

The Debate about Methods of Using the Laboratory Plan (Dalton Plan) During History and Social Studies Classes in the “Istorik-Marxist” Journal in 1927

Ayrat H. Tuhvatullin¹

¹Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Correspondence: Ayrat H. Tuhvatullin, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya street, 18, Kazan 420008, Russia. E-mail: tayrat@mail.ru

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Abstract

The importance of the problem investigated is caused by modern trends in the Russian educational system which aims to seek new teaching methods for various disciplines including historical ones. The reference to debates about teaching methods in History and Social Studies in the second half of 1920s allows to make a practical use of the ideas that were never realized because the unified Soviet educational system was established in 1930s. The purpose of the article is in investigation of the debate that took place in 1927 in “Istorik-Marxist” journal, as well as the analysis of the main problems that arise in the process of using the Dalton Plan and ways of their solution. The leading approaches to investigating the problem given are the comparative-historical method and the essential-substantial analysis. The article shows in retrospect the condition of teaching historical and public disciplines in the Soviet system of education, examines the process of the debate about methods of using the Dalton Plan in the “Istorik-Marxist” journal, reveals certain complications that teachers of the second half of 1920s faced and offers the ideas of their solution. The ideas of the article can be useful for researchers in the field of education history, varieties of pragmatic methods use while teaching the Humanities, the USSR public opinion in the second half of 1920s.

Keywords: the “Istorik-Marxist” journal, methods of teaching History, Social Studies, the system of education, the Dalton Plan

1. Introduction

1.1 Urgency of the Issue

The key approach to teaching in the modern education is the teaching process as a systematically arranged teacher-student interaction aiming at solving and revealing educational and development tasks. Modern school should equip the growing generation with the basic means of socialization (Khoraskina, 2010). Accordingly, the up-to-date content of education at all stages including higher education is developing together with the world trends in informational, tolerant and civil society and demands of making up a free and harmonious personality.

In the post-industrial society education ceased to be a way of acquiring generally recognized and ready knowledge. The perfection of education consists in rethinking the scientific knowledge and solving a number of problems including mistakes and delusions. Revealing the truth of knowledge is now up to a student. On the other hand, the majority of pedagogical theories of the past century and educational practices were guided by the idea of achieving some definite educational standards.

In the beginning of the XXth century the Dalton Plan maker, American teacher E. Parkhurst considered that its main goal was the development of cognitive activity, initiative and leadership skills of students with individual work being the best way of mastering means and techniques of acquiring knowledge (Petukhova, 2010). The American experience aroused great interest in the Soviet Russia. The most important goal of the laboratory-brigade method as a Russian variety of the Dalton Plan in 1920s was acquiring the basic skills of team work and schedule discipline taking into account everyone’s personal theoretical job done. In 1930s the Dalton Plan was criticized and forgotten as it did not give any effective results. Only in 1990s when the principle of alternative teaching methods got into the Russian pedagogical community the interest in the laboratory method of teaching History and Social Studies in schools came back. It is important to note the fact that modern

Russian schoolchildren find it difficult to apply the knowledge they get to real life situations to be able to explain the phenomena of a modern society (Shuvalova, 1995). Thus, now we have the necessity of searching new methods of further educational system perfection in accordance with the XXI century demands.

1.2 Exploring the Importance of the Problem

A lot of teachers of 1920s made and comprehended active methods of teaching on the basis of the research method wide application in contrast to the “ready knowledge” method, that was the leading one in the classical system of education in the Russian Empire.

The research method was based on independent practical activity of students that is gathering information from different sources, its processing and getting new facts. This method worked out a special type of scientific thinking, gave the basis of empirical perception of the world and the society. The Dalton Plan followers (Blonsky, 1924; Gorbunov, 1925; Zhadovsky, 1925; Kalashnikov, 1927; Merzon, 1925; Shatzky, 1925 and others) called not to refuse from team work of non-laboratory type (lessons, excursions), but connect the class materials to life, modern trends and carefully think over plans of studying the material and make use of the research method in the process of making up tasks and so on (Kudryavtzev, 1990; Guseva, 2010; Kalutzkaya, 2008).

In the current context exploring the debate on the basic Dalton Plan methods in the “Istorik-Marxist” journal will allow for revealing the main problems that aroused in 1920s for Soviet teachers and scientists in the process of using the methods on practice.

1.3 “Istorik-Marxist” Journal

In 1926 the Community of historians-Marxists (CHM) with the Academy of Communism and the Institute of the Communist Academy History came to the decision about publishing a new historical journal. The first issue was published in the “Bolshevik” journal (№23-24, 1926 г.) and the “Pravda” newspaper from 15th June and 7th July 1926.

The structure of the “Istorik -Marxist” journal was following:

1. Articles
2. Reports
3. Materials
4. Teaching History
5. Criticism, bibliography and reviews
6. Chronicles

The “Teaching History” section in 1926-1931 published the reports of the methodological section of the Historians-Marxists Community members, as well as reviews of text-books and methodical books. The section also gave place to the debates about methods and means of teaching History and Social Studies at secondary and high schools and universities. A.I. Alatortzeva notes, “Careful thematic selection and the original nature of investigations as well as their high scientific level and urgency constitute the basis of the journal editorial board work principles.” Their contemporaries paid attention to the popularity of the new issues among scientists, teachers and historians-methodists. “The “Istorik-Marxist” journal reflected the main guidelines of the research, scientific-methodological and propagandistic work of the Community” (Alatortzeva, 1979). In 1941 the journal was unified with the “Historical Journal”.

1.4 Hypothesis of the Research

The analysis of research works in the field of the problem given demonstrated that the issues of the debates about means of teaching History and Social Studies still lack careful investigation in the context of the Soviet and Russian education. This fact allows to formulate the research hypothesis of the current problem: exploring themes of debates in the “Istorik -Marxist” journal can reveal the main problems that Soviet educators and social scientists faced in the context of teaching History and Social Studies at different educational stages in 1920s.

2. Methodological Framework

To check the hypothesis the author used the complex of various complementary methods:

The author analysed dissertations and literature sources devoted to the investigation of using the Dalton Plan and the condition of the Soviet school system in 1920s – early 1930s; studied the materials about the problems of teaching History and Social Studies in schools and universities of various types in the “Istorik-Marxist” journal for 1926-1931.

When analysing literature sources the author used the following methods of historical research:

The essential-substantial analysis is based on finding and explaining the facts that are hidden from the superficial observation and are naturally not only original and individual. Therefore, in order to reveal the essence of the phenomena investigated we should use description as the material for general conclusions. Description and analysis of the phenomena essence are interconnected and interrelated steps of knowledge. Description is not a chaotic list of information pieces about the problem pictured but a consistent statement with its logics and sense.

Each object of a historical research combines a majority of intercrossed historical process spheres but one historian is unable to cover the whole range of their interrelations. A historian has to limit a research object to only several sectors of the problem studied. That is why the article shows the research of quite a wide issue of the Dalton Plan use methods in the framework of a short but substantial and having far-reaching consequences debate in 1927 in the "Istorik -Marxist" journal.

The following method used in the current investigation is comparative-historical. The possibility and necessity of applying this method are stipulated by the nature of the cognitive object that is historical reality as the unity of the general, the repeating and the individual or original in any phenomena and processes.

The degree of investigations in the field of the compared event should be similar in each case, because if there is lack of research in the field of one of the events compared, it can be taken for the lack of their development. This may cause errors in conclusions. Thus, a detail description of the research objects in the result of application of the descriptive-narrative method leads to the productive use of the comparative-historical method.

3. Results

3.1 Peculiarities of Teaching History and Social Studies in the Soviet School in the First Half of 1920s

The modern system of Russian education pay great attention to self-control, practical importance of the material studied and the ability to use it in real life. Similar principles were the basis of the Soviet school in 1920s.

The pre-revolutionary classical school did not encourage self-control of students. The in-class system with the teacher's authority prevailed. That is why the classroom-lesson system became the main critical point for Soviet educational specialists. After the 1917 revolution they started to seek new forms and systems of educational process organization. There were plenty of naïve and unjustified ideas in the context of "control-free education". The following general school teaching principles were offered: "we need to make a natural control-free educational establishment where a child gets the chance to develop naturally". "When teaching a child, be a child" and others. Such education was supposed to promote more effective development of students' thinking activity.

Teachers-Marxists such as N.K. Krupskaya, A.V. Lunacharsky, M.N. Pokrovsky, A.P. Pinkevich, V.M. Pozner and others considered school as a tool for "spiritual liberation of the nation" and connected it to the state policy and bolshevik ideas.

The score system of evaluation was rejected as well as sanctions, homework and examinations. A form to form transfer and school final results depend on teachers' references at the Teachers Council including the general level of knowledge and the results of their class work. Brigades consisting of several students replaced traditional classes and the lessons transformed into laboratory classes. The main knowledge acquiring loading was imposed on students, while the teacher's task was just monitoring.

The previous methods of teaching History and old textbooks were said to be unsuitable for teaching young generation. The Head of the Public Education Commissariate A.V. Lunacharsky and his Deputy M.N. Pokrovsky started to reject the necessity of systematic historical education because they really worried that the teachers might start using old bourgeois textbooks in their work (Lunacharsky, 1918). Thus, M.N. Pokrovsky wrote: "...the History taught even on the 2nd step of the working faculties, was worked out by the XVIth century humanists, but we still study it. It has been four hundred years! In the previous times the division into ancient, medieval and modern history was justified but now it is utterly senseless!" (Pokrovsky, 1924)

Instead of Russian History and General History they suggested teaching the Labour History and Social Studies that still kept separate elements of a graditional historical course but with careful facts selection in the context of the Marxist social development paradigm.

In October 1918 All-Russian Central Executive Committee of RSFSR approved "The Statute of the united labour school" that changed all pre-revolution schools. School divided into two steps: the first one was for 8 – 13 year old children (5 years) and the second one was for 13-17 year old children (4 years). Free secular gender mixed public schools were established.

At the first step an elementary course of the Russian History started on the 3rd year of study. The basis of the Soviet Constitution was taught in the last year of study. Following the 1921 curriculum, teachers had to pay special attention to the History of a native land, as well as the economic and everyday-cultural life of the society.

In 1923 Soviet schools refused from separate disciplines teaching and started working in accordance with the complex programs that existed until 1931. The History of Russia or USSR was not taught. Historical material was presented within corresponding chapters of the General History. There were no textbooks or school books, and the main source of knowledge was fiction, teacher's words and independent work.

In the 1925 curriculum for high school the material was built in accordance with sociological types with examples from the history of various countries. Sociological outlines included the following topics (for example): 1) «Feudalism»; 2) «City and its culture»; 3) «The origin of the trade capitalism and geographical discoveries»; 4) «Revolution of the trade capitalism era»; 5) «The trade capital state»; 6) «The trade capital culture» (Kalutzkaya, 2008).

3.2 Practical Application of the Dalton Plan at History and Social Studies Classes in the Soviet School

The Dalton Plan created by the American teacher Elen Parkhurst from Dalton was the basis of school classes. During her teaching practice, Elen Parkhurst came to the conclusion that her students master the material given during independent laboratory works better than during traditional in-room classes. E. Parkhurst (1922) extended the laboratory system to the whole range of disciplines and the curriculum. Soviet educational specialists in search of new methods paid their attention to the fact that the Dalton Plan helps students to develop initiative and self-education skills. This teaching method was not copied but creatively adapted to the Soviet reality and named the Laboratory-brigade system.

The classes were formed in the following way: a teacher gave the topic of a class, a plan for independent work and a list of literature sources. Students were divided into small groups, i.e. brigades with a brigadier in each, who guided independent study of the material on the topic given by a teacher. Students got their knowledge in various ways: excursions to some industrial objects, discussing the processes they observed there and read about them in textbooks, laboratory tasks through the analysis of various sources and literature. The teacher consulted them occasionally and checked laboratory works. After studying a certain topic, a conference where brigades reported about the job done took place. The system cultivated the principles of team work in a group.

However, the system had a number of shortcomings:

- a teacher's role in explanation of new materials was low that led to superficial knowledge got by students;
- a skilled student in a brigade could do the whole job but all the students in the brigade got good marks;
- one of the students read a textbook and the others were passive listeners;
- the lack of laboratory equipment drastically decreased the research potential of students.

As a result, a number of teachers had to combine the brigade-laboratory system with the traditional one.

3.3 The Main Problems of Applying the Laboratory Planning Method in a Final Debate in the "Istorik -Marxist" Journal from 1927

In the "Istorik-Marxist" journal in 1927 the debate about the problems of using the laboratory-brigade system in Soviet schools and universities took place. The debate was published in issues 3 and 4, but it continued till 1931.

The participants of the debate noted positive and negative aspects of the laboratory plan use in teaching historical disciplines. The main reporter was the teacher of History and methodist A. Rindich, one of few communists as one of the journal editors A.V. Shestakov said (Shestakov, 1927).

From A. Rindich's point of view, three-year experience (from 1923) of the laboratory plan use in higher Communist party educational establishments confirmed that the method was the right choice in the Soviet conditions. The research method can be used when studying textbooks and classical literature, primarily of the Marxist nature. The problem of the material use proportion should take into account several factors: the nature of a certain historical or social discipline, the level of audience and the complexity of the topic studied. The basic task was teaching students to use factual material.

Research excursions were to become of great assistance, because one of the basic principles of studying History in those years was modernization, i.e. the connection of teaching with the modern realities. There existed another close view point that suggested starting teaching History from the modern stage because it is easier to understand for students.

The problem of the Dalton Plan use (the laboratory plan) uncovered the necessity to work out the task making method. Methods, forms and techniques of task making varied depending on the level of readiness of a group or "brigade". A. Rindich considered that some tasks were hard to understand for students, or the questions were built in such a way that one had to study the whole monographies to answer them, or, on the contrary, one task was divided into 10-20 parts and each of students got one of them. For example, there was a task connected with the 1961 peasant reform: "Among other materials here we can see a book of M.N. Pokrovsky, one chapter, but this chapter has been so dissected up to nitty-gritty details, that students had to look through dozens of pages to combine these details into a logical and finished statement. This was definitely an obstacle for independent thinking development" (Ryndich, 1927).

In S. Freedland's opinion (1927, a member of the Communist university methodical center), the application of this method was effective in the groups with strong team work principles. Another important shortcoming of the approach to teaching historical disciplines was disconnectedness of the material studied both in the chronological and topical context. The inaccuracy of the formulated ideological aims lead to simultaneous study of economic development and some revolution movement facts of the countries or eras that have no historical interconnections. Besides, methods of teaching Social Studies and History were often mixed for school stages 1 and 2 which lead to the necessity of teaching All-Russian central executive committee the basis of Sociology and History to university students.

S. Freedland defined the key task for teaching public disciplines at a school stage 2 as follows: «We should show the audience the meaning and public essence of the historical material on the basis of separate historical facts and phenomena and give them the minimum of information that cannot be omitted, and then connect it with Social Studies on the whole" (Freedland, 1927). The same problem arises in the works of M. Nechkina (1927), a Russian revolution movement history researcher, the author of a number of textbooks. The book by M.N. Pokrovsky "Russian History in a short outline" was a textbook in many schools, however, it could not be an adequate didactic source (Nechkina, 1927). The readers available were not comfortable to use because their sources were scrappy, sometimes with 3-5 lines extorted from an original document or investigation. The use of ideologically wrong books and sources often nonplused students, therefore, one of the most significant problems was the lack of a good Marxist paradigm – oriented textbook. To overcome the shortcomings mentioned above, one had to write a good school book with teachers and students involved in the process.

Paying attention to the inner structure of the Dalton Plan, the participants of the debate spoke out that a teacher should uncover a minimum level of knowledge at the consulting stage, and monitor a discussion during a conference (brigade groups gathering). S. Freedland regretted that when they rejected the individualistic approach from the Dalton Plan, they actually destroyed competition and encouragement among students (Freedland, 1927).

The educational specialist and researcher of the Russian revolution movement A.V. Shestakov (1927) revealed the following shortcomings of applying the Dalton Plan to the Soviet reality: laboratory plans made by teachers quickly transformed into "stiff" ones which lead to stereotyped teaching, that was to be avoided while using the laboratory method. The same happened to the excursions within laboratory classes: they became formal because students simply observed the exhibits without any discussion about the objects they saw. Shestakov suggested inviting the participants of revolutionary events of 1905-1907 and 1917 to class discussions, or conduct lessons at the enterprises where revolutionary strikes took place.

The debate about using the Dalton Plan, in contrast to other topics from the "Istorik -Marxist" journal, was not over yet. In the next issue A.V. Shestakov suggested supplying the laboratory plan with workbooks in order to solve the following tasks: 1) teaching History with a wide use of factual material, 2) mastering the Marxist paradigm while studying certain aspects of History and Social Studies; 3) the skill to analyse historical documents.

Workbooks allowed for solving the problem of lack of good school books. Moreover, M.N. Pokrovsky mentioned in his article that a good historical textbook was not written yet but it could be done only through the team work of a scientist-teacher and students (Pokrovsky, 1927).

At the same time, workbooks should be different for corresponding stages of school and university education: «a workbook can be applied when studying History in different educational establishments, from the 2nd stage school to worker's faculties and Communist universities and even the 1st years at universities where there are no seminars on historical topics... A practically arranged workbook can solve the problem in the best way because it will take into account the conditions and environment." (Shestakov, 1927).

Further, in methodic publications the problem of using the brigade-laboratory system was discussed in the

context of working out ideologically correct school book. However, scientists refused from this method after 1931 and returned to the traditional classroom-lesson system.

It is important to note that the same problems with teaching History and Social Studies at schools took place in the post-Soviet Russia, i.e. the lack of up-to-date textbooks and the mosaic nature of various approaches to learning and interpretation. The introduction of Central Testing with a variety of textbooks on History or Social Studies seriously reflected on students' progress. Therefore, the question of the necessity of creating a unified History textbook was raised in Russia in 2012 at a government level.

History workbooks were introduced by the "Step by step" publishing office in 1995, and are still a good assistance for conducting school lessons. Thus, A.V. Shestakov's ideas were successfully realized in the system of Russian school education 70 years after they had been first introduced.

4. Discussions

Investigation of scientific theses connected with the current research problem allowed to form groups in the following directions: researches aiming at studying active methods of teaching in a native school in 1920s-30s (Allaberdina, 2003; Bagrova, 2001; Baranova, 1974; Lisitzkaya, 1996; Romanova, 1995; Turchina, 1995); works touching interconnections between creative ideas and teachers experience of 1920s with the foreign school concepts and practices (Bochkareva, 1999; Guseva, 2010, Kuleshova, 1995; Maximova, 1991; Epshtein, 1998), investigation of separate innovator teachers ideas and practices of 20s-30s (Leiko, 1975; Melnikova, 1995; Prosvetova, 1995).

Special attention should be given to A.I. Alatorzeva's investigations. She demonstrated a complex process of making and functioning the "Istorik-Marxist" journal in 1926-1941. (Alatorzeva, 1969; Alatorzeva, 1973; Alatorzeva, 1979). The American scientist A.E. Poel made up a cumulative index of the journal in Russian and English (Powell, 1981). The following articles were devoted to the history of the Dalton Plan use in the Soviet educational system: Kalutzkaya, 2008; Koloskov, 1988; Kudryavtzev, 1990.

It is necessary to note that the articles mentioned above give only fragmentary outlines of the debate about the Dalton Plan use problems in the Soviet school depicted in the "Istorik -Marxist" journal.

5. Conclusion

In the process of studying the debates about the peculiarities of the Dalton Plan use in the Soviet educational practice from 1923 to 1927 the author revealed the following problems:

- the transition from the individual system of education to the brigade-laboratory one resulted in the passive condition of the majority of students and their motivation decrease;
- the tasks became stereotyped and did not take into account real student opportunities;
- acute lack of textbooks or use of M.N. Pokrovsky historical essays instead (1923), the same with fiction.

The main ways of solving these problems were in attempts of teachers to take into account both the level of students' efficiency and their interest in research work. Some scholars gave the idea of making a school book with the explanation of historical and sociological processes from the Marxist ideological point of view. The opinions of scientists, school teachers and students also counted. Some teachers from the Stalin Communist University in Moscow initiated application of workbooks instead of laboratory plans in order to solve the problem of didactic supplying of historical disciplines. Their initiative was realized in the Russian system of education in the field of History teaching only in 1990s.

6. Recommendations

The materials of the current article may be important to the readers interested in the history of education development in Russia, varieties of the Dalton Plan use and the condition of public opinion in the Soviet Union in 1920s.

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