

DEAF PEOPLE EDUCATION IN VYGOTSKY'S WRITINGS: MIMICRY AMONG FORMS OF SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

Regarding the education of the deaf people, Vygotsky severely criticized speech teaching techniques for their mechanical, artificial, and sometimes cruel nature, although he agreed with the general objectives of oralism. In the late 1920s, he began to point out the failure of this method and in a conference in 1931, he radicalized his position. He proposed an educational work based on polyglossia involving different forms of speech, including mimicry and centered on the processes of communication and signification aiming to meet the guideline of social education for the effective insertion of the child into the collective. This article aims to explore the author's arguments in this reorientation of ideas and indicate points of advancement and limits. The purpose is to highlight Vygotsky's contributions to issues raised in the current scenario of deaf people education, based on his elaborations both in the field of defectology and in the sphere of general theses about the semantic dimension of higher psychic functions.

Keywords: sign language; special education; school inclusion; language development

La educación de sordos en los escritos de Vygotsky: la mímica entre las formas de habla

RESUMEN

Sobre la educación de sordos Vygotsky hacía críticas severas a las técnicas de enseñanza del habla por su carácter mecánico, artificial y por veces despiadado, aunque concordara con los objetivos generales del oralismo. En el final de los años 1920, pasa a apuntar el fracaso de ese método y, en una conferencia en 1931, radicaliza su posición. Propone entonces una labor educativa basada en la poliglosia abarcando distintas formas de habla, incluyendo la mímica, y nucleado en los procesos de comunicación y significación, visando atender a la directriz de educación social para una efectiva inserción del niño en el colectivo. En este artículo se objetiva explorar la argumentación del autor en esa reorientación de ideas e indicar puntos de avance y límites. El propósito es destacar las contribuciones de Vygotsky para cuestiones puestas en el escenario actual de la educación de sordos, con base en sus elaboraciones tanto en el campo de la defectología como en la esfera de las tesis generales sobre la dimensión semántica de las funciones psíquicas superiores.

Palabras clave: lengua de signos; educación especial; inclusión escolar; desarrollo del lenguaje

A educação de surdos nos escritos de Vigotski: a mímica entre as formas de fala

RESUMO

Sobre a educação de surdos Vigotski tecia críticas severas às técnicas de ensino da fala por seu caráter mecânico, artificial e por vezes cruel, embora concordasse com os objetivos gerais do oralismo. No final dos anos 1920, passa a apontar o fracasso desse método e, numa conferência em 1931, radicaliza sua posição. Propõe então um trabalho educativo baseado na poliglossia envolvendo diferentes formas de fala, incluindo a mímica, e nucleado nos processos de comunicação e significação, visando atender à diretriz de educação social para uma efetiva inserção da criança no coletivo. Este artigo objetiva explorar a argumentação do autor nessa reorientação de ideias e indicar pontos de avanço e limites. O propósito é destacar as contribuições de Vigotski para questões postas no cenário atual da educação de surdos, com base em suas elaborações tanto no campo da defectologia como na esfera das teses gerais sobre a dimensão semântica das funções psíquicas superiores.

Palavras-chave: língua de sinais; educação especial; inclusão escolar; desenvolvimento da linguagem

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INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the communication process in the formation of consciousness and the development of higher psychic functions is a thesis that Vygotsky developed and deepened towards the end of his life. This guiding idea, which is intertwined with the principle of the social constitution of human activity, attributes a special role to language, speech and words. The meaning of the word, which implies the capacity for generalization, and the sense of the word, which expands the field of meaning, assume a focal place in the explanation of human processes, which led Vygotsky to affirm, in his final years of production, the semantic character of psychic functioning. In this complex reworking, he says, in one of his personal notes, that communication necessarily changes the person who communicates, because,

In addition to understanding the other, which is the main purpose of the word, and *eo ipsu* develops the understanding of oneself. The communication of a thought transforms thought. Communication with another (i.e. an interpsychological function) is always *eo ipsu* communication with oneself (i.e. an intrapsychological function). The first is implicit in the second. That is to say, what is possible for two becomes possible for one. That is to say, in communication, not only the relation with the other changes, but also the relation of the person with oneself (Vygotsky, 2018a, pp. 405-406).

Vygotsky constructed /elaborated the propositions of the historical-cultural theory throughout studies carried out in various thematic spheres, always concerned with the relation between theory and practice. In the field of defectology, speech is highlighted in its functions as means of communication and as means of thought and action, linked to the postulate of the social character of personality (see, for example, Vygotsky, 1931/1995). This guideline, which orientates the author's discussions and analyses regarding various deficiencies is linked to the idea that the possibilities for compensating or overcoming difficulties by the child depend on immersion in the collective and on conditions offered by the social group for alternative paths of development that foster processes of meaning and elevation of modes of thinking

The condition of deafness is related in a very special way to the central issues of Vygotsky's theorizing, as they refer directly to the sphere of communication and speech. This paper focuses on Vygotsky's writings about the education and development of deaf children. During the 1920s, in his initial analyses, the author showed acceptance of the oralism then in force in his environment. However, he soon began to express dissatisfaction with the techniques employed under this model, becoming, so to speak, a nonconformist and critical oralist. From 1930 onwards, he radicalized his opposition and re-directed his ideas with the proposal of polyglossy, an

educational work that should encompass the use of different forms of speech in school education, necessarily including mimicry¹ and other communication resources accessible to the deaf.

This path of elaborations is discussed in the following sections, in an analysis that first highlights the arguments that supported the change in Vygotsky's position and, in the subsequent part, discusses the notions about mimicry underlying his interpretations of the development of deaf children, at a time when there were no studies characterizing sign languages (which only emerged in the 1960s). The final part of the text addresses Vygotsky's contributions to the education of the deaf today, in a way that is articulated with the repercussion of his ideas in the more general debate on inclusive education.

FROM ADHERENCE TO ORALISM TO THE PROPOSAL OF POLYGLOSSY

Vygotsky attributed an indispensable role to speech and writing in the education and social compensation of different types of deficiencies. For this reason, he understood that deafness implied a very limiting condition, taking into account the great difficulty students had in learning to speak and the predominant use of mimicry and gestures.

In his first records, he addressed the issue of deficiencies from a reflexological perspective, but over the course of his work, Vygotsky profoundly changed his understanding of the role of speech in the development of the deaf and, therefore, also changed his perspective on education in this area. He began to criticize the methods that were based on teaching a mechanical, artificial and painful oral language for the deaf (Vygotsky, 1997). In view of this, he proposed that teaching should make speech necessary and interesting, so that it could be established as a means of communication and thought. He believed that speech would fulfill this role in the development of the deaf only if it were taught efficiently and meaningfully, as a living and functional language, so that the deaf would then lose interest in mimicry as a form of communication.

At that time, Vygotsky assumed that mimicry could not fulfill the function of speech for the development and learning of the deaf. He stated that deafness is a bigger problem than blindness, because the blind do not have access to the natural world, but by hearing and speaking, the social world becomes accessible to them. The deaf, on the other hand, experience exclusion from communication and find themselves deprived of social bonds, which are more essential and important than natural ones. He then considered that mimicry constitutes a lower level and a more restricted form of development,

¹ As stated in the translations, Vygotsky uses the term mimicry to refer to sign language. Among the works mentioned here, only in "Fourth Lecture" (Vygotsky, 2018b) does the author also use the term "sign language".

mainly because it occurs among equals, enclosed in the limited circle of their defect and, therefore, with marks of primitive thinking for him, only through speech could the deaf become aware of themselves and others.

Only in the development of speech is the guarantee of a social regeneration of the deaf-mute and of their intellectual development implicit. Without the help of speech, the deaf-mute is condemned to remain in the stage of great intellectual backwardness and lack of development (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 254).

Based on these impossibilities, Vygotsky supported the proposals present in the oralist approach of the time. He argued that deaf people need to understand their pronunciation and control their own reactions through kinesthetic and tactile stimuli. His concern was focused on the return of speech to the deaf person, which he said was necessary for the development of conscious speech, but he soon began to recognize the enormous barriers to this teaching and to criticize traditional procedures, directly and ostensibly opposing them.

For Vygotsky, the defect alters the child's attitude toward the world and also shapes the relation with other people, since the "organic defect is projected as a social abnormality of behavior" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 90), and it is up to the educator to address less the defect itself and more its social consequences (in deafness, the absence of speech and the resulting restriction of social contacts). He stated, as in other cases of disability, that deafness is a normal, not pathological, state for deaf children and that the defect is only felt as a result of their experience in relations with others.

Thus, Vygotsky argued that the starting point for the social education of deaf children should be early childhood education, since deaf children generally do not develop speech at home. However, he criticized slow and exhausting teaching, without practical application. At the same time, he stated that mimicry and gestures are so deeply rooted in these children that speech cannot fight against them.

Such practices eliminate lively interest in language, with artificial measures and with exceptional rigor and, sometimes, with severity, resorting to the student's conscience, in order to teach them to speak. [...] Supporting education only through conscious efforts goes against their fundamental interests and their customs (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 91).

Expecting children to learn to pronounce each sound correctly is a mistaken path, precisely because it is not true language. They need meaningful speech, indispensable for life, speech in use, and not dead articulation. The exhaustive efforts invested in mechanical speech training, which prevented the elevation of modes of thought, left no room for other teaching objectives: "if,

in traditional education, speech devours, like a parasite, all the remaining aspects of education and becomes an end in itself, then precisely because of this it loses its liveliness" (Vygotsky, 1931/1995, p. 230).

It becomes clear, therefore, that even defending the importance of speech development, Vygotsky did not accept that it should be taught at any cost, precisely because speech that is not a true manifestation of the child cannot promote social contact and self-awareness. This is the central problem of deaf education for him: speech is fundamental, but it must be directed towards the interests of the child, respond to his needs and be linked to the communicative function. In general, it can be said that, from 1924 to 1929, Vygotsky defended an education for the deaf based on the teaching of living speech, opposing the practices of oralism, but still using arguments based on principles recognized as "oralist".

Despite the strong opposition, it was only in the early 1930s that Vygotsky presented a proposal to face this dilemma, when he pointed out the need for a theoretical and practical restructuring of the issue of linguistic development and deaf education (Vygotsky, 1997). He highlighted the need for special attention to mimicry and written language and argued that the most fruitful path to solving the problems in the area lies in polyglossia, which would imply the involvement of different forms of speech. Such ideas, presented in a synthetic form, were later discussed in "The collective as a factor in the development of the anomalous child" (Vygotsky, 1931/2021). In this text, the author radicalized his criticisms against oralism and brought more explicit arguments for a plurality of speech development pathways. However, he warned that the path to overcoming this was more complex and indirect than previously thought, as he did not see it as possible at that time to "cut this knot in one fell swoop" (Vygotsky, 1931/2021, p. 233). He reiterated the need to oppose artificial and verbalist speech, disconnected from the real situation of social coexistence, which is why, for him, deaf children resort to mimicry.

He then reaffirmed the role of the collective as essential for the development of children in general, but considered that, in the case of deafness, political and social education faced a significant barrier imposed by insufficient speech development, which demanded a return to mimicry as the only way through which the deaf child "can assimilate a series of theses, ideas and information without which the content of this political and social education would be something absolutely dead and lifeless" (Vygotsky, 1931/2021, p. 232). He also pointed out the need to seek, on the theoretical and practical levels, criteria to promote cooperation and complementarity between the different forms of speech and opposed the view that this relationship would be one of rivalry, of mutual interference, which would harm the development of the deaf child. Considering the stage of pedagogy at the time, Vygotsky said that polyglossia

seemed to be the most fruitful path for the education of the deaf child. He changed his attitude towards mime and pointed out as an essential task the investigation of new methodologies to combine forms of speech according to the different levels of education. And he recommended:

Without treating mimicry with disdain, without underestimating it, nor treating it as an enemy, understanding that the different forms of speech can serve not to compete with each other or to mutually restrain their development, but as steps by which the deaf-mute child achieves mastery of speech. (Vygotsky, 1931/2021, p. 234).

It is worth noting that the proposal for polyglossy brought great challenges to the educational reality of the time: the establishment of a teaching system centered on the processes of signification and the commitment to encompass the teaching of school content, as well as the approximation to the common school. Vygotsky recognized the complexity of what he advocated in the 1931 conference, so much so that he ended his text by saying that it was more of “an introduction to a vast field of investigation” (Vygotsky, 1931/1995, p. 235).

As for the unfolding of these intentions, Zaitseva, Pursglove and Gregory (1999)² report that in 1938 a conference was held, attended by Vygotsky’s collaborators, in an attempt to establish a counterpoint to the hegemony of the oral method. However, the initiative did not continue due to various factors, among which was the rejection, for ideological reasons, of Vygotsky’s ideas. Thus, Russian sign language remained in disrepute for several decades.

THE PLACE OF MIMICRY AMONG SPEECH FORMS IN POLYGLOSSY

During the period in which he proposed polyglossia, Vygotsky made occasional references to the development of deaf children in the context of discussions on various topics, when he pointed out deficiencies related to the formation of psychic functions, for example, perception, voluntary attention, imagination and concept formation (Vygotsky, 1997, 1934/1993). Regarding this reiteration of problems, it is important to remember that Vygotsky studied deaf children who had a school experience under strict oralism, a method that, according to his critics, did not promote the processes of signification, in addition to neglecting the teaching of school content. In short, this was a child who did not receive effective instruction nor had been encouraged to expand the development of communication.

These limitations in psychic functions were attributed to the lack of mastery of speech, but it is worth noting that Vygotsky also attributed them to the use of mimicry

itself, which, although it allowed communication, did not fully favor the development and elevation of modes of thinking. The gap in the role of mimicry was mentioned, for example, in the discussion of the relations between the process of attention and the emergence of functions of the word, when describing the sign for “tooth” and stating that for the deaf it is difficult to establish “any complex connection between the indicative function of the sign and the function of signification” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 169). The same example was taken up again in another text, in reference to thought in complexes: “thus, in the mimicry of the deaf-mute, the gesture that denotes ‘teeth’ can also mean ‘white’, ‘stone’ and ‘conversation’, depending on the entire sentence” (Vygotsky, 1934/1994, p. 318). He goes on to say that, since these meanings are united in an associative complex, additional gestures are necessary to allow the differentiation of the word being expressed. He clarifies that this is because mime does not have a “fixed system” associated with oral speech, and for this reason, the meaning does not have a relation with the object as it does at the level of the concept. This indicates that the words of mimicry do not reach the structure of conceptual meaning but are limited to the structure of thinking by complexes, which according to other discussions by the author (for example, Vygotsky, 1934/1993), is restricted to the scope of concrete and practical functioning and does not reach categorical thinking, of high generality.

Another reference to mimicry is found in the text “Vygotsky’s Seven Lectures” (Vygotsky, 1934/2018b). In the Fourth Lecture, which addresses the role of the environment in the development of a child’s personality, Vygotsky states that the social environment acts more specifically as a source of development in childhood, and not as a unilateral determinant. Its role also depends on the child’s level of development and experiences, configuring a relational process of reciprocal affectation. Using the term used in pedology at the time, he referred to the “ideal forms” of activities present in the environment that influence personality from early childhood. These are broad forms of consciousness that are configured in the activities carried out by members of the social group (family, school, and other spaces) at a given time and in a given culture. In this presentation, the author emphasized the sphere of speech and said that the child’s form of speech, which can be called “initial,” interacts with the “ideal” form of speech, which constitutes the model or reference for what should be achieved in a more advanced stage of development. When explaining the relation between the two forms, Vygotsky includes the case of the deaf child:

Studies show that deaf-mute children develop a peculiar form of speech, mime, a richly developed sign language. The child develops another language, a language of its own. Together, in collaboration,

² This article is a translated and edited version of a text by the first author, Zaitseva, published in the Russian Journal of Defectology.

in society, they create this language. But can the development of this sign language be compared with the development of speech in children? What is the development of the child in relation to the ideal form? Of course not. If we deal with the absence of an ideal form in the environment and speak only with the initial forms that interact with each other, this means that development carries an extremely limited, compressed and impoverished character (Vygotsky, 1934/2018b, p. 88).

Thus, for him, sign language allows communication among deaf people and is considered an initial form, but it does not put the child in relation to the ideal speech/form, the one that prevails in the larger social group. This results in great harm to the child's general development. In this consideration, the question of the collective arises, which is at the heart of the argument about the initial and final/ideal forms and is linked to the vision of political-social education of the time, which sustained the author's discussions on various issues, especially in the school environment. In this sense, the speech of a collective of hearing speakers, in both oral and written forms, must be considered "ideal", since deaf children need this ability to have access to social practices, activities, knowledge and values that circulate in society. Regarding deficiencies the author insisted on the importance of heterogeneous collectives, since it is a condition of conviviality that constitutes a necessary context for the development of these children's personalities, and more broadly, a social organization conducive to the formation of any and all children.

In the case of deafness, Vygotsky also began to value homogeneous collectives, because they allow the deaf child to broaden his social experience; however, he left an implicit notion that places limit on the scope of the recommendation of multiple forms of speech, since mimicry was recognized only as an "initial form". It is worth noting that he attributed the creation of mime to a spontaneous process of groups of deaf children, which would occur in nonspecific circumstances, and was silent about its subsequent development. Linked to this is a restricted perception of the issue of deaf collectives. Although the author briefly mentioned the tendency of some countries to accept a complementary composition of uses of spoken language and mimicry in education (Vygotsky, 1931/1995, 1997), he did not refer to deaf communities or to the fact that, after the Milan Congress in 1890 (which consecrated the oral method), movements occurred in which these communities actively involved themselves in proposals about education and other social rights, being present at congresses in European countries, especially in France, and in the United States, as pointed out by Rodrigues, Machado and Vieira (2020). Such considerations suggest that, even defending multiple language resources for the education of the deaf, Vygotsky did not attribute to mimicry/sign

language the same linguistic status as forms of oral/written speech, which is noted both by his characterization of mimic speech and by the statement that it did not allow for highly generalized thinking.

Zaitseva et al. (1999) acknowledge that Vygotsky was initially skeptical about mimicry and, even when he came to value it, he implied that it did not have all the properties of speech, which can be attributed, in part, to the fact that, at the time, there were no studies about sign languages. Skedsmo (2016) also addresses this issue and considers it a "dilemma" for the author. On the other hand, despite or because of this dilemma, Vygotsky went from being an adherent of oralism to an advocate of the use of sign language as an indispensable condition for the development of deaf children, as it broadens their experiences of collective life, favors communication and elevates modes of signification. As for the mastery of spoken language, he gave priority to visual-gestural semantic resources, which are more accessible to deaf people. Along these lines, he sometimes stated the importance of educational work oriented towards learning writing as a priority over orality.

The author considered it essential to investigate and explore methodologies to combine different forms of speech, a demand that persists still today. Furthermore, he came to anticipate the idea that oral speech(ideal form) should not be considered as the mother tongue of deaf people, but rather as a foreign language. In a brief mention in his personal notes from 1934, he proposed the study of the development of (oral) speech in deaf people from the point of view of reflexive and voluntary consciousness and said that in this process "the analogy is not with the mother tongue, but with a foreign language" (Vygotsky, 2018a, p. 602). Although only outlined, this idea corresponds to what guides the current view of the bilingual condition of deaf people.

Vygotsky seems to have found in polyglossia a way to move from the observation of the limitations of deaf children, "the offspring of oralism," to reaffirming the positive differential approach to development – oriented toward the child's potential and strengths – that he always defended in the fields of psychology and education. And it is to be assumed that this change in position did not merely result from the confirmation of the failure of oralism, but above all from the theoretical consolidation regarding the relation among speech, thought, and the formation of consciousness, which the author was already concerned with at that time.

VYGOTSKY AND THE EDUCATION OF DEAF PEOPLE TODAY

By defending the social nature of development processes, Vygotsky moves away from a fatalism determined by biological conditions when he addresses the field of deficiencies. In the case of deafness, as he himself states, the least of the problems is the lack of hearing. What causes the greatest harm to the development of

the deaf is linguistic deprivation – the lack of access to language – precisely because the development of higher psychic functions takes place in social interactions, which are carried out through a language, through words that allow communication with others and the meaning of experiences, which is then converted and internalized.

The word is involved in the relation with others, it allows us to understand the lived world and conceive the imagined, converting meanings and senses into thought and action. The deprivation of shared speech leads to social isolation, a precarious level of generalization processes and damage to the development of higher psychic functions (Vygotsky, 1931/1995, 1933/2013).

These ideas reinforce the analysis, current today, of the centrality of sign language for the development of deafness. This language is accessible to deaf individuals because it relies on visual perception, body and manual gestures, and is acquired when learners interact with competent interlocutors, especially deaf adults. It is through this language that sign words emerge that will allow communication and knowledge of the world and of oneself, thus constituting the path to linguistic development, since it is organized based on integral functions, on the potential of the individual, in accordance with the principles of Vygotskian defectology and with broader propositions on the semantic character of higher psychic functions.

In the Brazilian context, since the 1980s, studies based on historical-cultural theory have been arguing for the need to guarantee the bilingual education of deaf people. This concern extends to present time, when we note the exploration of themes related to bilingual education policies for the effective school inclusion of deaf people (for example, Silva & Abreu, 2023; Vieira & Fumes 2022). Furthermore, research focusing on teaching and learning in the classroom has explored the possibilities and benefits of involving Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) in Early Childhood Education (Garrutti & Moreira, 2022) and in different areas of Elementary Education, such as science (Cunha, Miguel, & Garrutti, 2022), literature (Mori & Pissinati, 2020) and mathematics (Dessbesel, Silva, & Shimazaki, 2023). In addition to their specificities, these studies address the bilingual issue and the dialogic dynamics in Libras and show that interactions in this language bring effective gains in the mastery of school content, in addition to contributing to a collective feeling of equals, which compels active participation. Other productions also address the challenge of teacher training and performance in relation to different content areas (Barroso & Lacerda, 2021; Bizon & Silva, 2023; Souza & Lacerda, 2023).

In this sense, it is through sign language that the psychic functions of the deaf person can more easily reach their peak, since it is the language that allows the fluency of meanings, generalization and reflection necessary for more complex elaborations that reach the level

of the concept, as proposed by Vygotsky. Studies that investigate the conceptual formation of deaf students show that it is through this language that the construction of meanings can emerge (Almeida & Lacerda, 2019; Dessbesel, 2021; Silva Brito, 2017). In general, the absence of sign language consolidates linguistic deprivation and limits conceptual elaboration, especially at more complex and elaborate levels, as would be desirable.

These studies contribute to affirming the essential place of Libras in the education of the deaf. It is worth noting that effective bilingual education implies the use of Libras as a *language of instruction and communication* in the classroom environment and the teaching of Portuguese, especially written language, as a second language. However, a worrying problem in the Brazilian reality is that inclusive schools still maintain the supremacy of Portuguese as a prestigious language, which ends up prevailing in teacher-student conversations and in the teaching of content. As a result, classroom conversations are not always based on the foundation of the centrality of Libras, which is often present only as a supporting role – translated by the interpreter, for example – without it being used to carry out the most relevant interactions for the teaching-learning process. On the other hand, schools for the deaf do not always expand social interaction or promote literacy in the “ideal form of speech” (even if only through writing) in a satisfactory manner. Thus, both approaches show limitations.

For the bilingual condition to be truly experienced by the deaf, it is necessary for public policies to guarantee access to Libras as early as possible and for it to be a living and circulating language in the educational environment. It can be inferred, then, that although research and discussions are aligned in defense of the participation of Libras in education, the implementation of the *bilingual project* lacks theoretical and methodological specification, a task whose importance was already warned by Vygotsky.

Another issue that can be perceived in Vygotsky's considerations and that is still present is the concern or resistance regarding the isolation of deaf people among themselves, in a group restricted to people with the same atypical characteristic, who use sign language for communication and formation of ways of thinking, separated from interactions with the broader society. It is worth recognizing that the author's defense of the importance of the heterogeneous collective is valuable, since it opposes segregation in socio-educational proposals and defends the richness of interactions interspersed with diversity, according to principles that today could be called “inclusive”. Vygotsky argues, on the one hand, that the more people with deficiencies have access to favorable cultural experiences the greater the chances of full development. Thus, in the education of the deaf, this possibility is linked to the mastery of the hearing language, in the “ideal form” (mainly through writing).

On the other hand, the author also recognizes that sign language is essential for the development of the deaf, but he hesitates about the importance of the sign-word in the constitution of the semantic dimension of psychic functions and consciousness.

This dilemma present in Vygotsky remains quite current in some way, despite the difference in recognition of the status of sign languages today. Associations and communities of the deaf in Brazil have been defending the creation of “schools for the deaf” for greater coexistence and communicative exchanges in an accessible language, privileging the linguistic singularity of this collective (Campello & Rezende, 2014). At the same time, other sectors of society criticize this stance, describing it as segregationist, because such schools do not effectively promote individual development and social integration (Machado, Böck, & Mello, 2022). The central dilemma for the education of deaf people (in Vygotsky’s analysis and today) is how to provide conditions for the mastery of an accessible language, which promotes the greatest possible development and elevated mode of thinking, and provide also heterogeneous social experience, of access and contact with the diversity of cultural productions and practices.

This is a fundamental question, because it involves the possibility of elaborating meanings at the conceptual level which correspond to an elevated level of thinking and underpin the formation of personality. The concept implies the capacity to generalize, which can only emerge through the word (materialized in the sign or in speech/writing) during the communication process. Vygotsky reminds us that animals have a rudimentary form of communication, which implies more of an effect of contagion and does not involve generalization (Vygotsky, 1934/1993). In very young human beings, even rudimentary communication practices quickly evolve into generalizations, built on social relations. The word that shapes human consciousness is the meaningful word, the word that can be thought, that leads to action, that is, the word that has semantic strength (Vygotsky, 1933/2013). Thus, it is only possible to become aware, think about oneself, think about thinking, reflect, through words and generalization. In other words, without an accessible language, without the participation of words that carry meanings and senses, the processes involved in the formation of consciousness are deeply compromised.

In this line, it is worth considering a difference in diversity and scope of the concepts available and circulating in spoken language collectives and in those using sign language. The broader conceptual universe of the language of hearing people becomes accessible if the deaf person masters it (even if it is almost only in written form, a path that opens up ample possibilities). In this sense, the bilingual approach is necessary, because the deaf person, upon becoming bilingual (early mastery of sign language in order to appropriate spoken language

through it), can constitute themselves through the sign word and at the same time through the word in its “ideal form”. In other words, the goal of this education must guarantee formation in the homogeneous collective and also provide access to the broader collective. Thus, the school education of the deaf must also ensure immersion in the heterogeneous collective, whether through participation in the inclusive regular school or through the school for the deaf with complementary activities and forms of experience conviviality in the collective composed of diversities, to expand knowledge of the world.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a final word, we would like to highlight the current relevance of Vygotsky’s propositions, both for social inclusion in general and for the school inclusion of special education students, and specifically deaf students.

It is worth noting, however, that although references to the author’s theory and socio-educational vision are frequent today in the national and international debate about inclusive education, some of his central ideas are not easy to implement, as they involve the challenge of conceptual-methodological innovation and the complexity of the theory-practice relation, in addition to ethical-political principles linked to the Marxist matrix. This is the case of the *positive differential approach*, which has been emphasized in the discussion of Vygotskian defectology and refers to the guideline according to which all human processes – typical, atypical or anomalous – should be characterized *positively*, and not negatively oriented towards “what is missing” in comparison with the normal. The positive aspect lies in the fact that any assessment should allow for the creation of an affirmative picture of the strengths and capabilities of the person with a disability and the identification of areas of development that need and can be further promoted by educational practices and other social actions.

This guideline is part of Vygotsky’s propositions that problematize the concept of normality, question psychology as a normative science and, in the context of pedagogy, advocate for the depathologization of the lives of children and adults with deficiency (Mecacci, 2021; Moysés & Angelucci, 2021; Smagorinsky, 2012). Thus, it is an idea that aligns with contemporary principles of school inclusion, but requires a radical change in perspective, which has not really been implemented. In a way, these are contributions by the author that are not recognized or are under-incorporated. Vik and Somby (2018) point out that the lines of action for inclusive education in Western countries still tend to be based on the defects of public school students in special education and to propose adjustments based on the capabilities of typical children, which goes against the positive approach and the principle of inclusion itself.

In the context of deaf education, another consideration is worth considering, regarding the trend of rese-

arch based on the historical-cultural matrix: Vygotsky is recognized as a powerful author to support the ethical-political-social tone of the discussion on educational goals and as a source of criteria for understanding the school development of deaf students. However, research efforts on educational practices are timid in deepening the central concepts of the theory.

Just to suggest themes that bring challenging perspectives, the issue of affection in the teaching-learning processes of deaf students must be raised, another direction of studies should focus on the formation of concepts closely related to the bilingual condition, a field in which there has been little progress in recent years. Without forgetting that the knot identified by Vygotsky – in the idea of the heterogeneous/homogeneous collective in the field of deaf education – has not yet been resolved and remains present in the debate of the area. Let us continue with the research to untie the knots.

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Note

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Data availability

Research data are available in the document.

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