

Specific Learning Disorders: A critical analysis in the light of Historical-Cultural Theory

Transtornos Específicos da Aprendizagem: Uma análise crítica à luz da Teoria Histórico-Cultural

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Summary

The process of assessment and intervention of school complaints based on Historical-Cultural Theory seeks to understand non-learning at school as a multifactorial process, carrying out an investigation that goes beyond the description of the phenomenon and seeks to explain the difficulties cause in the teaching-learning process, understanding the child from the materialist, historical and dialectical method. With the aim of understanding how the Historical-Cultural Theory perceives medical diagnoses given to difficulties in the schooling process, this article carried out a narrative review of national literature based on an electronic search in different databases, such as Google Scholar, SciELO and Pepsic. It is clear that this theoretical perspective has a critical conception of the symptoms that children present at school and raises concerns about the current production of diagnoses that individualize the teaching-learning process for the subject who does not learn and medicalizes him, without considering this child moving with society in a development process that involves several characters.

Keywords: Medicalization. Teaching and Learning Process. Historical-Cultural Theory.

Resumo

O processo de avaliação e intervenção da queixa escolar baseada na Teoria Histórico-Cultural busca entender o não-aprender na escola como um processo multifatorial, realizando uma investigação que supera a descrição do fenômeno e busca explicar a causa das dificuldades no processo de ensino-aprendizagem, compreendendo a criança a partir do método materialista, histórico e dialético. Com o objetivo de compreender como a Teoria Histórico-Cultural percebe os diagnósticos médicos dados às dificuldades no processo de escolarização, realizou-se neste artigo uma revisão narrativa de literaturas nacionais a partir de uma busca eletrônica em diferentes bases de dados, tais como Google Acadêmico, SciELO e Pepsic. Percebe-se que essa perspectiva teórica possui uma concepção crítica sobre os sintomas que a criança apresenta na escola e levanta preocupações sobre a atual produção de diagnósticos que individualizam o processo de ensino-aprendizagem ao sujeito que não aprende e medicaliza, sem considerá-lo em movimento com a sociedade em um processo de desenvolvimento que envolve diversos personagens.

Unitermos: Medicalização. Processo Ensino e Aprendizagem. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

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Introduction

This work aims to understand how Historical-Cultural Theory perceives medical diagnoses given to difficulties in the schooling process. This research originated from a narrative review of national literature which addressed themes related to school complaints and Historical-Cultural Theory. The following keywords were used: development, school complaints, specific learning disorders and Historical-cultural Theory. To survey publications, a free electronic search was carried out in different databases, such as Google Scholar, SciELO and Pepsic.

Specific Learning Disorders are described by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 5th revised edition (DSM-V-TR) as “a neurodevelopmental disorder with a biological origin that is the basis of abnormalities at the cognitive level, which are associated with behavioral manifestations” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2023, p. 323). Diagnoses of specific learning disorders are supported by four evaluative criteria, which describe academic deficits and the necessary conditions for this. These being (APA, 2023): (A) Difficulties in learning and using academic skills - difficulties in reading, writing and mastering number sense - that persist for at least six months; (B) Academic skills below expectations for chronological age, causing significant interference in one or more spheres of the subject’s life; (C) Difficulties that began during the school years; (D) Such difficulties cannot be explained by another disability, disorder or psychosocial aspects.

However, despite the manual (APA, 2023) drawing attention to the need for a historical look, as well as the relation between academic skills and the teaching-learning process, it is observed that the centrality of this condition and its process assessment has been placed on individual and physiological aspects of the subject (Giroto et al., 2020), since this presents a series of behavioral symptoms necessary for the diagnosis, but does not elucidate reflections about their relation with the subject’s reality analyzed. It is therefore essential to consider

the social and cultural context of the subjects evaluated as determining factors in the constitution of their psyche.

Historical-Cultural Theory and criticism of the teaching-learning process standardization

Borges and Gontijo (2020), in a movement of historical contextualization, resume the construction of child psychological assessment by carrying out a critical analysis by stating that this process developed based on the psychometric model of assessment, with a medical-statistical characteristic, with a fragmented view of the individual and their development. Giroto et al. (2020) relate this to the growing medicalization of non-learning, where multifactorial and complex issues - of a social, historical, economic, family, cultural, political and pedagogical nature - are reduced to biological aspects, carrying biomedical logic to other areas of knowledge.

In this way, this phenomenon comes to be understood based on the dichotomy between health and illness, where non-learning is seen as deviant and receives a medical diagnosis and, with this, the abnormality is legitimized in comparison to other children (Cruz et al., 2022). When children who do not learn are seen to be detached from their social environment, they are referred by pedagogical institutions to health services, therefore receiving a medical diagnosis and, in turn, drug treatments. Since the 1990s, researchers Cecília Azevedo Lima Collares and Maria Aparecida Affonso Moysés have problematized the high incidence of medication prescriptions for symptoms related to difficulties in the teaching-learning process. The authors also discuss that the pathologization of education, where non-learning processes are considered as illnesses, unfolds into the medicalization of education, that is, treating symptoms of social, cultural and historical origin with medication (Collares & Moysés, 1994, 1996, 2011, 2014).

In contrast to this practice, the Historical-Cultural Theory provides strong theoretical support for the deconstruction of a focus on the

student's deficits and/or difficulties, expanding the evaluation of the teaching-learning process to other participants involved in the production of the school complaint and contextualizing them based on the subject's social and cultural reality. This assumption is made by Vigotski (1995/1927) when highlighting the importance of social mediations for the development process. The author systematizes the dialectical relation among such processes based on the principle of the general law of cultural development, where he proposes that psychic development occurs from a movement of internalization from the social plane (interpsychic) to the psychological environment (intrapsychic). In this sense, first the subject has access to a certain socially mediated instrument through the cultural appropriation of knowledge, to later internalize this social instrument as a psychological instrument. An example of this is the language, which developed socially through the mediation of others (on a social level) and, from the relation with culture, man appropriated language and internalized it, developing his psyche and making use of this superior psychic function as an instrument of self-regulation of behavior, this allowed man a qualitative leap in thought, since language began to be used to plan his action.

Thus, it is understood that the higher psychic functions - voluntary attention, language, thought, voluntary memory, imagination, intelligence, emotions/feelings, sensations and perceptions - essential to human development and the construction of academic skills, do not arise naturally and organic, but based on the subject's relation with the social environment and the opportunities for internalization and appropriation of the culture that he has access to, qualitatively changing the subject's relation with their environment. Martins (2012) discusses that the cultural, social and historical environment directly impacts the way in which the subject internalizes the values, ideas, attitudes and practices of the context in which they are inserted and, to what extent social mediation enables the appropriation of culture and enables this student's learning.

Since learning does not occur in a vacuum, but is inserted in a teaching-learning process, it is essential that the professional expands his object of study beyond the subject and his difficulties, considering the appropriation of knowledge as a dialectical movement of internalization, which depends on the way in which the social relations involved in this process are constructed and the quality of the mediations they provide (Facci, et al., 2007).

Thus, the subject's psychic activity cannot be seen as an immediate reflection of his biological development, but needs to be understood in a complex path of historical and dialectical materialist development (Clarindo, 2020) that "constitutes him as a subject and mediates his way of thinking, feeling and acting in the world. Therefore, it is an unfinished synthesis of the multiple relations it establishes with culture and society, configured in processuality" (Gesser, 2013, p. 71).

Vigotski (1927 / 1995) highlights that everyone has the ability to develop as long as mediations are made available that allow the internalization of culture in the particularity of each subject, which deconstructs the traditional conception of a normative learning pattern. The author considered development as a unique ontogenic process, in which each child has specific needs. Therefore, thinking about the inability of a subject with a disorder or disability to adapt to a universal methodology is to blame the child for the social inability to offer him the mediating instruments necessary for him to internalize the culture and promote his development.

This view does not deny the existence of biological conditions that alter the individual's relation with the environment, but considers that such aspects have different roles in the subject's life depending on their historical and social constitution (Clarindo, 2020). The transformations in social demands, in different times and cultures, are reflected in the intensity with which a certain characteristic comes to be classified, whether it can be considered a disability or not, as well as, depending on the social class of this person, greater or lower conditions for social adaptation, generating different impacts for the same biological condition (Cruz et al., 2022).

In this context, it is essential to recognize the importance of adopting a broader perspective in relation to the nosological criteria of Specific Learning Disorders based on the recognition of the needs of students with difficulties in the learning process, regardless of whether they have received a diagnosis or not. It is added to this discussion that the target audiences for Special Education, according to Decree No. 7,611 (2011), are students with disabilities (sensory, motor or intellectual), Pervasive Developmental Disorder (currently Autism Spectrum Disorder) and High skills/Giftedness; Therefore, students with Specific Learning Disorders are not considered target audiences for Special Education and, therefore, specialized educational assistance is not guaranteed by law. A critical stance is highlighted in relation to the need for a report, since this classification can be restrictive and insufficient to cover the entire diversity of profiles and educational needs, especially as it limits the possibilities of developing personalized educational mediations to meet the needs of students who do not have a formal diagnosis.

It should be noted that there is law No. 14,254 (2021) for students diagnosed with Specific Learning Disorder, which provides for comprehensive monitoring for students with dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or other learning disorder, but which, above all, it emphasizes the need for early diagnosis, referral and monitoring in health services, reinforcing a biologizing look at attentional difficulties and the learning process.

Souza et al. (2020) discuss how much what is considered normal is within a sociocultural model, also manifested in the economy and politics, as these determine who is considered productive or not in a society and, in turn, who does or does not fit a pre-established norm to the expected standard.

In this way, the Historical-Cultural Theory seeks to overcome the mere description of the observed phenomenon, adopting an investigative stance into the causes that imply its existence (Asbahr & Lopes, 2006), that is, when receiving a school complaint,

the psychologist or historical psychopedagogue-cultural does not limit its investigation to the clinical office, but carries out the movement of returning this demand to the school and the family, dialoguing and including them in the understanding and transformation of this reality. To this end, the Historical-cultural Theory uses the Historical and Dialectic Materialist method as a basis for analysis. In this context the formation of the subject tends and psychic activity occurs from its interaction with concrete and materialistic reality, internalizing it, which enables an unlimited range of possibilities of being and acting for the subject, as this is dependent on the historical moment and the development process that precedes it, from culture accumulated throughout history, which occurs in a constant movement of dialectical contradictions.

Luria (1981) also corroborates this statement by stating that psychic development must be seen as a historical process in which the child's social environment induces the development of mediation processes of several higher mental functions. Based on the compensation and neuroplasticity concepts the author contributes to thinking about non-learning beyond the subject's biological aspects, since there is the possibility of restructuring neuronal connections, thus, uncompromised brain areas replace previously performed functions by the compromised areas (Terra-Candido, 2015). In addition to the decentralization of justifications for non-learning to individual and biological aspects, Luria (1981) allows us to look at the subject in transformation, capable of overcoming their current biological condition.

This look at the subject's movement in the society in which he is inserted is what supports the professional's performance whose epistemological basis is anchored in the Historical-Cultural Theory, as it allows a process of evaluation of teaching-learning processes with a focus on potentialities of the subject and the transformation of their concrete reality, as we will explore in the next topic.

The motivations and consequences of assessing non-learning

As already explained, historically, the evaluation of school complaints was built based on the psychometric evaluation model, with a medical-statistical characteristic (Borges & Gontijo, 2020). This conception of the subject is based on a normative view of the teaching-learning process, based on homogenizing ideas that do not value the inherent differences of each subject and attribute academic performance to individual causes, personality or cognitive capacity (Borges & Gontijo, 2020). Speeches permeated by “a medical vision concerned with distinguishing the “sane” from the “non-sane” or “insane” are perceived (Borges & Gontijo, 2020, p. 5), “normal” children from “sick” ones with deficits, disorders or disorders that prevent them from learning. Giroto et al. (2019), reinforce this position by drawing attention to the use of the expression “non-learning disease” and the normalization of this, highlighting an already established and culturally appropriate meaning.

Here in Brazil, the production of this discourse is related to the influence of psychometrics and mental hygiene in schools, marked by a psychopedagogical practice focused on individual capabilities, where it was considered possible to measure intelligence (Hostins, 2000; Machado, 2000). Such methodologies did not consider the social differences of each subject, the inequalities in access and quality of mediating instruments available in different social classes and their impact on the development of higher psychic functions (Machado, 2000), as well as disregarding the different internalization processes and knowledge in the acquisition process. In this way, the evaluation of teaching-learning processes based on exclusively tests and/or intrinsic aspects of the subject hides the way in which the teaching-learning process takes place, the multiple social relations involved in this and the unique way in which each subject experiences them.

Patto (1997) associates such an individualizing and reductionist practice with the production of reports, which are often used as instruments for

excluding children who do not learn. The author calls this phenomenon *the production of school failure*, since there is no attempt to overcome the demands presented, but to attest or justify failure to learn based on “physical or psychological disorders within the individual” (p. 4).

In this way, the conditions of the Brazilian educational reality are ignored, removing from the discussion the social, political, family and pedagogical responsibility of the teaching-learning process by considering only the description or results of tests that measure what the child can do or cannot achieve and justify them based on the subject’s illness (Conselho Federal de Psicologia [CFP], 2015). Bock (2003) states that, in the history of Educational Psychology, there was ideological complicity of this science with the “concealment of the social character of education” (p. 85).

Such conceptions and practices regarding school complaints have generated an observable impact in increasing the referral of children to health services (Giroto et al., 2019; Facci et al., 2007). Amaral and Caponi (2020) draw attention to the guidelines that, in an ideal of preventing the worsening of learning difficulties, encourage the referral of “suspicious” students for evaluation in the health area, contributing to the construction of an understanding that any deviation from the “ideal” learning process must be understood as a symptom of psychopathology and treated in the clinical sphere. With the increase in medical referrals, there is also an increase in the medical intervention, the drug, (Scarín & Souza, 2020) which tends to be well accepted by the school and the family (CFP, 2015, p. 11) The impact of such practice occurs in the crystallization of the transformation of reality, since the teaching-learning strategies, administrative structures, working conditions and social relations involved in school complaints remain unquestionable, generating the stratification of the social position the person who does not learn (Chagas & Pedroza, 2016). Borges and Gontijo (2020) emphasize the importance of not lightly asserting the existence of a psychopathology or an intellectual deficit, as these contribute to

the stereotyping and stigmatization of the subject, making the teaching-learning process even more difficult. The CFP (2015, p. 7), in its booklet “Recommendations of non-medicalizing practices for education and health professionals and services” advises that professionals:

Both in the areas of education and health, it should not be about looking for what is missing (lack of attention, lack of discipline, lack of food, lack of motor coordination...), because, in this case, the logic is the same as medicalization. The look must turn to everything that situates the conditions at the beginning and throughout the process that generated the issue; questions that lead us to understand when, why, for what, with whom, for whom, where the problem is found show us this path. (CFP, 2015, p. 7)

The psychometric conception of the assessment of non-learning also comes up against the assumptions of the Historical-Cultural Theory when considering the subject as a static product. Patta (1997) emphasizes that psychometric tests “measure *products* of mental processes, ignoring the response production *process*, which is most important in determining the intellectual development stage” (p. 3). It is observed that psychological tests can actually indicate the level of development already consolidated in the child, but they tell us little about the ontological process of formation of such skills and are incompatible with the observation of the development or not of new skills and knowledge. In the next topic we explore a little more about the research possibilities.

Possible ways to investigate children who don't learn at school

Vigotski, in his search for overcoming the dichotomy and fragmentation of the subject that guided the view and therapeutic intervention of psychological sciences, built in Historical-Cultural Theory, means to think about this in its entirety, no longer reducing them to aspects isolated from the duality of mind and body, but considering such

aspects in their dialectics (Oliveira, 1993). For the author, understanding the subject means having their development process as an object of study, which occurs immersed in social relations and in a historical and dialectical materialist context. Anchored in Vygotskian assumptions, the professional strives to see beyond the appearance of the object - the immediate and evident - carrying out a true investigative process that searches for the essence of the phenomenon, that is, the structure and dynamics that support them. This conception is anchored in the Marxist idea that “all science would be superfluous if there were an immediate coincidence between the appearance and essence of things (...)” (Marx, 2008, p. 1080).

In this way, the construction of an interventional thought based on the Historical-Cultural Theory begins with the identification of the individual's period of development and the diagnosis of development, that is, the investigation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In Vigotski's definition

The distance between the level of actual development, which is usually determined through independent problem solving, and the level of potential development, determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vigotski, 1931 / 2007, p. 97)

“In practice, it involves identifying already consolidated maturational processes (real development zone), and mainly those that are in the process of maturation (potential development zone)” (Alves & Caldas, 2020, p. 186). As previously stated, such analysis is contextualized in his life story and covers much more than the emerging symptoms as a manifest complaint, as it is understood that to understand them it is necessary to investigate the subject's development process and the social structures in which he is immersed.

One of the main concepts proposed by Vigotski (2010), the zone of potential development (ZPD), sheds light on skills in the process of development, considering them as fundamental to the evaluation and intervention process as the already consolidated maturational processes. The ZPD talks about

the moment of development in which certain skills are still in the process of maturation, at this moment, it is observed that although the subject is unable to carry out such an activity alone, it becomes possible through the mediation of another. Thus, the importance of social relations for psychic development is highlighted:

We can measure not only the development process up to the present moment and the maturation processes that have already occurred, but also the processes that are still occurring, which are only now maturing and developing. (Vigotski, 2010, p. 112)

In addition to evaluating what the subject can or cannot do, the ZPD becomes valuable in investigating the way in which the child constructs such a response, understanding the subjective way in which complex psychic functions are articulated in the development of that subject. Luria (1981) states that the same symptom can come from different brain configurations, thus, the focus of his clinical analysis is not on the brain structure (injured or not) or on the result of an activity, but on its construction process, on the strategies and plans that the subject develops to achieve his objective. It is understood that this perspective allows us to perceive the configuration and relation of their superior psychological functions, the compensatory resources that the subject uses to deal with the difficulties that arise, highlighting their potential (Terra-Candido, 2015). It is stated by Alves and Caldas (2020) that the professional's performance based on the Historical-Cultural perspective takes place with a focus on this zone of development and based on the potential that the subject presents.

When investigating the relation between developmental diagnosis and school complaints, a movement of historical and dialectical materialist analysis is necessary that considers the senses and meanings about oneself and others. In this way, we investigate the repercussions of such symptoms on the development of that person, how they are seen in the family and what this represents for their

cultural group, as well as the pedagogical measures already taken and which are still possible, since the child's relation in the school environment contributes to the understanding and analysis of their school complaints (Alves & Caldas, 2020; Terra-Candido, 2015).

As previously explained, based on Luria's (1981) concept of brain plasticity and Vigotski's (2010) conception of the dialectic between learning and development, the Historical-Cultural Theory constructs a view of a subject as a being in constantly changing. Thus, such investigations are designed with the aim of enabling interventions that instrumentalize the subject in his action in the world and create strategies to deal with certain difficulties, making him aware of his action in the world, seeking to mediate the subject's development process so conducts they were previously in the zone of potential development move to the level of actual development (Terra-Candido, 2015). In this discussion, in the words of Moysés and Collares (1997):

[...] look at what the child knows, what she has, what she can, what she like. No previously defined task is proposed, no question is asked if you know how to do a certain thing, even if it is flying a kite or playing marbles. Wonder what she knows how to do. And, from there, the professional searches, in these activities, in the expressions that she has already acquired, which supports and allows such expressions. Instead of the child adapting to what the professional knows how to ask, the professional is the one who must adapt to their expressions, their values, their tastes. (Moysés & Collares, 1997, p. 131)

Finally, it is highlighted that the subject's growth during the pedagogical process can be observed from qualitative analysis through the comparison of the subject with himself (Terra-Candido, 2015). Psychopedagogical interventions would act on the process and not on the product of learning, respecting the particularities of each individual subject.

Considerations

From the research and construction process of this article, it was observed that the evaluation and intervention of school complaints, historically, have developed centered on the person who does not learn, corroborating with medicalizing practices that limit the investigation of this phenomenon to biological and individual of the subject. This way of seeing non-learning was culturally appropriate and well accepted by health professionals, teachers and family members, who find this a justification for school difficulties.

However, from a critical analysis based on the assumptions of the Historical-Cultural Theory and the Historical and Dialectical Materialist method, it is clear that this way of understanding school complaints has transformed the symptoms of psychosocial aspects into their cause - that is, by instead of looking at the political, pedagogical, social and family reality of the subject and seeking to understand how these have crossed the teaching-learning process and influenced school complaints, the focus is on the appearance of the phenomenon, on the subject who does not learn, and causes are sought that justify it in itself. By ignoring the subject's social reality, opportunities for transformation are stratified, producing academic failure (Patto, 1997) and the stereotyping of people who do not learn, limiting their possibilities and potential for transformation.

Thus, it seems to us that the practice of evaluating teaching-learning processes as disorders or cognitive deficits, historically, has been constructed as a process of "justifying" non-learning with clear implications for the exclusion of people who deviate from a standard said to be normal, its focus seems to be more related to diagnoses, producing reports, than thinking about prognoses and the transformation of the phenomenon.

This traditional view of non-learning clashes in many ways with the assumptions of Historical-Cultural Theory, in addition to criticisms about its motivation and consequence. For Vigotski (1927 / 1995), thinking about development means

understanding that higher psychic functions develop from social mediation and not through a process of biological maturation, thus, the cognitive development necessary for academic skills can only be understood from the social context and mediation opportunities to which the subject has access. There is also a strong criticism of the ideal of normality and standardization of subjects, considering that each person develops in a unique ontogenetic process and that once the necessary mediations are made available, all subjects can develop. The author also draws our attention to the Zone of Proximal Development, which based on the contributions of Luria (1981) helps us to look at the subject as a being in constant transformation.

Thus, the focus of the professional based on Historical-Cultural Theory is not concentrated on attributing a behavioral diagnosis to the subject's symptoms, nor is his analysis limited to complaints expressed by the family or school, since such praxis would be restricted to understand and intervene in the appearance of the observed phenomenon. Opposing such praxis, the Historical-Cultural Theory, based on an analysis of the subject's period of development and the investigation of the paths taken during the activities carried out with or without the mediator's help (ZPD and ZRD), we seek to understand the development processes, the complex and interconnected relations of higher psychic functions, the senses and strategies developed by the subject when faced with a challenge, understanding them in their materialistic, historical and dialectical relation with the social environment. This movement allows us to perceive the subject's crossings and potentialities, and it is in this space that the professional, based on this theoretical conception, guides his actions.

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