work of a doctor of medicine, which must be based on anatomy and other knowledge about the human body if it is not to become mere quackery.

In the introduction to his principal - though unfortunately unfinished - theoretical work, *Man as the Object of Education*, Ushinsky explains his concept of the scientific nature of education:

We do not say to teachers, ‘Do this’ or ‘Do that’; we say ‘Study the laws of the mental phenomena you wish to control, and proceed in accordance with those laws and the circumstances in which you wish to apply them’. There is an infinite variety of such circumstances, and, what is more, no two pupils are alike. Given this diversity of educational circumstances and pupils, is it possible to issue any general educational prescriptions? It would be difficult to find even one educational measure that did not produce beneficial results in one case, harmful results in another and none at all in a third. This is why we advise teachers to examine as carefully as possible the general physical and spiritual nature of man, to study their own pupils and their environment, to scrutinize the history of various educational measures that may not always spring to mind, to set themselves a clear, positive educational goal and to pursue it steadfastly, using the knowledge they have acquired and their own good sense.

The work itself is a remarkable attempt to implement his approach and to give teachers general scientific support in their educational practice. In this work, Ushinsky discussed the then known findings from psychology and other life sciences and demonstrated the possibilities for education resulting from this knowledge. Quotations can often be found to illustrate his thoughts on the training of habits, perception, memory, etc.

It should also be emphasized here that Ushinsky was not only a great expert in teaching, but also paid considerable attention to questions of education. His remarkable papers ‘On the Moral Element in Russian Education’ and ‘On the Mental and Educational Importance of Work’, both from 1860, illustrate this interest. They are written in the spirit of the ideas already expressed in the essay ‘On Nationality in Public Education’, but they go even further, each in its respective field. The former discusses morality at the general level, points to its dependence on freedom and to its roots, sunk deep in Russian national traditions. The latter selects from the whole complex of questions of moral education the problem that might be taken as the fourth main pillar of Ushinsky’s education system—the problem of work.

The paper devoted to this subject is a unique essay from which it is difficult to select a characteristic quotation because we might well quote the whole text from beginning to end. But perhaps the most typical part of the paper is contained in the following passage:

Genuine and necessarily free work—because there neither is nor could be any other kind—means so much for the life of an individual that without it life would lose all value and dignity. It is necessary not only for a person’s development but also for maintaining the level of dignity already achieved. If he does not work, the individual can neither progress nor remain at the same level but will inevitably regress. The body, heart and mind of man need work and so imperative is that need that if, for whatever reason, a person has no personal work in his life he loses the true path and is faced with two others, both equally ruinous: the path of incurable discontent with life, of gloomy apathy and utter boredom, and the path of wilful, imperceptible self-destruction down which a person rapidly descends to the level of childish whims or animal gratifications. People on both these paths lead a living death, because work—personal, free work—is life.

Ushinsky’s life is a wonderful example of work conceived in this fashion, fully devoted to the education of the younger generation and to a better preparation of those entrusted with this task. Such education is serious. It allows humour, but never superficiality. Ushinsky has noble educational goals, intended to elevate the people. He is trying to find a solid, scientific method, while respecting fully the child’s soul and also the nation’s spirit. He is aware of the fact that if education is to give man happiness, it must prepare him for a life filled with work. That is the legacy of the educational wisdom for which Ushinsky is not merely a dead classical author, but in many respects a living teacher.

Ushinsky’s memory was highly esteemed in the former USSR. In 1946, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of his death, a Ushinsky silver medal was created as an award of the highest educational honour to the most deserving teachers and educationists.

It would be appropriate to close this review with the words of Ushinsky’s devoted disciple E.N. Vodovozovova which she addressed in the spirit of his educational bequest to Russian women teachers prior to the October Revolution:

In the words of Ushinsky, ‘all have a duty to contribute their work, knowledge and talents to the people, and the period of liberation that is beginning imposes on Russian women the special duty of emancipating themselves from the prejudices that bear especially on them. Bringing up the young is a great and noble task, but one that is also extremely difficult and complex. A woman can properly accomplish it only if she has armed herself with sound knowledge. Consequently, women, as well as men, should receive higher education’.

Ushinsky’s works are an inspiration for the ideas that even now, towards the end of the twentieth century, are in many respects for a number of regions of the world still more of a programme than a reality.

### Notes

1. Miroslav Cipro (Czech Republic). A teacher since 1937, he obtained a Ph.D. in 1951 (Prague) and another in 1967 (Tbilisi). Professor at Charles University, Prague, in 1963 and again in 1980. Educational researcher (1950–71), vice-minister of education (1971–75), senior officer at UNESCO (1975–79). Retired in 1988. Chairman of the World Association of Educational Research in 1989. His principal publications in Czech include: *The Dialectics of Education* (1988); *The Principles of Education* (1987); and *The Sources of Education* (3 vols., 1991–93).
2. Profiles of Comenius, Diesterweg, Fröbel, Locke, Makarenko, Montessori, Pestalozzi and Rousseau appear in this series of ‘100 Thinkers on Education’.
3. A profile of Leo Tolstoy appears in this series of ‘100 Thinkers on Education’.

### Further reading

An extensive bibliography of the works of K.D. Ushinsky can be found in:

Lordkipanidze, D.O. *Pedagogiceskoye uceniye K.D. Ušinskogo* [The Educational Ideas of K.D. Ushinsky]. Moscow, 1954. Tbilisi, 1974.

Other useful sources are:

Danilov, M.A. *Didaktika K.D. Ušinskogo* [The Teaching Methods of K.D. Ushinsky]. Moscow/Leningrad, 1948.

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