

## Relationships between the senses of the study activity and theoretical thought<sup>1</sup>

*Las relaciones entre los sentidos de la actividad de estudio y el pensamiento teórico*

*As relações entre os sentidos da atividade de estudo e o pensamento teórico*

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**Abstract:** In this work we propose, based on the historical-cultural approach, to carry out a theoretical study about the meanings of the study activity, especially in the school tasks proposed by the teachers, in order to enable the development of theoretical thinking. In the course of the text we are dedicated to solve the following problem: What are the meanings of the activity of study? Do they influence the performance of pedagogical tasks? In the search for answers we bring the studies of Leontiev (1978; 2004), Davidov (1978), Davidov and Slobódchikov (1991). We show that the ways in which the teacher proposes the school tasks are important for the formation of motives that drive the activity of study, senses and the development of theoretical thinking.

**Keywords:** Study activity. Senses. Theoretical thinking.

**Resumen:** En este trabajo nos proponemos desde el enfoque histórico-cultural, realizar un estudio teórico acerca de los sentidos de la actividad de estudio, especialmente en las tareas escolares propuestas por los profesores, en intuito de posibilitar el desarrollo del pensamiento teórico. En el transcurso del texto nos dedicamos a resolver el siguiente problema: ¿Qué son los sentidos de la actividad de estudio? ¿ejercen influencia en la ejecución de las tareas pedagógicas? En la búsqueda de respuestas traemos los estudios de Leontiev (1978; 2004), Davidov (1978), Davidov y Slobódchikov (1991). Evidenciamos que las formas como el profesor propone las tareas son importantes para la formación de motivos para la actividad de estudio, de sentidos y de desarrollo del pensamiento teórico.

**Palabras clave:** Actividad de estudio. Sentidos. Pensamiento teórico.

**Resumo:** Neste trabalho nos propomos, a partir do enfoque histórico-cultural, realizar um estudo teórico acerca dos sentidos da atividade de estudo, especialmente nas tarefas escolares propostas pelos professores, no intuito de possibilitar o desenvolvimento do pensamento teórico. No transcurso do texto nos dedicamos a resolver as seguintes questões: O que são os sentidos da atividade de estudo? Eles exercem influência na execução das tarefas pedagógicas? Na busca por respostas trazemos os estudos de Leontiev (1978; 2004), Davidov (1978), Davidov e Slobódchikov (1991). Evidenciamos que as formas como o professor propõe tarefas são importantes para a formação de motivos para a atividade de estudo, de sentidos e de desenvolvimento do pensamento teórico.

**Palavras-chave:** Atividade de estudo. Sentidos. Pensamento teórico.

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## Introduction

This work is the result of dialogues established between us, the authors of this article, professors and all the ones involved in the doctoral process, in Brazil and in Cuba, all with the same theoretical base, the historical-cultural theory. This theory had as main proponent L. S. Vigotski (1896-1934) and the objective was to create a materialist psychology to understand the human being in its totality. They were joined by Vygotsky initially A. Luria (1902-1977) and A. N. Leontiev (1903-1979) forming what some called troika and, subsequently, several followers, including V. Davidov (1930-1998).

By means of the theoretical apparatus constructed by the precursors of the historical-cultural theory, in the present text we will be guided in Leontiev<sup>ii</sup> and Davidov<sup>iii</sup> for believing that with their studies it is possible to reflect the pedagogical tasks of the professors so that they favor the learning of the contents produced by humanity during the study activity process.

Knowing the meaning that the subject has of the activity he performs is vital to know the reason for his motivation, the driving and energizing source of his behavior, his attitudes and being able to predict the steps that mark the present and future path of the subject. You can encourage their development support it with resources that help you move forward, even in the most difficult moments of their life.

It is basic then, if we want to guide the behavior and attitude toward the study of schoolchildren, we should investigate and determine the meaning of their study activity. This would allow knowing the motives that guide and influence them, help them to modify it in case they are shod, induce them the formation of new senses that support them and impel them in their learning process, and motivate them to study.

Depending on the different social development situations in which the students meet, the psychological formations called senses of the study activity will be configured and, depending on how they are constructed by the students, their activity will be true, authentic and consistent with the location in which they are located, with the space and context where they are, and contribute to the teaching-learning process, or they will be out of place, decontextualized and displaced with dysfunctional and sabotaged behaviors in school.

If students perform their study activities motivated to learn and understand what they are taught, if they internalized the importance of what they have learned for the future and are aware of the value of their personal development effort, they will engage in a real study activity. Otherwise, it will be a simple act of study that will not guide them in the pursuit of essences or in the development of their theoretical thinking, but rather will be conducted with superficial behaviors and strategies, such as wanting to pass grade in school or studying for obligation, and will not appreciate the real learning pleasure.

We start from the assumption that the study activity influences the formation of theoretical thinking, motivating the argumentation of the students' ideas in front of their colleagues and their positioning in front of the others' arguments. For this, it depends on the linguistic culture already acquired.

It is for this reason that, in this work, we propose from the historical-cultural approach:

- Conduct a theoretical study on the meaning of study activity in school students from studies conducted by Leontiev (1978; 2004) and theoretical study on the development of theoretical thinking by Davidov (1978), Davidov and Slobódchikov (1991).
- Demonstrate the importance of this knowledge as a necessary resource that should be used as a strategy by the teacher in his daily classroom work to promote and encourage student development in order to perfect the teachers' work to fulfill their role as educator of future generations.
- Make recommendations to educators to apply this knowledge.
- Solve the following problem: What are the meanings of the study activity? Do they influence the execution of pedagogical tasks?

### **The senses and the development of theoretical thinking**

By acting in the environment in which he lives, the Human Being modifies nature (external) and also modifies his (internal) psychic functions. Unlike other animals, the human being is able to perform an activity oriented towards a certain purpose, such activity allows a mediation between the individual and objective reality.

According to Leontiev (1978; 2004), performing activities promotes the mental development of individuals and at certain periods of a life are more crucial than others, they are called guiding activities, namely: play in childhood, the study of school age and the work of youth. The change in steering activity should not be understood in a watertight way, that is, a process and, as such, occurs gradually, in the face of the contradictory relations established.

The structure of this activity, according to Leontiev (1978; 2004), consists of: needs and motives, actions, operations and object (ends). In the process of development, the individual modifies nature to satisfy their needs, as they are satisfied, social relationships become more complex and new needs arise. Needs are transformed into reasons for activity, that is, they promote activity. Leontiev (1978) notes that there is a need linked to biological issues and there are objective needs that have the task of guiding and regulating the specific activity of the subject in the objective. Objective needs are those acquired from social practice, those that stimulate and direct activity.

According to Leontiev (1978; 2004), the dynamics between the motive (impulse) and the object of human activity (final) is constituted by a fundamental and generic point: social relations. They are dialectically linking the subject and the object of the individual's activity, shrouded in dynamics such as non-linear actions. Reason is not always connected immediately to its end. To satisfy a need, the individual constantly performs actions and operations that do not directly come into contact with the object / object of the activity.

The activity consists of actions that are executed by operations, evidencing a distance

between motive and purpose, that is, “[...] the separation between the motive and the object of the individual activity is the result of the division in different operations of a complex activity [...]” (LEONTIEV, 2004, p.83). The individual performs a chain of actions - not additives - in response to a task, to an end that occurs under certain conditions. In this sense, actions are related to the purposes and operations of conditions, that is, they are the means by which an action is performed. The genesis of action is in the relations with activity, and the operation is in the transformation of action that becomes automated and used as a condition for carrying out another action (LEONTIEV, 1978).

The reasons, in turn, may be understandable or effective. The former are those in which the individual understands and recognizes the importance of the activity, however, they are not enough to promote the actions. Already the effective ones are those that drive the actions. According to Leontiev (1978; 2004), understandable reasons can be effective and vice versa. In this sense, we argue that the pedagogical tasks provided in the study activity must be effective motifs, either creating new motifs or transforming understandable motives into effective motivators.

For example, a student who needs to conduct an assessment, but is easily distracted, goes out for a walk, then leaves the activity. This shows that his motive is not very understandable and is not effective enough to sustain his attention in the study. However, learning and/or gaining a good grade in assessment can become an effective reason, becoming a new objectification and, consequently, a new motivated activity that leads you to study.

The relations between motive and the end of activity are mediated by concepts of senses and meanings<sup>iv</sup>. These are considered by Leontiev (2004) as the main components of the structure of human consciousness. According to the author, “meaning is the generalization of reality that is crystallized and fixed in a sensible vector, usually the word or phrase” (LEONTIEV, 2004, p. 100).

The meanings are always social, are objective, are results of human activity and, therefore, produced historically and socially. They include scientific, philosophical, and artistic knowledge. They achieve conscious reflection (thought) by language, by the appropriation of knowledge produced and reflected by humanity historically. When reading a book, for example, it is not the book that enters our consciousness and its meanings expressed by other individuals who already reflected them and registered them using language (concepts).

Meaning is present objectively, it is the reflection of reality independent of the subjective relation that the individual in particular can have with it. What this particular meaning represents to the individual is part of another concept, the senses. Leontiev (1978) initially speaks of objective meaning for the subject, then justifies that, to avoid duplication of terms, he will call the latter the sense.

Senses and meanings are two concepts that are interconnected, which are interrelated, since the senses are manifested in meanings. The senses are personal and are formed from the appropriation of meanings. Conscious or rational reflection depends on the subjective and

personal meaning that meanings have for the individual.

In human activity, Leontiev (2004) emphasizes that the correlation between actions and objective operations to achieve an end is given by the rational and conscious sense given by the individual during the activity. Then, “[...] conscious sense translates the relationship of motive to the end” (LEONTIEV, 2004, p. 103), starting from “conscious objective phenomena” (LEONTIEV, 2004, p. 105). Following this line of thought, senses and meanings are determined by social consciousness. In general, this awareness is formed from individual social practice, not only at school, however, but the school in fulfilling its social function as facilitator of access to knowledge contributes to the psychological development of students.

The importance of the work of the teacher in the course of the study activity is there to propose pedagogical tasks that favor new motives and meanings that are effective and that allow the development of theoretical thinking.

Asbahr (2011), in his doctoral thesis, investigated how the fourth grade students of a public school in São Paulo/Brazil attributed meaning to the study activity. She found that the students had a great need to learn, they wanted to learn things related to the contents proposed by the teacher, they were much asked to copy from the blackboard to the notebook (mechanical) and, therefore, they became empty actions of meaning and motives that were only understandable and ineffective.

The author cites the example of a child who has repeated the fourth grade three times and who has undergone a transformation in the second semester of the school year. The student had a history of rejections regarding the activities proposed by the teacher, he was warned that he could fail again. Besides the possibility of disapproval, the child broke his arm and could not write, the teacher then asked to have the follow-up of the researcher, the Asbahr. She, in turn, suggested that the student read poems. He liked the rhymes, realized the reading strategy used by the researcher and was interested in reading more poems, then asked for her help to write a love letter using the poems he read. Asbahr (2011) concluded that reading made little sense to the student, since he could not quite understand what he was reading.

Saviani (2011) warns that pedagogical activity needs to consider two fundamental aspects: the selection of content to be taught and the forms appropriate to it. In relation to the first, it is defended the teaching of the classics, that is, those contents historically signed as fundamental, as essential. Such content must be studied in its dynamics and in constant relation with the present. As for forms, it is the “organization of the means of communication (space of content, time and procedures) through which progressively each individual performs, in the form of a second nature, the humanity historically produced” (SAVIANI, 2011, p. 13).

The ways in which the homework is organized by the teacher are of essential importance for the formation of reasons for conducting the study activity. When teaching a calculation, for example, if the teacher presents only his mechanical form of resolution, the student may not find sense for this task. On the other hand, if it teaches the concepts of

calculation and its logic, it will favor its understanding and use in several other situations of life, not only in the school.

Therefore, if the teacher concentrates on simple activities, which do not oblige the student to make a minimal effort, the activity of study does not receive meaning. It is performed mechanically as an automaton and without understanding the content or meaning of the activity being performed. This leads them to lose the motivation to study and not to strive for it. In fact, they perform a study action, not a study activity and about what it would be, it's time to turn the act into activity.

Therefore, in order for students to be motivated to carry out their study activity, it is necessary for them to find sense and personal meaning in their study activity. There should be an initial moment you perform the analysis and initial abstraction from the observation of the object of study, allowing them to extract the data and information needed to be processed to follow the method of abstract thought to the concrete, fulfilling the following tasks of the study task:

1. Transformation of the problem data: This is to perform the essential analysis to determine the properties (essential characteristics of the object), to extract the essential connection between the essential characteristics of the object of study, in order to separate the relation that constitutes the base essential genetics, the constituent cell.

2. Modeling of this relation: The model establishes the essential components and relations between the properties of the object of study, so that a representation can be made and a suitable image of it can be constructed.

3. Transformation of the model: In order to study the relation of substantial importance in the general process of assimilation of theoretical knowledge, because it allows to understand the specificity of the orientation in a peculiar plane. Being able to apply and adapt the model to particular situations and particular cases in concrete, thus manifesting the only thing in diversity.

In this way, with this intellectual effort, the motivation and the mobilization of all the energies of your personality are guaranteed to achieve the teaching objectives, propitiating a construction with sense and meaning with conscious learning and development.

Davidov (1978), Davidov and Slobódchikov (1991) devoted himself to the activity of study. For him, quality education promotes psychic development and the ability to think through concepts (theoretical thinking). Libâneo analyzes Davidov's studies and concludes:

At the heart of Davydov's thought is Vygotsky's idea that learning and teaching are universal forms of mental development. Teaching promotes the appropriation of culture and the development of thought, two processes articulated among themselves, forming a unity. We can express this idea in two ways: a) while the student forms scientific concepts, incorporates thought processes and vice versa; b) as it forms the theoretical thought, develops mental actions, through the solution of problems that provoke the mental activity of the student. With this, the student assimilates the theoretical knowledge, skills and abilities related to this knowledge (LIBÂNEO, 2004, p. 14).

Therefore, it is recommended that teachers reach the formation of teaching and



learning situations that lead to the formation and construction of guiding bases of action (GBA) that propitiate the construction of their knowledge and development. For this, traditional teaching, where the teacher plays the active role, must be broken in order to provide situations where the student plays the active role and receives a space of time to be able to think, express his ideas and propose his solutions to the problems that he himself elaborates and the teacher proposes.

However, when the student is able to find his personal meaning and meaning for his study activity and the tasks of study are fulfilled, as Davidov (1978) states, conditions and premises are created for the student to develop his theoretical thinking, surpassing its tendency to empirical thought. Thought allows students to find their way in search of the essences of a particular object of study, in working with concepts, in establishing the essential relations of what they learn, in deducing the laws that govern movement and development. This allows them to understand the world in which they live.

About theoretical thinking, one can raise some basic ideas that justify their need in the formation of the individual and the importance of promoting their development from the earliest years of school education so that empirical thinking is overcome in the formation of their senses and meanings about what they learn.

Theoretical thinking is of paramount importance because it is opposed to the empirical, proper to a child, which remains at the level of appearances and simplistic representations, because “it is based on the principle of purely formal and abstract generality, since it works with direct data of reality and in reality” (DAVIDOV, 1978, p. 199), and therefore perceives it as fragmented, disjointed, then one sees the isolated properties of the concrete object.

Whereas, in contrast, theoretical thinking transcends empirical thinking because it departs from genesis, from premises, conditions, seeks to discover the essence through essential abstraction and deduce the deeper laws and principles governing object development, defined and produced in concepts through essential synthesis, establishing relationships, the essential internal connections between the essential properties of the object of study and its development, seeing it interconnected with other objects, since it finds the only thing different in the path of the ascension of the abstract to the concrete (DAVIDOV, 1978).

Knowing the properties of the object of study and the essential relations between them, what constitutes a property in itself of said object, as well as its internal contradictions; According to Davidov (1978), theoretical thinking is successful in reflecting the phenomenon in its development, in its evolution, and not only in its direct and external aspect, which is addressed by empirical thought. In this way, understanding, predicting, applying to daily life the principles and laws that govern it in solving scientific and technical problems of society are achieved.

Only theoretical thought is what allows man to orient himself and to approach ever closer to the essence of things, in order to allow him to progressively reveal the conditions and contradictions that engender the object of study. To determine the attributes of what one

intends to define through concepts and categories, which are nothing more than the essences reflection and the essentials relations of the object of study at a level of depth possible for man at a specific historical moment.

In studies conducted by Davidov and his followers it has been shown that it is possible to train and develop theoretical thinking of students from the earliest times, you only have to create the conditions that foster as they are the creation of a teaching-learning situation which condition active learning, the problematization of teaching and learning situations.

The importance of theoretical thinking (dialectic and complex by nature) is that it guides man in the essential generalization and establishment of essential relations between the essences in the process of construction and elaboration of concepts by the method of ascension of abstract thought to concrete thought, that during this integration process, together with the conditions and contradictions that give rise to it, actions are taken that can transform the object and the reflection that it has.

For what has been presented so far, we propose to make a set of recommendations that contribute to the formation of the meaning and personal sense of the study activity and, as fulfilling the study tasks proposed by Davidov (1978), contributes to the conformation and development of students' theoretical thinking.

The recommendations to teachers, all based on the theoretical contributions of the historical-cultural perspective, revolve around the relation between content and form. Some have already been identified in the course of the text, we have rescued them and presented them along with others, namely:

1. To create teaching and learning situations where active learning is encouraged to students, and where the reality of the study is problematized. Be very attentive to the students' spontaneous words and give opportunities for them to express their understandings and needs (meanings), since the senses are expressed in the meanings;
2. To encourage greater participation of students in the elaboration of problems and in the elaboration of strategies and ways of finding solutions;
3. Give time and space for students to think, reflect and give opportunity to make mistakes without fearing the mistakes;
4. Avoid evaluations and stigmatization of students for their error;
5. Promote the learning of concepts from a fact and from this conduct the actions of thought to unravel its essence, in order to create effective reasons for meaningful learning;
6. Allow the student to have knowledge and information about the importance and meaning of what he learns for his personal past, present and future, for science, technology and for society as a whole;
7. Do not give students the knowledge or the contents of their learning in a fully elaborated, finished, ready, but provide the conditions so that, with different levels of help, they can elaborate them by themselves and in interaction with each other. However, if you



abstain from your teaching job, the help of teachers with explanations, clarifications and critical questions should be present;

8. To take into account the dynamics of the group and to foster the creation of areas of eminent development that promote them and lead them to development.

Based on the theoretical basis adopted, we defend the work of the teacher as fundamental importance, it is the teacher who drives the teaching and learning process, is the one who has the highest degree of concentration on the content of the classroom, who needs to be creative in devising ways to engage students in the study activity and who will create opportunities for these students to be active subjects who can make attempts and make mistakes, that can use the already internalized concepts for the analysis of general situations of daily life and school, among many other possibilities.

We emphasize that these are indicative to help the reflection of teachers in the definition of school tasks. We do not have a “cookbook” ready and finished, we do not even believe it exists. Our efforts consist of constant approximations with the concepts of meanings and their influence in the execution of school tasks to enable the development of theoretical thinking.

We cannot fail to emphasize that we have adopted the classical authors (Leontiev and Davidov) as the basis for the present work, but in fact several researchers have contributed effectively to the investigations of historical-cultural theory and study activity around the world, the level of information for future research, we only pointed out some in Brazil and Cuba.

In Brazil, we can mention mainly authors related to historical-critical pedagogy such as Saviani (2011), Duarte (2013), Martins (2013), and authors related to Development Education as members of the “Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Didática Desenvolvimental e Profissionalização Docente (GEPEDI)” and “Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisa da Atividade Pedagógica (GEPAPe)”. In Cuba, we can mention, among others, Beatón (2013) and Serra (2017). In addition, there is a researcher from Cuba who lived the last stage of his life in Brazil, Gonzáles Rey (1949-2019).

## Conclusions

In the historical moment in which we find ourselves, if we want our students to be active and transforming citizens of society, to fluctuate in their rhythm and to be beings with a high level of development, we must promote the formation of meanings and personal senses of the contents of their activities study, so that they can develop their theoretical thinking that allows them to unravel and reach the essence of the object of their study.

We begin the text proposing to investigate the role of the senses for the study activity, specifically to study the tasks proposed by the teachers, in order to develop the theoretical thinking of the students and we can say the motivation and personal senses of the study activity, determine behavior, interest and performance, as well as the degree of awareness of

students during the learning of certain contents in the process of building their knowledge.

Teachers should have minimal knowledge of the reasons and meanings of their students' study activity in planning and organizing their educational teaching process in order to achieve conscious learning and development. In this way, conditions can be created for the transformation of understandable motives into effective motives, those that make sense for students and boost their study activity.

The teacher has a central role in the teaching and learning process, it is up to them to know the essential contents to be studied and the ways to do it. The proposed pedagogical tasks must take into account the real student, he must be understood as an active subject that appropriates social meanings and analyzes them to create his motivations and give meaning to the activities in which he participates.

Educational tasks can also create general and meaningful reasons that, in addition to encouraging action, can give a specific meaning to what the student does. Another important task is to educate students about their motives, because with this they can acquire a more lucid and efficient view of studies and acquire new behaviors.

The school must provide access to the knowledge and concepts produced by humanity historically and create conditions for the student to produce new knowledge of those already developed. In this process the student develops his superior psychic functions, which generates the conditions for theoretical thinking capable of thinking by concepts, able to analyze theoretically the social practice as a whole.

The recommendations made here, cannot be understood mechanically and linearly, are just some indications that can be considered as support points for reflections with teachers, based on the terms of their concrete reality. We do not intend to exhaust the question here, but rather to reinforce the need to reflect the activity of study and, especially, the role of the teacher in proposing pedagogical tasks.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Translated by Lívia Miranda Saraiva.

<sup>ii</sup> A. N. Leontiev (1903-1979), Soviet psychologist, participated in the initial team of Vygotsky together with Luria, participated in the first generation of the psychological school. He was a proponent of the Theory of Activity.

<sup>iii</sup> V. V. Davidov (1930-1998), Soviet psychologist, was the third generation of the psychological school, he started from the studies of Vygotsky and Leontiev to create his own version of the Theory of Activity, he deepened in the study activity and the developmentalist education.

<sup>iv</sup> In the texts studied, the words “senses” and “meanings” appear as synonyms. Both forms will be used in the course of this article with the understanding that they are only translation variations.

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