

The Necessary Path of Education: The Virtuous Pedagogical Cycle and Its Implications for Contemporary Practice

Jiajia Qiu

Chengdu New Century Guanghua School, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

DOI: 10.65285/RET.V2I2.002

Abstract: This paper explores the "virtuous pedagogical cycle" - a conceptual framework derived by Chinese educator Gan Guoxiang from Vasily Sukhomlinsky's educational writings - and examines its six constituent pedagogical laws. Drawing on Sukhomlinsky's *Advice to Teachers* (Suggestion No. 81), the analysis elucidates how the interplay between overcoming difficulty, achieving success, and developing inner dignity constitutes a self-reinforcing cycle underpinning holistic student development. Theoretical perspectives from Adler's individual psychology and achievement motivation theory (Atkinson and McClelland) situate the cycle within broader educational psychology discourses. Each law is examined in detail, with attention to implications for classroom practice in the context of China's Core Competencies reform (2014). The analysis suggests that the virtuous pedagogical cycle offers educators a theoretically grounded framework for designing learning experiences that cultivate self-esteem, agency, and a sustained desire to learn.

Key words: pedagogical cycle, Sukhomlinsky, self-esteem, achievement motivation, Core Competencies, holistic education, dignity

Introduction

The question of what constitutes a "good" education has preoccupied educators, philosophers, and policymakers for centuries. In the Chinese context, this question has acquired renewed urgency amid the ongoing curriculum reform agenda set in motion by the Ministry of Education's 2014 framework of Core Competencies for Chinese Students' Development. That framework enjoins schools to cultivate "well-rounded individuals" - a formulation that resonates with, yet also complicates, long-standing debates in international educational thought regarding the relationship between academic achievement, personal dignity, and the desire to learn.

A particularly fruitful, though underexamined, theoretical resource is the work of the Ukrainian educator Vasily Sukhomlinsky (1918-1970), whose pedagogical writings have exerted a profound influence on Chinese educational discourse since the 1980s. Sukhomlinsky's emphasis on the "spiritual life" of the child - the ensemble of intellectual, emotional, and moral experiences that constitute a developing personality - offers a counterweight to purely instrumental conceptions of education that continue to dominate many policy and practice contexts. The present paper takes Suggestion No. 81 from Sukhomlinsky's *Advice to Teachers* as its point of departure and traces its systematic elaboration by Gan Guoxiang. The analysis proceeds in two movements: first, a close reading of the foundational text and its interpretation; second, a detailed examination of the six pedagogical laws that follow, illustrated by reference to concrete classroom scenarios^{[1][2]}.

The Foundational Text: Sukhomlinsky's Pedagogical Vision

In Suggestion No[2]. 81 of *Advice to Teachers*, Sukhomlinsky offers the following passage:

The art and skill of cultivating a well-rounded personality lie in the following: the teacher must be adept at opening up, before every student - even the most mediocre and intellectually challenged student - a sphere of spiritual development, enabling them to reach the pinnacle in that domain, to manifest themselves, to declare the existence of the capital "I," to draw strength from the fountainhead of human self-esteem, and to feel that they are not inferior to others but are spiritually enriched individuals. ... If a person cannot declare their own existence, cannot become a master in some domain of the human spirit, cannot establish their position through activity and achievement (which is particularly important), if they do not experience the self-esteem of being a creator, if they cannot hold their head high as they walk - then so-called individuality becomes incomprehensible.

(Source: Sukhomlinsky, V. A. Advice to Teachers, Suggestion No. 81^[2].)

Several aspects of this passage warrant attention. First, "sphere of spiritual development" signals Sukhomlinsky's conviction that every child possesses a "domain of possible mastery" within which they can experience the dignity of becoming a "capital I." This is not a generic injunction to "build confidence" but a precisely specified claim: the child must find, or be helped to find, a domain of genuine mastery. Second, "declaring the existence of the capital I" introduces a theme that reverberates throughout Sukhomlinsky's oeuvre: the child is not a passive recipient of pedagogical intervention but an active subject who requires the experience of self-as-agent. The word "declare" suggests a public, witnessed dimension to self-esteem - it is not merely a private psychological state but a socially recognized achievement. Third, the closing warning - that without such experiences "individuality becomes incomprehensible" - positions the pedagogical relationship as the condition of possibility for the emergence of a recognizable individual personality. Individuality, in this view, is not a pre-given attribute but a fragile achievement that can fail to crystallize if the educational environment does not provide opportunities for genuine accomplishment^[2].

Gan Guoxiang's Interpretation: The Virtuous Pedagogical Cycle

Gan Guoxiang, in his interpretive writings on Sukhomlinsky, extracts from the passage above a structural framework he terms the "Sukhomlinsky Pedagogical Cycle":

The cycle is defined as follows: in the process of life, one overcomes difficulties in labor or learning and obtains success; this in turn leads to a high degree of self-feeling (self-confidence and self-esteem), as well as a sense of responsibility and willpower; and the motivation to once again experience the happiness gained through learning and overcoming difficulties in labor or learning.

Gan clarifies the cycle through two mutually implicating propositions: (1) without overcoming difficulties and obtaining achievements, it is impossible to possess self-esteem, self-confidence, and the desire to learn; and (2) without self-esteem, self-confidence, and the desire to learn, it is impossible to overcome difficulties and obtain achievements. The circular structure is essential: each term generates the conditions of possibility for the next, and the sequence, once initiated, tends to reinforce itself - hence "virtuous cycle." The Chinese term "liangxing" (良性) connotes not moral virtue but a self-reinforcing, beneficent dynamic - analogous to the economic concept of a virtuous cycle as opposed to a vicious one. From this account, Gan derives six interrelated laws of education, to which the paper now turns^[1].

Six Educational Laws Derived from the Pedagogical Cycle

Law 1: The Historicity of Interest and the Specificity of the Learner

The first law states that a person's interest in current, specific learning and labor is always grounded in the results of previous learning and labor. A specific child enters each new learning situation carrying the accumulated weight of their particular historical experience; that encounter, in turn, becomes part of the substrate from which future desires to learn (or to avoid learning) will emerge.

This law fundamentally challenges any approach that treats students as blank slates or uniform recipients of standardized instruction. The child's current capacity to be interested is not a free-floating disposition but a historical achievement (or injury). The familiar observation that "the same teacher, the same textbook, the same teaching method - yet the students produced are all different" captures this in everyday language. The teacher who fails to register this specificity is teaching to an abstraction rather than to the children actually present.

Law 2: Diversity and Regulation in Pathways to Achievement

The second law stipulates that the pathways through which children obtain achievements should be diverse yet regulated. "Diverse" refers to the necessity of providing multiple, richly varied spiritual activities through which each child may have an opportunity to succeed. "Regulated" refers to the non-negotiable requirement that major academic subjects must be mastered; success in other domains cannot substitute for failure in these core areas.

This law acquires particular salience against China's 2014 Core Competencies reform, which enjoins schools to cultivate well-rounded individuals through a comprehensive curriculum including academic subjects, elective courses, extracurricular activities, and moral education. A child who excels academically may also find recognition through calligraphy competitions or drama productions - providing the "sphere of spiritual development" Sukhomlinsky envisaged. At the same time, Law 2 imposes a crucial constraint: the school cannot divert all energy into non-academic domains as compensation for academic struggle. If a child never tastes success in English, even substantial achievement elsewhere cannot fill the resulting deficit of academic self-confidence. The English classroom is not merely one domain among many; it is a regulated space in which a specific kind of dignity must be won^[2].

Law 3: Inner Dignity as the Core Factor in Learning and Growth

The third law identifies the child's inner sense of dignity as the core factor in the process of learning and growth. Responsibility, willpower, and motivation all emanate from this "inner feeling of life." If a child succeeds in a legitimate domain and thereby wins the dignity of existence, then undesirable situations are less likely to emerge in other domains. This formulation invites connection with Alfred Adler's individual psychology. Adler argued that the individual does not present as a collection of modular traits but as an integrated purposive whole oriented toward a felt sense of superiority or worth. His concept of the "inferiority complex" and compensatory striving for superiority provides a useful lens for interpreting Sukhomlinsky's emphasis on dignity. Adler further argued that the pursuit of superiority is rooted in a biological foundation - a claim echoed in Gan's observation that each life emerges as a kind of victory, underscoring that the capacity for development is an immanent propensity: every life, provided it receives affirmation, tends toward growth. The teacher's task is not to "motivate" a passive subject but to remove obstacles that prevent an already-present developmental tendency from realizing itself. Dignity is not a luxury; it is the medium in which learning becomes possible^{[1][2][3]}.

Law 4: The Proportionality of Achievement and Difficulty

The fourth law states that the sense of achievement - the conjoined experience of happiness and dignity - is directly proportional to the difficulty overcome. Learning that involves no genuine difficulty cannot yield a true sense of happiness or dignity. Entertaining or purely recreational activities may nourish the overall sense of life but cannot nourish this specific core: dignity.

This law finds strong support in achievement motivation theory. Atkinson (1957) and McClelland (1961) demonstrated

that achievement motivation is a tension between the motive to approach success (Ms) and the motive to avoid failure (Maf). Atkinson's model predicts that the peak incentive value of an achievement task occurs when the probability of success is approximately 0.5 - neither so easy as to be trivial nor so difficult as to be demoralizing. The classroom implication is precise: tasks should be calibrated to the "50 percent difficulty" zone. A task that is too easy produces no dignity; a task that is too difficult produces anxiety and, if repeated, learned helplessness. A fourth-grade student given a first-grade English test and scoring 100 experiences muted achievement because difficulty was absent. If instead that student struggles with fourth-grade material, receives scaffolding, and eventually succeeds independently, the resulting sense of dignity is substantial. The teacher's art consists in calibrating challenge to the "productive difficulty" zone^{[4][5]}.

Law 5: The Negative Effects of Failure and the Temporality of Setback

The fifth law addresses the consequences of failure. If difficulty is excessive and cannot be overcome, resulting in failure, and if this failure is experienced as temporary, it will nevertheless produce negative effects: frustration, depression, and feelings of fear or aversion toward the domain in question.

The law does not claim that failure is always detrimental; temporary setbacks followed by eventual success - and appropriately framed by the teacher - can be integrated into a resilient learning identity. The critical variable is whether failure is experienced as a localized, reparable event or as a global, stable judgment on the student's capacity. This distinction tracks Weiner's (1974, 1985) attributional categories: failure attributed to unstable, controllable causes (effort, strategy) is pedagogically productive; failure attributed to stable, uncontrollable causes (ability) is corrosive. The teacher must develop the interpretive capacity to frame failure in ways that do not rupture the student's sense of dignity. The temporal dimension is crucial: the negative effects of a single failure may be contained if the broader trajectory remains positive. It is the accumulation of unrepaired failures - "cumulative dignitary injury" - that poses the gravest threat to the pedagogical cycle^[6].

Law 6: The Social Embeddedness of the Pedagogical Cycle

The sixth law introduces a crucial qualification: if the requirements of society and the community, the interests and evaluations of other people, are not incorporated into the model, the pedagogical cycle will be misunderstood as an internally closed system. The attainment of success and the cultivation of self-esteem are not purely private achievements; they occur within a social field and are subject to social evaluation. Learning or labor that contravenes social requirements may yield private pleasure but carries a "sense of guilt"; the individual's personality is placed in a state of contradiction.

The law insists on introducing social and communal criteria into the pedagogical cycle. For the sake of personality unity, the individual must integrate their achievements with their sense of belonging to, and recognition by, a wider community. They must "either belong to society or belong to their own happiness" - but the former is the condition of a well-rounded personality, while the latter signals a fractured, divided self. For educators, cultivating student self-esteem cannot proceed in isolation from the question of what students are being encouraged to take pride in. Self-esteem tied to antisocial or exploitative accomplishments is not a pedagogical achievement; it is a pedagogical failure disguised as success. The virtuous pedagogical cycle thus has a normative horizon: it aims at individuals whose sense of dignity is compatible with, and ideally contributory to, the flourishing of the wider community.

Discussion: Implications for Contemporary Educational Practice

The six laws, taken together, constitute a coherent pedagogical framework integrating psychological insight, ethical commitment, and practical guidance. First, the framework provides a theoretically grounded rationale for differentiated instruction. If every student enters with a distinct historical trajectory, standardized, one-size-fits-all instruction is not merely suboptimal; it is theoretically indefensible. The teacher's task includes ongoing diagnostic work to understand what each student brings and to design learning experiences that meet them at their particular developmental readiness. Second, the framework offers a nuanced perspective on academic and non-academic achievement. Law 2's dual

emphasis on diversity and regulation resists both the narrow reduction of school success to test scores and the equivalencing of all forms of achievement. Third, the framework has direct implications for assessment practices. If achievement is proportional to difficulty overcome, then assessment systems that set the bar too low or prohibitively high are both violations of the pedagogical cycle. Assessment is not merely a measurement tool but a dignity-distribution mechanism. Fourth, Law 6 resists the privatization of educational success. In an era saturated with the language of "personal best" and "individual growth," it is worth recalling that the formation of a well-rounded personality is not a solitary achievement. The teacher is not merely a facilitator of individual progress but a curator of the social conditions under which dignified individuality can emerge.

Conclusion

The "virtuous pedagogical cycle" elaborated by Gan Guoxiang on the basis of Sukhomlinsky's writings offers a theoretically sophisticated and practically actionable framework for understanding how student learning, self-esteem, and motivation interact over time. The six laws provide educators with orienting principles that are at once psychologically realistic, ethically grounded, and adaptable to diverse classroom contexts. At a historical moment in which students in many educational systems report high levels of anxiety, disengagement, and fragile self-worth, the recuperation of Sukhomlinsky's emphasis on the "spiritual life" of the child constitutes not a nostalgic return to an idealized past but a living resource for reconceptualizing what education can and should be. Future research might usefully explore the empirical manifestations of the pedagogical cycle in specific classroom contexts, the cultural particularities of how dignity and achievement are conceived across educational traditions, and the possibilities of integrating this framework with contemporary work in formative assessment, growth mindset, and social-emotional learning. The virtuous pedagogical cycle, properly understood, is a living theoretical resource with considerable untapped potential for enriching both educational research and practice^{[1][2]}.

References

- [1] Gan, G. (2003). *Education and Life: Interpretations of Sukhomlinsky's Educational Thoughts*. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House. [Chinese]
- [2] Sukhomlinsky, V. A. (1981). *Advice to Teachers*. Moscow: Prosveshcheniye Publishers. [Russian]
- [3] Adler, A. (1927). *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- [4] Atkinson, J. W. (1957). Motivational determinants of risk-taking behavior. *Psychological Review*, 64(6), 359-372.
- [5] McClelland, D. C. (1961). *The Achieving Society*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand.
- [6] Weiner, B. (1974). *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.

Author Biography:

Jiajia Qiu, born on August 23, 1993, female, Han nationality, from Chengdu, Sichuan. Degree: Master. Professional Title: Level 2 Teacher (Primary & Secondary Education). Research Interests: primary school English; interdisciplinary studies; teaching evaluation.