Developmental didactic of activity: the contributions of V.V. Repkin to the elkonin-davidov system

Abstract. The philologist, philosopher, psychologist and didactic V.V. Repkin (1927) is the third most important figure in Elkonin-Davydov system, yet his work is virtually unknown in the West, especially in Brazil. This educator and scientist made important contributions to the system and, in general, to the developmental didactic of activity in fields as diverse as: theory of study activity, Russian language teaching methodology, teacher training, transition between the different levels of education, system diagnosis, creation and consolidation of groups and research centres, as well as the foundation of the International Association of Developmental Education. This article specifically approaches Repkin’s theoretical and methodological contributions in three specific fields of knowledge: 1) Activity (content, objectives, tasks and structure); and 2) transition from the primary to the secondary level of studies (the new contents of the learning activity, new methods and teacher training).

Keywords: developmental didactic of activity; Elkonin-Davydov system; V.V. Repkin

The developmental didactic of activity arose in the ex-Soviet Union at the end of the 1950’s. Within the interior of this area a varied array of systems were shaped, among which are highlighted: a) Zankoviano, b) Galperin-Talizina and c) Elkonin-Davidov. The Elkonin-Davidov system, in
particular, developed their arguments from the work of D.B. Elkonin and V.V. Davidov, who collaborated with a large group of scientists and professors from the cities of Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, Dushanbe, Tula, Ufa, Volgograd, Tomsk, Togliatti, Taganrog, Riga and Médnoe (Kalinin region), among others. These arguments were based on theoretical-experimental research developed over a period of more than fifty years of uninterrupted work in the field of developmental psychology, pedagogical psychology, didactics and teaching methodologies.

The idea was to confirm through experiment the theoretical thesis of L.S. Vygotsky [8] on the essential role that the teaching of children plays in their psychological development, and align the discovery to the psychological laws of developmental didactics [5, 6].

One of the figures that contributed most to the consolidation of this system was the psychologist, philologist and educator V.V. Repkin (1927), who after D.B. Elkonin and V.V. Davidov, was the most important theoretical leader of this concept. Repkin made significant contributions to the field of the theory and practice of developmental teaching, especially the didactics of the Russian language; in its creation, strengthening and consolidation of the Kharkov group, of which he was its main leadership over decades; in the establishment of new groups and laboratories in other Soviet Republics; and in the founding of the International Association of Developmental Teaching, of which he came to be vice-president.

The printed scientific-theoretical heritage of V.V. Repkin is relatively small, consisting of two monographs, various brochures, papers in scientific journals, as well as anthologies from psychological and educational fields. The didactic heritage that takes his name is on the other hand much more significant, containing some 40 books, along with manuals dedicated to the Russian language for primary schools, methodological orientations for professors and dictionaries [3, 4].

The study presented herein covers the most relevant aspects of the work of V.V. Repkin, from an analysis of his main theoretical-methodological contributions, concerning two specific fields: 1) theory of activity of study, and 2) the transition from primary to intermediate teaching.

**Contributions to the field of study activity theory**

V.V. Repkin significantly innovated the field of activity theory, especially the study activity, in its content, structure, tasks and objectives. He established important hypotheses, which were later tested. Supported by Elkonin [1], Repkin arrived at the point of discerning the difference between activity of study in its own right from that of any other type of activity. This he based on the fact that the objective and result of the study activity do not constitute only a change to the object with which the individual operates, but to the individual that realizes the activity. To put it another way, the transformation of the object acquires an important position in the interior conception as it depends on the self-transformation of the individual.

The author also highlighted the social significance of study activity, through the recognition that the developmental or transformation of the individual in personality only happens to the extent that they become a subject within the activity, which is socially joined. At the same time, he considered that the study activity is associated with the effective action of the subject, which needs to be a response to some specific type of need, which arises from a level of personal individual development, as well as from a specific historic plan.

Repkin approached the place of conscious interests (cognitive) in the study activity. According to his theoretical vision, the conscious interest is one of the phases that integrates the motivational part of the solution of the study task. When the student starts to analyse the situation or problem put forward by the professor and become convinced that their past ideas are not appropriate
for the building of a solid base for a course of action, the meaning of the action takes on an objective character. Thus, the objective acquires a special significance – it becomes interesting.

Through study of interest, Repkin [9] goes on to define and establish its relationship with the need, and clarifies conceptually the difference between the two terms. While the need is the dearth of an object (this can be the need to know), the interest is the subjective experience, which the meaning to this object (to know) provokes in the person. At the same time, it tries to explain the existing tie between the needs and the interests, through the affirmation that both are complementary in a clear dialectic relationship: the interests arise from the needs, in the same fashion that new needs arise from these formed interests.

The work of V.V. Repkin also applies the ideas of Leontiev [2] concerning the role of motives in the transformation of functional needs into the higher needs of the study activity. It acknowledges that the need for knowledge is the type of interest that underlies activity of study, but alerts one to the fact that this can also be satisfied by any activity, in a manner through which the need to know in itself is not sufficient for producing activity of study. The need for knowledge needs to meet with the object, from which the motive arises.

Seen in this manner, the need stimulates schools to simulate theoretical knowledge, the motives, on the other hand, simulate the reproduction procedures of such knowledge through means of study actions directed toward resolving the tasks of the study. It is thus hereby determined the proximity of the theory of study of activity with the principal arguments of A.N. Leontiev concerning internalization.

The objective is another of the components associated with activity of study that V.V. Repkin analyses. According to Repkin, the objective emanates from conscious character of the internal motives, and acts as a direct determinant that produces the activity and conditions its forms and means. At the same time, the objective is the psychological mechanism for the regulation of the activity and thus is only reached or achieved when the necessary conditions are defined: knowledge and abilities of the individual and the special characteristics of the object of the action, among others. The set of concrete conditions to which an object is defined in the psychology of the activity was the given the name task.

The recognition of the study task allows for the identification of the object as well as the specific objective of the activity. Under the premise of developmental teaching, any type of activity of study is a process pertinent to task resolution that is presented in the form of learning problem, which is capable of leading to theoretical opinion forming by means of modes of action of the domain, from the scientific concepts, laws and principles of the action.

In this sense, the task performs two functions, on one hand, it looks for the self-transformation of the individual, on the other, the domain of the theoretical knowledge. The two functions hold a close dialectical relationship: in that they dominate the theoretical knowledge the individual transforms him/herself; through such a transformation, the individual dominates the theoretical knowledge.

In regards to the research activity, while being a specific type of activity of study, it is important to highlight that this occurs, in the opinion of Repkin, from the formulation and resolution of problem-situations (learning problems). The sense is thus of a discrepancy between the plan of action and its establishment on the real action conditions. In this particularity Repkin affirms: “a problem in the sense that the modes of action available are inadequate and others do not exist. In other words, new modes of action are necessary” [7, p. 94].

In dealing with the activity of study, Repkin advises that even when the historical-cultural psychology understood the action in the context of a unit of analysis of the activity, the same cannot be applied to the analysis of the activity in itself. This is due to the simple reason that: “all the
specific aspects of the activity, related to its motivation and definition of objects, disappear in the action” [7, p. 94]. In such a sense, there arises as its unit of analysis the whole act of the activity, that being the segment of the activity of study that starts with the formulation of the task of study and ends with its solution (planning, execution, control and correction).

Contributions to the field of organization of the developmental field at the intermediate level

A small part, but not less important, concerning the work of V.V. Repkin was destined to the study of organization of developmental teaching at the intermediate level (fundamental II). Between the end of the 1950’s and the first half of the 1990’s, the Elkonin-Davidov system had dedicated its efforts and research toward the elaboration of a theory of the activity of study for primary education (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years).

However, from a specific moment the first generation of students influenced by the developmental concept start to arrive in the intermediate level, for which school and teaching were not organized into these modes and thus not capable of providing continuity to the type of development demanded. Such a situation generated an enormous challenge for the system - the transition from one level of study to another. For this reason, the second half of the 1990’s marked the start of a large movement within the inner workings of the Elkonin-Davidov system, in the sense of amplifying to the intermediate level the didactic research and experiments, which were performed at the primary levels. V.V. Repkin, while holding the position of the second most important leader, after V.V. Davidov, was one of the first to draw attention to this new issue.

Repkin, in an article written in co-authorship with V.V. Davidov [10], recognizes the growth experimented with by the Elkonin-Davidov system, but admits to the numerous problems that accompany this increase and mentions two as more important: 1) how to deal with students who possess a higher academic potential, when compared to their peers shaped in traditional schooling; 2) how to teach these students in a manner that does not weaken their desire to actively explore the world and themselves, and in a way not to exhaust the impulse for intellectual and spiritual self-transformation.

According to the author, the question of method content and equally the formation of teachers, demands solutions that involve a series of problems that are inter-related and interdependent of theoretical character (including psychological), technological (example, teaching) and organizational. The solution to these problems will only be possible, from their point of view, through the creation of work groups both interested and willing to take on the responsibility as a research object. In terms of the teaching of the Russian language on an intermediate level, in particular, Repkin believed that the main hypotheses that had been elaborated and tested for the formation of children in the primary school years, were valid for the development of the native language in the context of secondary education of the masses. It would only be necessary to confirm such hypotheses through time and school practice.

The development of the Elkonin-Davidov system is not possible without taking into consideration each of its parts, which implies all its components, including curriculum and its didactic books. The didactic principles elaborated in the primary level are given based on the experience acquired in teaching laboratories. For this motive, as recognized by V.V. Repkin, it was clear from the outset that the use of these conceptions in mass schooling would always demand some type of adjustment. It was known that at the intermediate level it would not be any different. Adaptations were made over a period of years, and with such an important work experience was accumulated.

From the didactic viewpoint, Repkin together with Davidov drew attention to a specific fundamental, that being the specific type of activity of study that is adequate to the adolescent. The
defence is made for school and extra-curriculum activities, where the student is capable of learning the work, social and organizational standards. It is suggested that the students get involved in one or two types of formation activity, which allows for the domination of real communication means, through their own activity groups. At the same time, one looks to favouring the interaction of adolescents, through the intermediation of the executed content and tasks with that of daily life, thus reproducing in the school that which they experience on its outside.

A second aspect that is under discussion is the mode by which one shapes, in the context of activity, the very system of values from the adolescent. The school should place the adolescent in activities through which the teaching and the work of the teacher help to identify, analyse and synthesis the system of human values, which underlie this activity. School activities should take into consideration the existing relationship between the individual social values, the mode through which the individual values direct the activity, and both generalize and universalize such based on the realization of tasks together.

The participation in activities together looks to place moral standards from the adolescent face to face with social morals, which is an essential condition for their inclusion into the group. The curriculum should predict the ethical fundamentals that aid in the understanding of universal moral values. When reaching the end of adolescence, the students will be capable of confronting their values with a significant variety of standards and regulate their conduct based on social demands. This control process cannot be the fruit of external coercive power upon the individual, but from conscious perception from the very individual in relation to the system of values that determine the extent of liberty and responsibility of the individual in society.

In another study, Repkin [11] looks toward explaining, in its essence, how to alter the life of the adolescent, along with what should be done by the school managers and teachers at this level. To develop in the student the interest for self-transformation and be capable of performing this, is the main content of teaching during school age. In turn, ensuring the conditions necessary for such educational formation is the main objective behind developmental didactics. The very quality of the objective of developmental teaching determines the characteristics of its content, the type of teaching activity, the methods and forms for organizing the educative process and the relationship among members that participate in it, especially communication.

From the perspective under analysis, the student can only participate in the educational process if they are capable of finding in an independent manner, and evaluate critically, the general methods that allow for the reaching of a solution to the problems they face. This in turn is only possible if the teaching has not already started in setting down the embodiment of the forms for resolving particular problems (typical in traditional schools), but through dominating the general methods to problem solving of a particular class (linguists, mathematics, etc.).

The implementation of this method demands a significant change in the type of relationship established between the participants of the educative process, firstly, in that which refers to the relationship between students and teacher. The acquisition of a particular course of action normally demands that the students receive precise directives from the teacher by way of obligation. Nonetheless, this type of directive is not acceptable in the teaching environment and the research activity, as these make such directives meaningless from the moment that the teacher starts to dictate the content and the sequence of actions to the students.

The activity of teach-research also modifies, in second place, the relationship between the very students themselves as they are become collectively distributed and involved in the critical comparison and evaluation of different approaches for resolving the problem. The more the student takes into consideration their progress and results from the results of other students, who are resolving the same problems, greater are the chances of finding the desired solution. This type of
practice generates within the students a mutual interest for the work of others, thus encouraging active analysis and evaluation.

The restructuring of relationships that take place among the participants of the teaching-research activity and from the organizational forms of developmental teaching, take on the character of intense interpersonal communication that is not limited to a simple exchange of information, as is frequently found in the traditional individualized simulation model, through modes of action directed by the teacher.

**Final Considerations**

The Elkonin-Davidov system, was for a number of reasons, the most important didactic system created within the developmental didactic of the activity. Among its main leaders is V.V. Repkin, who made innovative contributions in the theoretical-methodological order as he did in scientific management. A greater part of the work from this author remains in Russian and/or Ukrainian, which makes knowledge of its contributions very difficult in the West, especially in theoretical field of activity of study and the didactic specific to the Russian language.

Repkin criticises the traditional school that prepares for life and formulates a new proposal on the basis of a developmental teaching idea, which has as its fundamental objective to form within the individual the activity of study that arrives at their very own transformation, via the formation of theoretical thinking (scientific concepts, courses of action and action principles).

Within the interior of the theory of activity of study, Repkin made specific contributions in relation to the study of cognitive development of interests. On the one hand, their differences in terms of needs, as well as the link that exists between them, on the other, through the deepening of the principles of action as a component of theoretical thinking.

In regards to the transition process from one level to the other Repkin contributed by pointing to the principle challenges inherent to this question: on the one hand, the methods and content of the very next level and the type of adequate formation deemed as necessary for the teachers. It was considered pertinent that for the teaching of the Russian language, one could use the same hypotheses elaborated for the teaching of primary education. In addition the defence is made for a specific mode of study activity that allows for intimate and personal communication of adolescents, as well as the learning of social working and organizational standards.

Based on these and other contributions, it is possible to scale the magnitude of the theoretical and didactic work produced by V.V. Repkin, which can presently be of great use to the Brazilian context as one finds it, taking into consideration the different realities, in order to improve teaching and education.
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Дидактика развивающего обучения: о вкладе В.В. Репкина в систему развивающего обучения Эльконина-Давыдова

Аннотация. Филолог, философ, психолог и дидакт Владимир Владимирович Репкин (род. 1927) является третьей по значимости фигурой в системе Эльконина-Давыдова, но его труд практически неизвестен на Западе, особенно в Бразилии. Этот педагог и ученый сделал важный вклад в развитие системы в целом, и для развития дидактической деятельности в таких разнообразных областях, как: теория учебной деятельности, методика преподавания русского языка, повышение квалификации учителей, переход между различными уровнями образования, системе диагностики, формировании и консолидации групп и исследовательских центров, а также создания Международной Ассоциации развивающего обучения. В этой статье рассматриваются подходы Репкина, его теоретический и методологический вклад в таких областях знаний как: 1) деятельность (содержание, цели, задачи и структура); и 2) переходный от начального до среднего уровня обучения (нового содержания обучения, новых методик и педагогических).

Ключевые слова: развивающее обучение; система Эльконина-Давыдова; В.В. Репкин
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