

The constitution of children with autism: Diagnosis and its implications

A constituição da criança com autismo: Diagnóstico e suas implicações

Daniel Novaes¹; Ana Paula de Freitas²

DOI: 10.51207/2179-4057.20240014

Summary

This article aims to understand how the issue of diagnosing child development is treated by Lev Vigotski in his studies about disability and, from there, reflect how the autism diagnosis has been produced historically and its impacts on the subjectivity constitution of the child who receives it. The result of doctoral research in education, part of the problem of the hegemony of biologizing tendencies that circulate in the school environment and that end up affecting teaching relations and the ways in which children diagnosed with autism are understood. The study is based on Vigotski's texts about diagnosis and modes of human constitution. The empirical work focuses on the Miguel's story, a child with autism, in the second year of elementary school. In this text, the analyzes were carried out based on a narrative report made by the child's mother to the researcher, and on excerpts from her field notes. For the records, audio recording and subsequent transcription were used. The results allow us to understand two movements: the first concerns the way in which the theme is worked in Vigotski's texts; the second signals the historical construction of the diagnosis of autism in school and non-school social practices through the words of others. Finally, the discussions give indications of the possibilities for Miguel's participation at school, on the street, in commerce, in games, in short, in different social practices.

Keywords: Historical-Cultural Theory. Clinical Diagnosis. Childhood Autism. Educational Inclusion; Social Inclusion.

Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo compreender como a questão do diagnóstico do desenvolvimento infantil é tratada por Lev Vigotski em seus estudos sobre a deficiência e, a partir daí, refletir sobre como o diagnóstico de autismo tem sido produzido historicamente e seus impactos na constituição da subjetividade da criança que o recebe. Fruto de uma pesquisa de doutorado em educação, parte da problemática da hegemonia das tendências biologizantes que circulam na a mbiência escolar e que acabam por afetar as relações de ensino e as formas como as crianças diagnosticadas com autismo são compreendidas. O estudo fundamenta-se em textos de Vigotski acerca do diagnóstico e dos modos de constituição humana. O trabalho empírico focaliza a história de Miguel, uma criança com autismo, no segundo ano do Ensino Fundamental. Neste texto, as análises foram realizadas a partir de um relato narrativo feito pela mãe da criança ao pesquisador, e também de excertos de suas notas de campo. Para os registros, utilizaram-se a audiogravação e posterior transcrição. Os resultados permitem apreender dois movimentos: o primeiro diz respeito ao modo como a temática é trabalhada em textos de Vigotski; o segundo sinaliza a construção histórica do diagnóstico de autismo em práticas sociais escolares e não-escolares por meio da palavra do outro. Por fim, as discussões dão indícios das possibilidades de participação de Miguel na escola, na rua, no comércio, em brincadeiras, enfim, nas diferentes práticas sociais.

Unitermos: Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Diagnóstico Clínico. Autismo infantil. Inclusão Educacional. Inclusão Social.

Work carried out at São Francisco University, Itatiba, SP, Brazil.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare none.

1. Daniel Novaes - São Francisco University, Itatiba, SP, Brazil. 2. Ana Paula de Freitas - São Francisco University, Itatiba, SP, Brazil.

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

Introduction

In the contemporary educational context, children diagnosed with autism have participated in everyday school life thanks to advances in the field of educational policies that support mandatory enrollment in the Basic Education System (Brazil, 1996). However, their involvement in school and non-school social practices proves to be a challenge. On the one hand, family members based on diagnostic descriptions seem not know how to establish relations that consider the child in their uniqueness, not the diagnosis. On the other, educators focused on minimalist pedagogical practices based on the diagnosis of autism, which focus on training and repetition as a path in the teaching and learning process.

According to the updated version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM Tr-5, from the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022), autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder belonging to the class of disorders which, in this case, is on the autism spectrum. The main criteria reside in language deficits. As the APA (2022, p. 56) recommends, such deficits are “[...] persistent in social communication and social interaction in various contexts [...]”, an aspect that persists and characterizes the “[...] deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication to abnormalities in eye contact and body language.” The diagnostic criteria show a series of biopsychosocial characteristics of people in these conditions, which, in school contexts, has outlined the pedagogical work and the possibilities of participation in different social practices.

Research has been carried out to better understand how these children function and identify appropriate educational interventions. The findings, in general, indicate that proposals for educational and/or clinical work take the medical-pedagogical and psycho-pedagogical aspects as a reference (Jannuzzi, 2006). But when they do this and base themselves on behavioral characteristics described in the diagnostic manual, they end up taking the

descriptors as a rule for intervention and for the ways of being and acting of people with autism (Goulart & Assis, 2002; Gomes et al., 2016; Brito et al., 2021).

In the school environment, a hegemony of biologizing tendencies ends up affecting teaching relationships, restricting the child’s development possibilities to clinical symptoms. Both in the educational and family environments (Novaes, 2022), dealing with a child diagnosed with autism derives from the way it is understood. Therefore, it is necessary to stop interpreting it as a syndrome that restricts the child’s development, because this approach makes the search for other possible paths unfeasible.

This whole issue surrounding autism is not new. Natalie Mas (2018) carried out a historically based study based on the works of Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner (1943). The author emphasizes that the syndrome was presented to the clinic from cases of children with “mental weakness” or “hearing impairment”. For her, the emphasis on the treatment of autism brings with it the issue of medicalization, excess diagnoses and the production of a series of pedagogical devices in the educational space, with a view to the participation of people with autism in social practices. When looking at the historical issue of the diagnosis of autism, Mas (2018, p. 99) goes in another direction and argues that the subject in this condition “could be treated more effectively through singularity” (Mas, 2018, p. 99).

Studies based on the Vigotskian framework indicate that expressions such as “my son is autistic”, “my student is autistic”, “I have an autistic cousin”, “my student with autism is cute”, “I have a cousin with autism who is super intelligent”, “he is the love of the pro” circulate socially and impact the child’s ways of constitution (Chiote, 2021; Gonçalves, 2021; Novaes & Freitas, 2021; Padilha, 2021). Such expressions seem to delimit the person into “rigid and myopic conceptions of the subject as autism” (Padilha, 2021, p. 13). In school contexts, there is an exacerbated mark of the diagnosis that precedes the person, with a strong emphasis on organic conditions. This aspect causes strangeness when

one assumes the socio-historical-cultural thesis of human development: that man is constituted in the relation with others. For Vigotski¹ (2000), it is in the social context governed by historical and cultural laws that the human species development takes place, and not as the result of a chain of mechanized behaviors.

In view of the above, this article problematizes this issue and takes as a theoretical-methodological reference the propositions of the historical-cultural perspective, especially studies by Vigotski about the diagnosis of the child development conditions and possibilities (Vigotski, 1997). The objective here is to understand how this issue is handled by Lev Vigotski in his studies about disability and, from there, reflect about how the diagnosis of autism has been produced historically and its impacts on the constitution of the subjectivity of the child who receives it.

In order to achieve the objective intended here, this text is based on a doctoral study of a theoretical and empirical nature that addressed the Miguel's singularities, a child diagnosed with autism, a second-year elementary school student at a public school located on the outskirts of a municipality in the interior of São Paulo.

In this study, the researcher and first author's text developed participatory research during 2019, inserting himself in the student's classroom and developing pedagogical activities in collaboration with the class teacher². Furthermore, the researcher interviewed Miguel's mother in order to understand the child's story from the mother's perspective³. The records were made via video recording of classroom situations and audio recording of the conversation with the mother, in addition to the researcher's field notes. The recorded data were transcribed and analyzed based on microgenetics (Góes, 2000).

To cut out the discussions in this article, excerpts were selected from the interview with the mother and the researcher's field notes.

Addition to this introduction, this text is organized into three sections: In the first, we seek to understand the issue of diagnosis in the light of historical-cultural theory and the derivations for understanding the children with autism constitution in the contemporary debate. Next, the section 'Miguel and his dramatic relations' brings narrative excerpts that allow us to reflect, based on Vigotskian perspective, about how the diagnosis impacts the children with autism constitution. After the discussions, the final considerations emphasize the importance of understanding children in social practices, in relations with others and in their ways of acting in the world.

Reflections about the diagnosis in the historical-cultural theory light

A scientist at the beginning of the 20th century and precursor of historical-cultural theory, Vygotsky dedicated himself to understanding the process of constitution of the human psyche. Focusing on its theoretical-methodological scope, the discussions in this article are based on the development conditions of people with disabilities and the role of the other's word in the human constitution process.

When studying the people with disabilities development, Vigotski (1997) considers that the approaches of his time are unilateral, as they describe them based on their physiological factors, whether congenital or acquired. Nowadays, studies that are based on such approaches characterize autism as a syndrome that impairs a child's development, especially in the acquisition and use of language and in behavior patterns considered restricted and repetitive (Ferraz et al. 2018; Benitez et al. 2020; Elias et al., 2021; Silva & Moura, 2021).

However, the Vigotskian framework goes in another direction by understanding the people with disabilities development as a process that takes place in a social location, governed by historical laws of the human species in line with the culture in which the subject is inserted. That's why,

1 This author's name appears in literature with different spellings. In this work, we chose "Vigotski", but, in the bibliographical indications, we preserved the original spelling adopted in each material cited.

2 Study approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

3 The mother was heard as she was the one who had contact with the school.

[...] in this study, the expression “person with autism” and “autisms” is used to emphasize that autism makes up the subject, but does not define him completely. In this sense, it is considered that clinical diagnoses, which are delivered at school, are clues that can help in planning the pedagogical work to be carried out with students with autism, but this diagnosis cannot be interpreted as an end in itself, since all the subject is also historical and cultural. (Gonçalves, 2021, p. 113)

When diagnosis is problematized as a means, but not as an end to the constitutive process of people with autism, other paths open up to tension the limitations present in the terminology of ‘autism’ itself.

The most recent study focusing on this historical theme is the research by Natalie Mas (2018): ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder: history of the construction of a diagnosis’, which investigates the historical path of the classification of autism. According to the author, in 1911, Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler described the condition of autism. She emphasizes that, from this period until the description of the syndrome in 1943 by the Austrian doctor Leo Kanner, there was a tension between autism and schizophrenia due to the similarity of the diagnostic factors. For Mas (2018), this information in the literature is not new, but needs further study.

This question, in addition to contributing to the understanding of the proposed objective, makes it possible to enter the Vygotskian framework by looking at the human constitution and the historical facts that permeate the understanding of the term autism and reverberate in different social practices.

In the collection ‘Fundamentals of defectology’ (Vygotski, 1997), the word autism appears in the chapter “*El diagnóstico del desarrollo y la clínica paidológica de la infancia difícil*”, in which the author analyzes the frequent complications in the development of so-called ‘difficult’ children, with psychopathy or significant mental retardation.⁴

4 It is worth noting that the term mental retardation was used at that time, but currently, according to the “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, promulgated in Brazil in 2009 (Brasil, 2009), the term intellectual disability is used.

Vygotski begins with a critique about the way child development diagnosis was carried out in his time. For the author, the traditional clinic was concerned with diagnosing children who presented developmental peculiarities, however without concern for understanding their developmental possibilities. Vygotski gives the example of a mother who takes her 8-year-old son to a psychiatric evaluation because he was experiencing bouts of irritability, anger, and aggression. After clinical evaluation, the psychiatrist provides the mother with the diagnosis: the child is epileptoid. The mother then asks for more explanations and the doctor responds: her son is irritable, angry and aggressive. The mother retorts that, to know this, she wouldn’t need to have taken her son to the evaluation. With this case, Vygotski asks: what do parents and educators expect when they refer a child for an evaluation? And what do the experts respond?

Based on this reflection, he argues that it is necessary to understand what the diagnosis of development is, how it is possible to do it and, in addition to the diagnosis, think about the prognosis, that is, about the developmental possibilities. For Vygotski, it is necessary to understand the essence of symptoms, the dynamic-causal relations: The clinic must

[...] move from the study of complex symptoms to the study of the developmental processes that are expressed in these symptoms and there are no grounds for assuming that the developmental processes of the normal child and the abnormal child, the difficult educability mechanisms formation cannot be distinguished in the same way that the clinic used to distinguish psychic illnesses. (Vygotski, 1997, p. 284-285)⁵

Vygotski (1997) draws on psychiatry studies of his time, especially regarding child psychopathologies, which, according to him, also needed to abandon a strictly symptomatology view. Take as an example the research entitled “About the problem

5 In Spanish “*Debe pasar del estudio de los complejos de síntomas al estudio de los procesos de desarrollo que se exteriorizan en esos síntomas y no existen fundamentos para suponer que los procesos de desarrollo del niño normal y del niño anormal, los mecanismos de formación de la difícil educabilidad no pueden ser distinguidos del mismo modo que empleó la clínica para distinguir las enfermedades psíquicas*” (Vygotski, 1997, p. 284-285).

of the structure and dynamics of children's constitutional psychopathy"⁶, by the Russian psychiatrist Grunya Yefimovna Sujareva, which proposes to analyze the dynamics of children's psychopathy instead of a solely classificatory analysis. Vigotski finds many similarities between this study and his own investigations into the complex dynamics of the children with disabilities development. In the same way as in Sujareva's research, Vigotski (1997) finds that symptoms are much more reflections of external conditions – environment, education, real life situations. Thus, he relies on Sujareva to argue that the fundamental objective of analysis is to separate the primary fundamental symptoms from the secondary consequences.

For Vigotski (1997), primary symptoms are a direct consequence of biological regularities, while secondary consequences concern the way in which disability is understood in the social sphere. He attests that it is important, in addition to the disability, to know the child and the place that this disability occupies in their life and psychic constitution.

In the case of people with psychopathy or mental disabilities, development "it does not constitute a passive unfolding of particularities defined from the beginning, but a development in the legitimate sense of the word, that is, it includes within itself a series of new formations." (Vygotski, 1997, p. 307).⁷

The author understands that social and cultural factors also affect the development of children he calls 'difficult'. The new formations originate from the dynamics of the child's social life and constitute his personality. In other words, the child's constitution is affected by the meaning that others attribute to their gestures, actions, words. In other words, human singularity concerns a process of meaning. Based on the research of Sujareva (1930,

apud Vigotski, 1997), the description, analysis and synthesis proposed by the author regarding the development of a difficult child's personality consider this process of child's insertion into the social practices of his/her culture. Vigotski (1997) highlights the particularities and the relation between external (exogenous) and internal (endogenous) factors and points out that both 'mental retardation' and schizophrenic personality are expressed in the complexity of the child's developmental dynamics.

In contemporary times, discussions surrounding the diagnosis of autism have demanded in-depth work of understanding about the part of researchers who are based on the Vigotskian framework on how the social influences the constitution of the individual's uniqueness in this condition. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Vigotski's studies, in order to capture the author's approach in this sense. This movement makes it possible to reflect on the diagnosis of autism and its impact on social practices.

However, the historical-cultural reference makes it possible to understand that the speech of a child with autism has meaning, it is mediated by others and allows them to participate in social practices, such as those experienced at school. This look at the child's speech denotes 'possibilities', because it makes viable the understanding of the human being as the result of a social development process.

When considering the role of social and cultural aspects in the constitution of people with disabilities, Vigotski (2009) opposes the hegemonic psychological view that summarizes communication as sign, word and sound. The word, understood as a fragment of communication, represents an externalized aspect of language. However, from scientific exploration, "it was found that communication without signs is as impossible as it is without meaning" (Vigotski, 2009, p. 12). In other words, in school practices, Vigotski's view of the role of the social and of language in the development of people with disabilities has contributed to a work perspective focusing on development possibilities.

6 "Sobre el problema de la estructura y la dinámica de las psicopatías constitucionales infantiles"

7 The original: "[...] no constituye un despliegue pasivo de particularidades determinadas desde el comienzo, sino un desarrollo en el sentido propio de la palabra, es decir, que incluye en sí una serie de nuevas formaciones."

The study Contextualization: Miguel and his dramatic relations

It is not possible to understand Miguel's academic development without first knowing the paths that constitute his uniqueness. In this study, excerpts from an interview carried out by the researcher with the child's mother are analyzed. Excerpts from the researcher's field notes are also investigated, which allow us to identify aspects of Miguel's relations with his colleagues and the intern who accompanied him in the classroom. In the analyses, in line with the microgenetic approach, we seek evidence of how the other's word reverberates in the student's uniqueness.

The interview between the researcher and the mother took place after the parents' meeting of the fourth school bimester. The researcher explains to her that her speech will be recorded and she authorizes. He asks the mother to say what she would like to tell about her son's life.

She begins the story by saying that Miguel is the son of a truck driver and that, in the first twenty years of marriage, she couldn't "like, have a child". She mentions that for ten years she tried to get pregnant, underwent treatments, but no avail because the problem lay in the father. Over time, she decided to "let go" and continue his life, her diets – which were "a bit crazy" – she spent long periods without eating; the last one was a liquid diet (for 3 months she only ate soup and salad) which made her feel sick. At the hospital, she discovered that she was pregnant with Miguel.

The pregnancy was as expected, the baby was born by cesarean section, weighing 5.1kg. He was the first child. So, everything seemed "normal", but around the age of two and for work reasons, she had to put him in daycare. That's when an educator asked if the mother saw any difference between Miguel and other children.

T. 1: Mom: I said no. Then she said that he gestured a lot, waved his hand a lot, liked things that turn, the fan, things with wheels... and he screamed a lot, and at 1 year 8 months he didn't speak, he wore a diaper... Then she said, in this case, I think she already knew,

but she didn't want to say it so as not to give it that impact. Then she said, "so, mom, I'm going to send him to APAE, so he can have an analysis, to see, you know". But I think that in this case, she already knew the symptoms of an autistic person, and I didn't, in this case. At the age of 1 year and 8 months, Miguel was referred to APAE, for six months he underwent treatment and, after 1 year, "the report came out that he was mildly autistic (SIC), and that was when I discovered his autism."

T. 2: Researcher: Mom, how was this process?

T. 3: Mother: I was "shocked" because I saw Miguel before he was born, I dreamed of him, the way he is! God showed me how he was going to be. So for me, it's a belief thing, you know?! The autism spectrum, what is it? Spectrum: something identified that no one knows where it came from that acts in the mind, understand? This is where religion comes in, everyone has their own and that's not discussed, so for me it's normal, but for society, it's not. We talk to his psychologist at APAE, and she asks what I think of Miguel, I think he is the way God wants him to be, no treatment will improve his appearance or worse, I think he is exactly the way God wants it, and if one day, God wants it, he will free him, if not, if he is meant to be like that, he will be.

The mother states that she has no problems with the diagnosis, but that her husband treats Miguel differently because of his way. She says that his father treats him as if he was normal, punishes him and slaps him when necessary because, for him, Miguel is normal. When commenting about his father's manners, she reports what she explained to her husband regarding her son's condition:

T. 4: Mother: because if you take a healthy child, from the time he was born, and you treat him as sick, as retarded, he will be retarded, even though he is healthy, because you treat him as retarded, and when he grows up, will be delayed. So, I told my husband to

treat him normally. After much discussion, things were settled.

This ‘getting things right’ was not enough for her to project or have expectations for the child’s future, although she considers that there is a flow of learning for life and for everything.

T. 5: Mom: what I just do, when the teacher sends the homework, it’s not easy, if he did it wrong, he erases it a thousand times and do it again. Did you count wrong? We have a bag of caps at home, so when we give them the caps, he starts counting, did he count wrong? Count again, did you count wrong? Count again. Count a thousand times until he does it, do you understand? Because I know Miguel, and there are times when he knows how to do it, but he is very disconnected, like, in the world of the moon, he knows the answer, but he is disconnected and does it wrong, or else, he wants to finish quickly to do something else, that’s where I pick on him [...] life has its course, but like this, I follow the school. If he has a duty, I let him do it his way, eating words, eating lyrics, but I let him do it, then I erase it and correct it, you know?! (Audio recorded, October 17, 2019)

In her report, the mother says many things about her son’s social constitution, even without knowing the positioning of the Vygotskian framework. From this situation, we grasp the signs of Miguel’s uniqueness, without forgetting to hear the structuring echoes that the term ‘autism’ carries. The daycare teacher, commenting to the mother about the student’s behavior, lists some descriptors according to her conception of human development: “he gestured a lot”, “he waved his hand a lot”, “he really liked things that rotate”, “the fan”, “screamed a lot”. The words of the mother and the daycare teacher about Miguel help to understand which others constitute him, but this aspect is not enough to understand his dramatic relations. Another occurrence in the classroom composes the image of who Miguel’s interlocutors are, especially in school practices. As the professor-researcher reports,

[...] we were in mathematics class (March 27, 2019), performing mathematical operations (addition and subtraction) with two numbers (example: $22+12$). We (the teacher and I) placed the students in groups of four children, two who had already learned the arithmetic concept and two who had not yet, so that they could help each other and during the task we went through the groups explaining, if any child had doubts. Until then, everything seemed fine, but I noticed a different movement at the tables next to Miguel’s, a boy imitated him, clapping his hands and rolling his eyes, while the others laughed. A girl, who was in the next group, explained to her colleague that he couldn’t do that to him, as he was a child with autism. As the days went by, I observed and noticed that some children imitated Miguel’s behavior, sometimes to attract attention, sometimes as a joke of mistreatment. They asked for “pala a pofessola batheio”, they responded “pesenti”, and “they clapped their hands, turned their heads and eyes and, if they were standing, they jumped up and down and asked to turn on the fan and the light”. If, on the one hand, there was this satirization, on the other, there was a movement among children in the sense of “you can’t do it like that, he’s autistic”, or, “teacher, you can’t fight with him, he’s autistic”. (extracted from the researcher’s field diary)

He’s autistic! This phrase was expressed in several situations at school, especially when Miguel wanted something and was not answered. When the student wanted to turn on the fan, even on cold days, he could because the teacher explained that Miguel is autistic. When he got tired of doing his homework, he could go to the court, because, as Esther (the intern who accompanied him) argued, he is autistic. But after all, how many things can an autistic person do in the classroom?

Discussions

In the eyes of others, Miguel’s behaviors seem to place him on the autistic spectrum, especially

in comparison to other children. In the interview, the mother narrates what the daycare teacher says about her son:

Then she said that he gestured a lot, waved his hand a lot, liked things that turn, the fan, things with wheels... and he screamed a lot, and at 1 year 8 months he didn't talk, he wore a diaper... So, mom, I'm going to send him to APAE, so he can have an analysis, to see, right? But I think that in this case, she already knew the symptoms of an autistic person, and I didn't, in this case.

When looking at the issue of age and its impact on Miguel's development process, it can be said that the boy, at the time of the suspected diagnosis, was in the crisis of the first year of life, for which Vigotski (1996) identified three critical moments: the first refers to the child's ability to move around in space - the child starts to walk, but still does so poorly and with effort; a second moment concerns the development of language, as this is when the child needs language to communicate with the adult, and they do not yet have this capacity developed; finally, in the third moment, the first protest actions appear, which manifest themselves with the child screaming, refusing to do something, throwing himself to the ground.

This explanation helps to understand that Miguel's behaviors described by the daycare teacher may be part of his developmental social situation, which puts him in a position to depend on others to act. Vygotski (1996, p. 325) states that "no stage of childhood requires so many elementary forms of collaboration as the first year".⁸ Did Miguel find these forms of collaboration in the relations established at the daycare? Could it be that their "autistic" behaviors were not being constituted in the modes of interaction? How did the teacher come to signify Miguel's ways of acting?

His actions, such as his interest in the fan and rotating objects, were signified by a pathologizing

gaze. Could it be that, if the school (the teacher) attributed other meanings to these actions, wouldn't their "atypical" behaviors be transformed or gain new meanings? Traditional studies commonly focus on these characteristics and typify the subject to the detriment of them. Vigotski (2003) did not disregard biological/organic issues in his studies (primary consequences). However, he was concerned about the secondary consequences, inherent to the way disability is understood by the social group. For the author, these are the secondary consequences that impact the child's psychic constitution.

Amplifying this discussion regarding the pathologization of people with autism, Laplane (2018, p. 111) reflects on the "ways of participation of children with autism spectrum disorder at school". In dialogues with school actors, the author collected a series of reports that value children's abilities in the process of learning new knowledge. She also explains that it is necessary to organize the collective thinking about making the activity more flexible, maintaining whenever possible the prospect of resuming it at another time. With this, the expectation is that children feel invited to participate in the classroom dynamics. It is therefore understandable that there is a need to investigate student behavior and not assume that the cause of pedagogical delay is autism.

Following the interview with her mother, she mentions that the divine enters into that which cannot be explained, maybe she didn't know, but there are studies focusing on autism dating back to 1900. This could be an indication that research on people with autism needs to reach other spaces, leave the academic world and be disseminated in language that is understandable to society.

The mother also claims that the child is "exactly the way God wants". She mentions that her son is "normal for her, but not for society". Even so, "if one-day God wants, he will free him, if not, if he is meant to be like this, he will be". The mother observes that society does not see Miguel as normal. Even so, she herself returns to the idea of "divine liberation", as if her son's body were being punished, in a prison.

⁸ Original text: "*ninguna otra edad infantil exige tantas formas de colaboración tan elemental como el primer año*"

In this dialectical situation, there is a conflict between the sacred and the profane, between religion and science, a contradiction that, structurally, constitutes the view towards people with disabilities. Before the rise of Christianity, babies with disabilities were killed. After the fourth century, this practice was condemned, with Christians coming out in defense of life. Even with the idea that “all” are children of God and possessors of souls, people with disabilities were worthy of charity, or even conceived as crazy, possessed and deserving of punishment, the main one being banishment from the social environment (Walber & Silva, 2006).

It is clear that there is a dichotomy in the understanding of the divine and science. This thought to be surpassed in contemporary times, it disregards the completeness of man and causes many conflicts, especially with regard to the education of people with disabilities, as is the case of Miguel.

Still, there is a contradiction: if there are clashes between the profane and the divine, the normal and the abnormal, autistic or non-autistic, there is a mother concerned about her child’s academic learning. She says that “it’s not easy” when the teacher sends her homework; “If you do it wrong, delete it a thousand times and do it again.” This line reiterates what she said about seeing Miguel like the others; but when describing him, she reaffirms numerous characteristics that place him in an inferior place: “he is very detached”, “in the world of the moon”, “he knows, but he does it wrong”, “he wants to finish quickly to do something else”. She also explains the way she does homework “I let him do it his way, eating words, eating letters, but I let him do it, then I erase it and correct it, you know?!” Redoing the lesson, as narrated by Miguel’s mother, shows that, as much as she sees the traits of autism in her son, they do not define her view of the boy.

Oliveira and Victor (2018), based on the Vygotskian matrix, do not stick to such descriptors, and present a case study in which they analyze the modes of interaction established between a child with autism and adults in the context of a toy library. When they bring up the Murilo’s example, they note the interaction between him and the researcher

in sharing a playful activity; during the game, the boy shows contentment. From this study, the authors outline the need to look at children with autism as a person, who positions themselves actively, because, like all people, they also constitute themselves in their relation with others, through language.

It is clear from his mother’s words that Miguel is being drawn by the other’s words. Before birth, the dream about the son with autism; then, at age 2, the teacher’s words mark him as atypical. Miguel’s story refers to the construction of singularity and the way he is affected by the words of others in social relations.

It is like the example of the pointing gesture discussed by Vygotski (1995), when he argues about the process of signification. First, the other person attributes meaning to the child’s gesture; Then, the child takes this meaning for himself. First, the other (the mother, the teacher) attributes meaning to Miguel’s gestures – he is autistic; later, Miguel takes these meanings for himself and acts in social relations like a child with autism. Regarding meaning, Vigotski (2000, p. 31) comments:

the outsider creates connections, directs the brain and through the brain, the body. The internal relations between the functions and layers of the brain, as the basic regulatory principle in nervous activity, is replaced by social relations outside the person and within the person (domain of the other’s conduct), as a new regulatory principle.

Pino (1993) maintains that meaning affects the constitution of the subject. At birth, the child enters a cultural world in constant transformation. In the relations that children establish with this world, meanings form and guide their development, which happens dynamically. When a child takes upon himself the socially defined meaning of a word, he reworks his way of looking at the world and the situations that affect him. It is in the relation of meaning with the world that the (trans)formation of what seemed to be something natural (learning to speak, read, write) takes place. For Pino (1993, p. 22), “meaning alters the child’s modes of activity and cognition”.

The meaning concept makes it possible to understand characteristics considered to be of the person with autism, but which are established in the dialogical plot with the other. For example, apparent isolation may be a moment of escape from something that is uncomfortable for a child diagnosed with autism, and not because he or she, in fact, is unable to stay in the same space as others.

This clarifies that the common manifestations of autism occur in a web of relations. First they happen in the social context, then for the subject. Man, who created himself as he transformed nature (Engels, 2020), is the same social man as Vigotski (2000), involved in creating himself through the others' words.

The characteristics that make subjects unique can be seen through the body and identity that compose it. The human body reveals tastes, groups, and seems to be a canvas on which each person paints according to their wishes. In this case, it seems to us that Miguel is a canvas painted at the beginning of his school life by the colors of autism. His gestures are not an expression of his wishes, of his desires and his movements are an expression of characteristics inherent to the clinical diagnosis of autism.

It is true that the pathologizing vision has a strong presence in the scientific field, as stated by Vigotski (1997), but by extrapolating this vision, another way of constituting subjects becomes viable. Based on the Vigotskian framework, Silva M. and Silva D. (2017) point out that it is possible to resize the primary deficit based on the way the child is understood in the social context, as one of the children investigated by the authors enters the game and, with the help of a friend, his play develops. Furthermore, they highlight the need for alternative paths and other resources that allow students on the autism spectrum to appropriate cultural knowledge. In other words, the creation of social practices that tension the limitations present in the terminology of 'autism'.

However, it is clear from the excerpts analyzed that Miguel's ways of appropriating the human race are being dictated to the extent that, in his social

context of development, experiences are being led by a pathological human type. In his family situation, they claim that he is autistic: in the first years of school teaching, the words of the teacher come, who notices his differences as something deviant, lacking a clinical-therapeutic perspective and, in the classroom, his colleagues satirize his gestures.

So, what opportunities do children have in their social environment to isolate themselves from being classified as autistic? Miguel shows himself to be autistic because the environment characterizes him as such, as a character. It is the drama of ongoing development. The subject is not constituted as a copy and reproduction of what is social, but rather in the meanings he constructs and in the meaning of the transformations that occur in the human psyche. If it is from the other that Miguel constitutes himself, it is from the belief in his autism that he becomes part of the spectrum, with no possibility of being anything other than autistic. The mother reiterates this passage in her speech, when she states that "[...] if you take a healthy child from the time he was born, and you treat him as sick, as retarded, he will be retarded, [...] and when he grows up, he will be retarded [...]" and, corroborates Vigotski's argument (2000, p. 38), "it is not madness that differentiates the mentally ill person from us, but the fact that he believes in this delusion, obey, while we do not."

The author's perspective denotes that language is fundamental in the development of human beings. In this sense, Miguel's uniqueness is being constructed by structural discourses that typify people with autism: they say he is autistic, and he, without even knowing it, becomes increasingly more autistic.

In his development process, the conditions that can be offered (or not) in the environment are for Miguel, as they are for all children, the genesis of cultural forms of appropriation of the human race. If the environment is fragile, explains Vigotski (2018), the child will carry this mark in his constitution. The problem in the Brazilian context is the lack of looking at the person with autism in their

uniqueness, especially the other senses that can be attributed to the child's new experiences. If, on the one hand, the weakened environment leaves its mark on the child's appropriating ways, the environment can nurture development and make up for deficits along the way.

Considerations

This article aimed to understand how the diagnosis of child development is treated by Lev Vigotski in his studies about disability, and from there reflect on how the autism diagnosis has been produced historically and the impacts of this on the constitution of the child's subjectivity who receives it. When focusing on the proposed objective, we looked at the dialogues that Vigotski had with the psychiatrist Sujareva. From this reading, it is clear that the author takes a step beyond physiological science when he mentions that external, social and cultural factors affect the way in which the subject appropriates the human race. In this appropriation process, there is also an ongoing process of awareness, as a result of participation with others in social practices and acting in the world.

From the tensions carried out here, which occurred from a participation context of a child with autism in social practices, the urgency is affirmed that school actors and the entire society do not restrict themselves to clinical diagnosis. It is essential to look at the person with autism considering their history and their development possibilities.

Even though students with autism are supported by special education policies from the perspective of inclusive education, it is important to mobilize educators to enable social practices that understand, especially in the school context the students in their singularities.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Manual diagnóstico e estatístico de transtornos mentais: DSM TR-5*. Artmed.
- Benitez, P., Albuquerque, I., Manoni, N. V., Sanches, A. F. R., & Bondioli, R. (2020). Centro de aprendizagem e desenvolvimento: Estudo de caso interdisciplinar em ABA. *Revista Psicologia: Teoria e Prática*, 22(1), 332-350.
- Brasil. Ministério da Educação. Lei Nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996. (1996). *Estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional*. Ministério da Educação.
- Brasil. Presidência da República. Decreto Nº 6.949, de 25 de agosto de 2009. (2009). *Convenção Internacional sobre os direitos da pessoa com deficiência*. Presidência da República.
- Brito, H. K. M., Mendes, N. B., Lima, G. T., Pires, A. J. S., Cruz, W. V., Vargas, G. L. M., & Rabelo, N. N. (2021). O impacto da terapia cognitivo-comportamental no transtorno do espectro autista. *Brazilian Journal of Health Review*, 4(2), 7902-7910. <https://doi.org/10.34119/bjhrv4n2-323>
- Chiote, F. A. B. (2021). As políticas educacionais e a escolarização do aluno com autismo no ensino médio. In C. S. Emilene, & M. A. C. L. Gonçalves (Orgs.), *Autismos: a constituição humana a partir da abordagem histórico-cultural*. Etnografia.
- Elias, N. C., Gois, J. P., Benitez, P., & Trevisan, D. F. (2021). Aplicativos para intervenção comportamental com estudantes com Transtorno do Espectro do Autismo. *Revista Brasileira de Informática na Educação*, 29, 1487-1504. <https://doi.org/10.5753/rbie.2021.2423>
- Engels, F. (2020). *Dialética da natureza*. Boitempo Editorial.
- Ferraz, S., Moares, K., & Machado, L. M. B. (2018). O desenvolvimento das crianças com TEA. *Anais da Jornada Científica dos Campos Gerais*, 16. <https://www.iessa.edu.br/revista/index.php/jornada/article/view/865>
- Góes, M. C. R. (2000). A abordagem microgenética na matriz histórico-cultural: uma perspectiva para o estudo da constituição da subjetividade. *Caderno Cedes*, 20 (50), 9-25. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-32622000000100002>
- Gomes, E. R., Coelho, H. P. B., & Miccione, M. M. (2016). Estratégias de intervenção sobre os transtornos do espectro do autismo na terapia cognitivo comportamental: análise da literatura. *Revista Estação Científica*, (16), 1-16. <https://portal.estacio.br/media/3727389/estrat%C3%A9gias-de-interven%C3%A7%C3%A3o-sobre-os-transtornos-do-espectro-do-autismo-na-terapia-cognitivo-comportamental.pdf>
- Gonçalves, M. A. C. L. (2021). Pensamento verbal e intencionalidade na mediação pedagógica: episódios de fala de Luana no último ano do ensino fundamental. In C. S. Emilene, & M. A. C. L. Gonçalves (Orgs.), *Autismos: a constituição humana a partir da abordagem histórico-cultural*. Etnografia.
- Goulart, P., & Assis, G. J. A. (2002). Estudos sobre autismo em análise do comportamento: aspectos metodológicos. *Revista Brasileira de Terapia Comportamental e Cognitiva*, 4(2), 151-165.
- Jannuzzi, G. M. (2006) *A educação do deficiente no Brasil: dos primórdios ao início do século XXI* (2ª ed.). Autores Associados.
- Kanner, L. (1943). *Autistic disturbances of affective contact*. *Nervous Child*, 2, 217-250. http://neurodiversity.com/library_kanner_1943.pdf

- Laplane, A. L. F. (2018). Confrontando a norma: modos de participação de crianças com transtorno do espectro do autismo na escola. *Horizontes*, 36(3), 111-120. <https://revistahorizontes.usf.edu.br/horizontes/article/view/709>
- Mas, N. A. (2018). *Transtorno do Espectro Autista - história da construção de um diagnóstico*. [Dissertação de mestrado, Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade de São Paulo]. https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/47/47133/tde-26102018-191739/publico/mas_me.pdf
- Novaes, D. (2022). *Por entre olhares, o humano: processos de constituição de uma criança (com autismo) no segundo ano do ensino fundamental*. [Tese de Doutorado em Educação, Universidade São Francisco].
- Novaes, D., & Freitas, A. P. de (2021). *O impacto da palavra do outro no processo de constituição de uma criança com autismo*. Congresso Brasileiro de Educação Especial - IX CBEE, 2021, Florianópolis. Anais do 9º Congresso brasileiro de educação especial, 2021.
- Oliveira, I. M., & Victor, S. L. (2018). A criança com autismo na brinquedoteca: percursos de interação e linguagem. *Revista Educação Especial*, 31(62), 651-664. <https://periodicos.ufsm.br/educacaoespecial/article/view/29281>
- Padilha, A. M. L. (2021). Prefácio. In C. S. Emilene, & M. A. C. L. Gonçalves (Orgs.), *Autismos: a constituição humana a partir da abordagem histórico-cultural*. Etnografia.
- Pino, A. L. (1993). Processos de significação e constituição do sujeito. *Temas em Psicologia*, 7(1), 17-24. http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1413-389X1993000100004
- Silva, M. A., & Silva, D. N. H. (2017). O jogo de papéis e a criança com autismo na perspectiva histórico-cultural. *Psicologia Em Estudo*, 22(3), 485-496. <https://doi.org/10.4025/psicoestud.v22i3.35745>
- Silva, S. C. J., & Moura, R. C. R. (2021). Musicoterapia e autismo em uma perspectiva comportamental. *Revista Neurociências*, 29, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.34024/rnc.2021.v29.11882>
- Vigotski, L. S. (1995). *Obras escogidas. Problemas de desarrollo de la psique (incluye problemas del desarrollo de la psique)* (Tomo 3). Visor.
- Vigotski, L. S. (2000). Manuscrito 1929. *Educación & Sociedad*, 21(71), 21-44.
- Vigotski, L. S. (2003). *Psicología pedagógica*. Artmed.
- Vigotski, L. S. (2009). *A construção do Pensamento e linguagem*. Martins Fontes.
- Vigotski, L. S. (2018). *Sete aulas de L. S. Vigotski sobre os fundamentos da pedologia*. Organização (Z. Prestes; & E. Tunes, Trads). E-Papers.
- Vygotski, L. S. (1996). *Obras Escogidas. Psicología infantil* (Tomo 4). Visor.
- Vygotski, L. S. (1997). *Fundamentos de defectología* (Tomo 5). Visor.
- Walber, V. B., & Silva, R. N. D. (2006). As práticas de cuidado e a questão da deficiência: integração ou inclusão? *Estudos de Psicologia*, 23(1), 29-37.

Mailing address

Daniel Novaes
São Francisco University
Av. Senador Lacerda Franco, 360 -, Itatiba, SP, Brazil -
CEP 13250-400
E-mail: msdanielnovaes13@gmail.com



This is an open access article distributed in
Creative Commons license terms.