

# I. ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ И ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

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## ELKONIN-DAVIDOV SYSTEM: HISTORICAL ASPECTS (1958-2015)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** Developmental didactic activity arises in the former Soviet Union based on assumptions made by Vygotsky on the role of education and teaching in the development of the human psyche. The article deals with the Elkonin-Davidov system: a) establishes its main evolutionary stages, from the systematization of its genesis and historical process; b) analyzes theoretical and practical contributions conducted through laboratory research in experimental schools and basic education public. The access to valuable works in Russian, Ukrainian, English and Spanish, most of which are unknown in Brazil, resulted in a text that, although still very incomplete, is characterized by its unprecedented nature and enlightening.

**Keywords:** teaching; development; activity; Elkonin-Davidov system.

### Introduction

Developmental didactic arose in the second mid of the 50s. Its theoretical and practical consolidation, in a national and international scenario, has prolonged along its almost 60 years of existence to this day. With the fall of the socialist regime, and the consequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it seemed that such didactic would succumb to ideological, political and economic pressure, it survived and became the “official choice of curriculum for the schools in Russia, Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union” [8, p. 23].

This conception was made from three different didactic systems which, at the same time, have a close relationship: 1) Zankov system; 2) Galperin-Talizina system; 3) Elkonin-Davidov system. The intersection point of these systems is in the following Vygotsky’s theses: a) the adequate system is the internally essential and universal aspect of human characteristics development process; b) “pedagogy should not guide itself into the direction of the past but into the direction of the future (of tomorrow), into the development” [9, p. 114].

### Elkonin-Davidov system (1958-2015)

The fundamental theses of this system were developed by D. Elkonin and V. Davidov, in collaboration with a numerous group of scientists and professors from Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, Dushanbe, Tula, Ufa, Volgograd, Tomsk, Tolyatti, Taganrog, Riga and Mednoe (region of Kalinin), having experimental-theoretical researches conducted over fifty years of continuous work as a basis [2].

During this period, taking into consideration the diversity, intensity and nature of happenings, the effect of external factors, rhythm, advances, pauses, failures, withdrawals or successes, it is possible to establish a periodization. In this periodization at least five different stages can be identified: a) Stage I – Idealizing, experimenting and conception of the system (1958-1975); b) Stage II – Creation of conditions for the system universalization (1975-1982); c) Stage III – Censorship, persecution, dissolution and interruption of the system implementation process (1982-1986); d) Stage IV – Implementation of the system as an official alternative of the Ministry for Education (1986-1994); e) Stage V – Internationalizing and consolidation of the system (1994-up to now).

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***Stage I – Idealization, experimenting and system conception (1958-1975)***

When D. Elkonin decided to start psychological studies of the training activity of children at school age, in December 1958, he was taking the first steps to idealize, elaborate and establish fundamental theses of a new theory and a new psychopedagogical system: activity theory and Elkonin-Davidov system.

In March 1959 the first laboratory researches started supported by the several former professionals of the Psychology Division of the State University of Moscow, among them was V. Davidov. Thus, the Moscow group appeared. In September of the same year, after the beginning of the school year 1959-60, apart from laboratory researches, experiments in school contexts based on School 91 of Moscow started. In the following two years the initial results were published: “Опыт психологического исследования в экспериментальном классе” (The Experience of Psychological Research in the Experimental Class, 1960) [4] and “Психологические вопросы формирования учебной деятельности в младшем школьном возрасте” (Psychological Issues of the Training Activity at Primary School Age Formation, 1961) [5].

Next year, V. Davidov replaced Elkonin in the position of Laboratory director. In 1963 Pedagogical Sciences Academy conceded the status of institution of experimental teaching to the Experimental School n. 91 of Moscow. Soon the theoretical proposal extended beyond the borders of Moscow and Russia with the creation of new groups and laboratories in the following cities: Tula (Russia, 1961), Kharkov (Ukraine, 1963) and Kiev (Ukraine, 1963). Apart from these bigger groups, small teams were also formed and other elementary schools of first years of general education were transformed into laboratories in the cities of Dushanbe (Tajiquistan), Ufa (Bashkiria), Volgograd (Russia) and the village of Mednoe (Russia).

The experimental work was held in the first years of basic general education, that is, in elementary school (1<sup>st</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> years), though in some subjects (native language and literature, mathematics, physics, biology) it was also held among students from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades, thus composing the corresponding years of high school or complementary school.

The objectives of the researches which were held during almost seventeen years tried to determine the following: a) the content and the structure of the students training activity; b) the logical-psychological basis of structuring school subjects, which met the requirements of the training activity; c) peculiarities of students psychological development during the training activity; d) the reserves of students psychological development in different school years; e) peculiarities of the formative experiment organization.

The idea was to experimentally confirm the theoretical theses of L. Vygotsky about the essential role which the teaching of children plays in their psychological development and reveal the psychological laws of developmental didactic. One started from the hypothesis that the basis for awareness and for theoretical thought is formed in the students of younger age during the assimilation of knowledge and attitudes in the process of training activity. The results proved that training activity, in the first school years, is important for psychological development of a child.

At the first stage numerous researches which several groups held in five fundamental fields were conducted: 1) the development of the basis for a psychological theory of teaching, a task which was the responsibility of D. Elkonin and other members of the Moscow team, that V. Davidov was also part of; 2) the development of a substantive generalization theory (or theoretical) whose fundamental premises were formulated in the thesis V. Davidov (1970); 3) the design of a didactic teaching theory in which V. Davidov and E. Bodanski were responsible for mathematics, and V. Repkin and other members of the group of Kharkov were responsible for the Russian language teaching; 4) the development of a theory of the training activity diagnosis, under the responsibility of a team coordinated by A. Zak; 5) the development of a training program for teachers of experimental schools, designed by several research centers spread throughout different cities.

***Stage II – Creation of conditions for the system universalization (1975 1982)***

In less than fifteen years of work, the theoretical and practical results of Elkonin-Davidov system worked out an approach to the developmental teaching, following the clues of L. Vygotsky, got scientific and didactic-methodological support and coverage in books and didactic material, which became, along with Zankov system, a teaching pedagogical proposal. This attracted the attention of

specialists and the Ministry for Education to this project and the data collected (information about the students' performance in experimental classes compared with conventional classes students (traditional teaching) in such aspects as the level of theoretical thought development, problems solving, self-learning etc.).

However, it was in the second half of the 70s, when the Ministry for Education of the Soviet Union and member of the Central Committee of CPSU, Mikhail Prokofev (1910-1999) offered V. Davidov to develop the primary level educational system which involved the theoretical conception created by him, Elkonin and the group, which would start a new stage in the history of such a system. The stage lasted, approximately, from 1975 to 1982, and is marked, at the elementary level, by an enormous number of practical demands and by their complexity, for what initially was limited to a theoretical project applied to a small amount of experimental schools spread throughout few cities and Soviet republics, now needed to be conceived and implemented on a large scale.

It took about nine years of continual work to develop a pedagogical proposal for the mass school based the theoretical and methodological results accumulated in the researches held at experimental schools. All the groups of Elkonin-Davidov system were involved in this work, until it stopped in 1984 after three incidents. First, the political and academical failure of Davidov in 1983, when he was dismissed from the position of the principal of the General and Pedagogical Psychology Sciences of the Soviet Union Pedagogical Academy, which he had held since 1978, and his break up with the communist party. Second, the dismissal of Mikhail Prokofev from the position of Minister of Education and, consequently, the loss of the necessary support in the government. Third, the death of D. Elkonin in October 1984, who was the inspirer of the project, one of its main supporters along with V. Davidov.

Throughout this decade, Elkonin-Davidov system was ready to assume the role of an alternative of official teaching, along with Zankov system, facing the still strong domination of the traditional conception. It was essential to solve the problems that were rather practical than theoretical, even when experimental researches were neither abandoned nor had collected scientific results, mainly, during the first stage.

The demands had a very peculiar character: object-substantive, curriculum, didactic, methodological, pedagogical organization, as well as teacher training. It was necessary to do the following: a) to clarify the content and the logic construction of elementary teaching programs in the Russian language and mathematics; b) to prepare instructions for teachers; c) to develop the teaching method at different stages etc.

However, preparation of didactic books was the main and more urgent activity during the second stage. At the elementary level, experimental programs were developed very quickly, as well as a new teaching method and methodological manuals of the Russian language and literature, mathematics, science, arts and music.

### ***Stage III – Censorship, persecution, dissolution and interruption of the system implementation process (1982-1986)***

After twenty-three years of continual work, there came the political fall of one of the main leaders of the project (V. Davidov) and the death of the other (D. Elkonin). Since then, the experiment work in Moscow was interrupted almost completely and the research group was banished. After that, the groups of Kharkov, Kiev and Tula were also banished.

The attacks and negative reactions to the new teaching system lasted for almost five years. The opponents were everywhere: in the government and among teachers as well [3].

In Kharkov, V. Rapkin, being the department chief in one of the institutions of high technical institutions, tried to implement the main ideas of developmental education in the Russian teaching for foreign students. As for Moscow group, one still does not know the impact suffered in terms of persecution of experiment activities in the schools. Probably, in Moscow the works were more damaged than in Kharkov, because it was the center of researches and as it was practically without leadership after the death of Elkonin and the hurt and depression of Davidov.

None of the two main representatives of the system (D. Elkonin and V. Davidov), seem to have published anything about the training activity conception in the Soviet Union between 1982

and 1986. The four works of Elkonin written between 1982 and 1984 approached questions related to the work of A. Leontiev and L. Vygotsky. As for Davidov, just three texts were published about the developmental theory during this period, the first one in 1982 was in Spanish, it was a translation of his book of 1972, “Kinds of Teaching Generalization” [6; 1] published by Pueblo y Educación publishers, Cuba.

The second was a chapter published in Russian in 1983 with the title “Historical Premises of Training Activity”, published in the book “Psychological development of scholars in the process of training activity”. The third was published in English in 1984, entitled “Substantial Generalization and the Dialectical-Materialistic Theory of Thinking”, it was published as a part of the book “Learning and Teaching on a Scientific Basis”, organized by Mariane Hedegaard [7] and published by the Danish university Publisher Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

#### *Stage IV – Implementation of the system as an official alternative of the Ministry for Education (1986-1994)*

The case V. Davidov had a turning point in 1986 when the CPSU let Davidov join the party and head the Psychology Institute and the experimental researches. The sad phase of the country education history was over, which marked the end of censorship, persecution, criticizing and illegality of Davidov as well as all members of Elkonin-Davidov system and opened a stage characterized by implementing the system as an official alternative of the Ministry for Education at the elementary level, especially at the primary level, aiming to try to solve problems of quality that the traditional system of the national education still had.

In 1986, the second most important and most known work of V. Davidov was published with the title “Проблемы развивающего обучения: Опыт теоретического и экспериментального психологического исследования” (Problems of Developmental Teaching: Experimental and Theoretical Psychological Research), which represented the most vivid example of the end of a phase of criticizing and censorship of an ideological character and the beginning of a new moment in the developmental didactic history and the training activity theory.

By publishing this work, the didactic system developed by Elkonin and Davidov, together with numerous researchers and experimental teachers, became more known inside the Soviet Union as well as outside it. The conception of training activity crossed national borders and got followers in the west, mainly, in America, after the book was published in English and Spanish at the same time.

At this time there was also a significant increase in the teachers’ interest in the developmental teaching, associated with the political atmosphere favorable to the theory which started to dominate after V. Davidov was acquitted and the results in the previous stages of the research became known. Little by little, the groups returned to work focusing on clarifying the possibilities and conditions of the developmental teaching system introduction in the mass school [3, p. 16].

In the beginning, the return to the school experiment and the introduction of the training activity theory to the teaching official system was done without no financial support from the government or any other institution. However, the results were immediate in the cities where the process started first. In Kharkov and Krasnodar Krai, for instance, in 1988 only a few teachers were involved in the system implementing, a year later tens of groups were working according to the system and three years later (1991) some hundreds. Apart from this, besides Kharkov, Krasnodar Krai and Moscow, other cities from the regions of Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and the Baltic republics joined the process during this period.

The growing interest in Elkonin-Davidov system coincided with the phase when the Ministry for Education defined the policy of increasing the quality of school teaching, that would be profitable for both parts. The government needed didactic proposals which guaranteed its efficiency in terms of learning and development of the students, facing the traditional teaching system; the team of such a system would fulfil that pre-requisite and needed the necessary financial and political support which the government could give to establish, expand and consolidate the theory.

After the Ministry for Education created the Pedagogical Innovation Institute of the Pedagogical Science Academy of the Soviet Union in 1990, the distinct groups which integrated Elkonin-Davidov system were incorporated to the Institute by V. Davidov, as independent laboratories. Such

partnership that could re-establish the ideal conditions for the development of the work started in 1988.

The developmental teaching began to be incorporated in the educational process in different schools: School n. 91 of Moscow, School n. 17 of Kharkov, School n. 11 of Tula, School n. 106 of Krasnoyarsk were among others. According to a research report published by V. Davidov (1995), Elkonin-Davidov system proposed new programs for the basic subjects at the elementary level. Also new diagnostic instruments were elaborated and proposed at the previous stage, with the objective to verify the development of Elkonin-Davidov system in elementary school students.

Besides these didactic and assessment materials, other books as well as pedagogical manuals were written. Training centers were created in different cities, but one knows very little about the implementation of teachers' professional development programs. This is one of the so many aspects of Elkonin-Davidov system which needed and deserved to be clarified, for its adequate implementation depended, greatly, on the applied teacher development program.

However, three years after the reimplementation of the developmental teaching in the perspective of the training activity theory in the mass school, Elkonin-Davidov system faced a serious problem of disintegration of the socialist field in Europe (1989) and later the fall of the Soviet Union (1991). The choice of new political purposes, in an opposite direction to the one followed in the 20s, generated the partial split of the teaching system, confusion, its almost total stranglehold and drastic cuts on human and financial resources. The regional and political disintegration of the former Soviet Union made the work with different groups of Elkonin-Davidov system much more difficult. During this phase three big challenges were faced: 1) the groups whose basis were outside the Russian Republic were segregated from the Pedagogical Innovation Institute; 2) the drastic reduction of financial and institutional support from the Russian groups and the break off with the groups and research centers of Ukraine, Latvia etc.; 3) the need to continue the teacher training programs and to develop the instructional and methodological materials.

#### *Stage V –Internationalization and consolidation of the system (1994-up to now)*

During this phase, Elkonin-Davidov system became flexible enough to adapt to the new times and grow and consolidate till the end of the XX century and first fifteen years of the XXI century. Three important events mark the period: 1) the internationalization of the theory with the foundation of the International Association of Developmental Teaching of Elkonin-Davidov system; 2) the consolidation of the system from its transformation into one of three official systems of elementary teaching in some of the new countries which were created from the old Soviet republics; 3) the death of V. Davidov.

As a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, V. Davidov, with the help of V. Repkin and V. Lvovsky, managed to found the International Association of Developmental Teaching of Elkonin-Davidov system. In December 1994 a congress was organized to establish the basis for such an association, in which representatives of 43 regions of the Russian Federation as well as several countries of the EU took part, that together chose V. Davidov as the first president and V. Repkin as the vice-president of the Association Council. The headquarters was established in School n. 1133, of Moscow.

The Association was born with the aim to gather researchers, professors, trainers, school principals, teacher training colleges and universities of the former Soviet republics that were spread because the disintegration of the country and, at the same time, continue the works of new political, economic and educational conditions. Immediately the groups of research that were still working joined the Association.

Two years later, partly influenced by the positive results from the Association, Elkonin-Davidov system was a success after simultaneous decisions of the Ministries for Education of Russia and Ukraine to make it in 1996, along with Zankov and traditional systems, one of the three state systems of elementary teaching. Since then, the system has lived its phase of higher consolidation and national and international recognition. During the recent years enrollment at schools of the net reached their higher historical level representing almost 10% of the total of students enrolled in the state system at elementary school.

However, the death of V. Davidov in March 19<sup>th</sup> 1998, at the age of 68, left the system and the

association without their most important, influent and charismatic leader. Supposedly, V. Repkin was the most likely to substitute Davidov, because besides being the vice-president, he was also the most representative person of the system to be alive, but the position was taken by A. Vorontsov.

In the second half of this decade the system got a new task with the beginning of the theoretical studies about the problems associated with the developmental teaching at high school for students of adolescent age. V. Davidov and V. Repkin wrote some works together. Several years later these researches formulated the bases for the adolescence school of the system under the responsibility of professor B. Elkonin, son of D. Elkonin (2000). The project was associated with significant growth of the number of students who finished elementary school and prepared to start high school. Up to that moment, the system had not had a pedagogical proposal which could welcome the adolescent student at its disposal and the official system did not guarantee quality. Since then, the number of works related to the developmental teaching of the adolescent student grew fast.

Nowadays, Elkonin-Davidov system works in 2,500 schools; it has a working team that counts over 1,800 members among researchers, collaborators, professors and school principals spreading along 72 regions of Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Kazakhstan and Belarus etc.; Ukraine, specially Kharkov, is the most important center in the implementation of Elkonin-Davidov system in mass practice; and among its main proposals there are: a) introduce researches for the development of a holistic concept of training activity at schools and universities, as well as appropriate training courses, didactic books and pedagogical materials for teachers and diagnosis tools which permit to assess the effects of developmental teaching; b) create methods and forms of organization of exams at schools and universities which worked with developmental teaching; c) create a pre-service training and training for teachers, psychologist,s tutors, school directors in developmental teaching; d) offer school support, laboratories (mock schools), to improve curricula, programs, didactic books, methods and forms of developmental teaching; e) create a common space of information for all members of the Association such as information banks, sites, lectures, journals and seminars; f) create the subprogram "Children of the Association" with the aim to establish a permanent entailment with the students of Elkonin-Davidov net etc.

### Final considerations

It is possible to conclude that the the activity of developmental didactic grew and cooperated for several decades with three different theoretical systems: Galperin-Talizina system, Zankov system and Elkonin-Davidov system. However, the latter has received most recognition in and out of the former Soviet Union, associated, first of all, with the prestige achieved by its main representatives, D. Elkonin, V. Davidov and V. Repkin; secondly, with the numerous contributions made in the practical and theoretical aspects with the development of several theories (psychological theory of training activity, theory of the teaching of training activity, teacher training theory, theory of the substantive generalization, theory of training-didactic modeling, theory of the diagnosis of the training activity, teacher training theory, theory of the collaboration in the training activity) and with the implementation of these theories in a wide net of experimental schools and in the official elementary teaching system and high school of different former Soviet republics.

Elkonin-Davidov system founded numerous working groups and research centers in several cities of the former Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia etc.), it created an efficient elementary and high school teaching program and established institutions of teacher training which are still working.

The fundamental focus of this system continues to be developed in the training activity theory which main content is self-transformation of the subject by means of the critical thought formation, which is constituted basing on scientific concepts and mental actions teaching. Elkonin recognized that teaching played the main role in the mental development, firstly, by means of the content of assimilated knowledge.

Brazil still faces great difficulties in its teaching-learning system. Numerous research groups, specially attached to post graduation programs in education, since the second half of the 90s, an important movement to the historical-cultural psychology and developmental didactics started with the aim to find theoretical-methodological sustainability of the organization of teaching-learning

processes problem, mainly in basic education (child education, elementary school and high school). This is one of the reasons why the work and thought of important Soviet scholars in the field of psychology and didactics, such as L. Vigotski, A. Leontiev, A. Luria, S. Rubinstein, D. Elkonin, L. Zankov, P. Galperin, V. Davidov, V. Repkin started to be systematic object of study. The idea is to conceive a didactic theory which takes into consideration the theoretical supports of the mentioned authors, related to the development, teaching, learning, subject, training activity, diagnosis etc., and that, at the same time, responds to the demands of society, education, school and the Brazilian students. In such sense, contributions of the Elkonin-Davidov system, are a significant source of analysis, reflection and theoretical and methodological inspiration.

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## СИСТЕМА ЭЛЬКОНИНА-ДАВЫДОВА: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ (1958-2015)

**Аннотация.** Развивающая дидактическая деятельность возникает на основе предположений Выготского о роли образования и преподавания в развитии психики человека. В статье рассматривается, в частности, система Эльконина-Давыдова: а) устанавливаются ее основные эволюционные этапы, начиная с систематизации ее генезиса и исторического процесса; б) анализируются одновременно теоретический и практический вклад, осуществленный посредством лабораторных исследований в экспериментальных школах и базовом образовании. Статья написана на основе работ на русском, украинском, английском и испанском языках, большинство из которых неизвестно в Бразилии.

**Ключевые слова:** преподавание, развитие, деятельность, система Эльконина-Давыдова.

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