

Vigotski in his time and today: Contradicting the standard point of view

Vigotski¹ em seu tempo e hoje: Na contracorrente da hegemonia

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DOI: 10.51207/2179-4057.20240008

¹ Different translations adopt different spellings. In this text, we chose to use the spelling adopted in Vigotski (1995), except for literal quotations and references.

Summary

At the beginning of the 20th century, the perspective of organizing homogeneous classrooms in schools as the most suitable for pedagogical practices became widespread, with the belief that this would meet the characteristics of child development. From this perspective, there was a separation of “normal” and “abnormal” students and the creation of “stronger,” “weaker,” and “special” classes. During the same period, Vigotski, based on Marxist foundations, developed studies that enabled the understanding of cultural development and the proposition of pedagogical praxis that placed him against the current of hegemonic thinking. With attention to this context, this article proposes to situate Vigotski’s position in opposition to the hegemonic perspectives of his time and analyze aspects of the author’s production regarding human development and disability [Defectology], as an anchor for a proposition of a more promising education to this day. This is a bibliographical research and, for development, scientific texts circulating at the beginning of the 20th century were studied and some concepts developed by Vigotski in different manuscripts were re-examined, which are discussed in dialogue with the literature on the topic. The analyses indicate that the focus on cultural development gives the educational process decisive relevance to human development and that this perspective can support more promising contemporary pedagogical praxis.

Keywords: Education of People with Disabilities. Special Education. Human Development.

Resumo

No início do século XX, difundiu-se a perspectiva de organização de salas de aulas homogêneas nas escolas como as mais adequadas às práticas pedagógicas, acreditando-se que assim se atenderiam às características do desenvolvimento infantil. Sob esse olhar, houve a separação de alunos “normais” e “anormais” e a criação de classes “mais fortes”, “mais fracas” e “especiais”. Nesse mesmo período, Vigotski, fundamentado em bases marxistas, desenvolveu estudos que possibilitaram o entendimento do desenvolvimento cultural e a proposição de práxis pedagógicas que o colocaram na contracorrente do pensamento hegemônico da época. Com atenção a este contexto, este artigo propõe-se a situar a posição de Vigotski em contraposição às perspectivas hegemônicas de seu tempo e analisar aspectos da produção do autor a respeito do desenvolvimento humano e da deficiência [Defectologia], como ancoragem de uma proposição de uma educação mais promissora até os nossos dias. Trata-se de uma pesquisa bibliográfica e, para o desenvolvimento, foram estudados textos científicos circulantes no início do século XX e reexaminados alguns conceitos desenvolvidos por Vigotski, em diferentes manuscritos, que são discutidos em interlocução com a literatura relativa ao tema. As análises indicam que o foco voltado ao desenvolvimento cultural confere ao processo educativo relevância determinante ao desenvolvimento humano e que esta perspectiva pode sustentar práxis pedagógicas contemporâneas mais promissoras.

Unitermos: Educação de Pessoas com Deficiência. Educação Especial. Desenvolvimento Humano.

Work performed at Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Corumbá, MS, Brazil

Conflict of interests: The author declare that there is none.

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Funding: National Council for Scientific and Technological Development - CNPq

Introduction

The attempt to group children into selective classes is a rational consequence that arises from observations about individual differences among school-age children [...]

One of the most elementary and common measures, the first step towards individualizing teaching, is the selection of children into homogeneous classes.

Since the child is, first and foremost, a being in a state of evolution, grouping according to his evolutionary path and the bio-psychic stages he has reached would perhaps be the best criterion for such selection (Antipoff, 1931, p. 28)

The excerpt above is the introductory part of a lecture that Helena Antipoff gave on the occasion of the 4th Education Conference, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in 1931, published in a journal run by the Minas Gerais Department of Education, widely known by teachers at the time: the *Revista do Ensino*.

In the excerpt, it is possible to verify the defense of the homogeneous classes formation as the most convenient for proposing pedagogical practices appropriate to each period of development. This perspective is based on some principles, including the certainty of the existence of a rhythm of mental development specific to each child and the belief that the relation among those considered “equal” or very close in their development would be the key to a good teaching, due to the adequacy of content and methodologies proposed for each group.

This pedagogical perspective, still found in schools across the country, has long supported the formation of classes considered “stronger” or “weaker” by schools. It has also supported the practice of refusing to enroll students considered “not suitable” for schools. Regarding students with the support of Special Education – students with disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, High Abilities/Giftedness – this premise supports the practice of referral to special classes and schools.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when it was “certainty” that the homogeneity of classrooms

would be the most appropriate way to implement pedagogical practices, Vigotski developed his studies highlighting the importance of academic exchanges among students at different stages of development, for conceiving human development as essentially cultural/social. The perspective proposed by Vigotski ends up supporting different pedagogical practices that can bring benefits to different children, with different characteristics.

With these considerations in perspective, this article proposes to analyze aspects of Vigotski’s assumptions as an anchor for the proposition of a more promising and also more inclusive education. For the development of this work, different concepts developed by Vigotski are re-examined, in different manuscripts, in dialogue with contemporary production about the subject.

In search of the origins

Despite the historical belief in the “uselessness of the idiots’ education” (Puigdel·lívól, 1986 apud Lledó Carreres, 2009, p. 2), the 18th and 19th centuries recorded the first educational institutions (of a school nature) for people with disabilities.

The emergence of such schools becomes possible due to the strengthening of a strand of thought that explains human development based on social and cultural experiences, in a critical movement towards identifying innate characteristics of individuals. It is worth remembering that scientific knowledge outlines and expands by incorporating, in its constitution, historically instituted discourses, as well as leaving, prospectively, contributions (Kassar, 1999). Thus, the previous belief in divine predestination - to explain human development - gives way to hereditary fatality in modernity (Pessotti, 1984).

Pessotti (1984) states that the line of thought critical of innate determinism finds its roots in works such as that of John Locke (1632-1704), especially in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1690 [1983]).

Specifically, with regard to education, it is worth highlighting the report by Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1774-1838), in which he records his experience with the boy who became known as Victor of

Aveyron. In one of the passages of the report, it is possible to identify the value he attributes to social and cultural experience, or as he refers to it, to the “strength of imitation and influence of society” in human development:

Man, necessarily instructed by his fellow men, learned habits and needs; your ideas do not belong to you; he enjoys the most beautiful prerogative of his species: the ability to develop his intellect through the force of imitation and the influence of society. (Itard, 1801 [1964], p. 53) [free translation].

The perception of the decisive environment influence about understanding human development strengthened under the scientific status of psychology, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, with the experimental psychology laboratories formation and advances in reflexology. This movement influenced young scholars of human development, such as Antipoff and Vigotski. As Závěrná and Van der Veer state, “At the beginning of his academic career, Vigotski devoted himself to the study of contemporary psychological theories; in particular, he experimented a lot with the fundamental concepts of reflexology (Pávlov, Békteriev), behaviorist (Watson, Lashley) and reaction behavior (Kornílov)” (2022, n.p.)

Ornellas (1997) argues that knowledge about “normal” and “abnormal” human development is developed using the precepts of modern science: observation, description and classification. The existence of relations between anatomical lesions and clinical symptoms is also sought. All this knowledge is immersed in a hygienist perspective of social prophylaxis (Kassar & Magalhães, 2023). During this period, the first intelligence tests were developed, such as the Binet-Simon Metric Scale, presented in 1905, and began to be adopted in different countries, as a way of evaluating students for their allocation to classrooms considered the most appropriate, according to their mental age. Campos (2003), based on sources left by Binet himself, states:

Alfred Binet, a specialist in the study of intelligence and cognitive processes, responded

to the demand posed by the French Ministry of Education with the construction of the intelligence metric scale, aiming precisely to contribute to evaluating children’s cognitive abilities and planning education programs suitable for different levels. (Binet, 1920). (Campos, 2003, p. 212)

Rafante and Lopes (2013) and Borges (2015) report that Binet had died in 1911 and, from that year on, Antipoff began interning at the Experimental Pedagogy Laboratory under the supervision of Théodore Simon. Campos (2003) reports that Helena Antipoff collaborated with the work to standardize the Binet-Simon intelligence tests and it was along this path that she met Édouard Claparède, from the University of Geneva.

Claparède was developing the “tailor-made school” proposal, to offer teaching aimed at individual differences (Campos, 2003) and invited Antipoff to be part of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute (Campos, 2003; Rafante & Lopes, 2013; Borges, 2015). Regarding this contact, Ruchart (2008, p. 183) states that: “In terms of psychological science, [Antipoff] drew from a specific school, which was that of Geneva, organized around the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute, created in 1912, and its founder, Edouard Claparède (1873- 1940)”.

When Antipoff arrived in Brazil in 1929, she brought with her what was considered, at that time, most innovative in the field of Educational Psychology: the use of intelligence tests, the importance of scientific observation, the formation of classrooms based on scientific criteria and hygienist influence.

Antipoff is not alone, since the 1910s, scientific articles have been circulating in pedagogical journals in Brazil that argue about the importance of separating “normal” and “abnormal” students, from a hygienist perspective, present in several countries (Kassar, 2013), strengthened with the activities of the school doctor. Both translated literature (Pizzolli, 1914) and that produced in Brazil (Magalhães, n.d.; Quaglio, 1913; Pinto, 1928; Würth, n.d.) are impacted by the knowledge resulting from experimental psychology laboratories, their tests and the hygienist perspective.

The importance of studying the education of the “abnormal”, a common term at the time, can be attested to in the formation of the International Association for the Education of Excepcional Children, in 1937, made up of researchers who were dedicated to what was called “therapeutic pedagogy/curative” (Hanselmann; Simon, 1940), which can currently be understood as “Special Education”.

Vigotski elaborates his concepts in the circumscribed period by this scientific scenario, under the dissemination of these different perspectives. But, despite being immersed in this context, there is a fundamental difference in Vigotski’s perspective - the adoption of the materialist-dialectic perspective in his studies. Vigotski, based on Marxist assumptions, states that description alone does not reveal the dynamic-causal relations that constitute the phenomenon studied. It is necessary to go beyond the simple observation and description of what is observed, remembering that “all truly scientific thinking changes through dialectics” (Vigotski, 1995, pp. 29-30).

The Marxist perspective for the study of phenomena allows us to understand human development considering its historicity and complexity. As Anna Maria Padilha states in an interview with Ivone de Oliveira: “The historical-cultural approach overcomes the naturalization of human development processes, typical of other aspects of psychology, because it highlights the need for everyone to access the cultural heritage of humanity” (Oliveira, 2022, p. 4).

From the adopted perspective, every person is circumscribed by a certain historical moment, a social group, cultural characteristics... And the sensitive world

is not something immediately given from eternity, something always the same, but the product of industry and the social situation, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole series of generations. (Marx & Engels, 1845-1846/1984, p. 27)

It is valid to state that Vigotski seeks in Marxism the foundations for the construction of knowledge

by pointing to the fundamental relation between movement and history (Kassar, 1999). Or as Magalhães and Aguiar (2021, p. 120) state: “With its Marxist base, the social conception appears very strongly in his writings”.

From this perspective, Vigotski refuses the static and deterministic perception of the understanding of society, a common characteristic from the positivist and metaphysical point of view, as studying something historically means studying it in the process of change.

Human development from Vigotski’s point of view

Vigotski explains the appearance of specifically human forms of mental organization, in phylogenetic way, referring to “two lines” of development: biological and cultural. It is worth clarifying here that the concept of “cultural” or “culture”, for Vigotski, refers to the Marxist perspective of “product of social life and human social activity” (Vygotski, 1981, p. 164), or as he states Padilha “Vigotski conceived of culture as the set of human works” (Oliveira, 2022, p. 4).

From this perspective, in the constitution of the specificity of the human being, culture, the social, interferes much more in the development. For Vigotski, the cultural “line” supplants the biological one and gives rise to what are called “higher mental functions” – a process that characterizes the form of human mental organization (Vygotski, 1985).

Dainez and Smolka (2019) draw attention precisely to the fundamental difference in the author’s perspective in relation to the common use of the expression “social influence”. For him, it is not just an influence, “the social takes on a broader dimension that condenses the history of production and human relation, becoming the locus of constitution of individual and collective development” (2019, p. 14).

The idea of the initial “two lines” of psychological development is a didactic device to better understand this relation. In this view, the superposition of the social line over the biological suggests that social/cultural interactions are at the genesis

of human psychic functions, so that specifically human psychological functions develop initially on the “interpsych” plane and later on the “intrapsych” plane, that is, specifically human thinking (higher mental functions) arises from the internalization of social relations (Vygotsky, 1981). Hence his general genetic law of cultural development:

Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. Firstly, it appears among people as an interpsych category, and later in children as an intrapsych category. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163)

Therefore, from this perspective, education not only influences development processes, but restructures psychic functions in their entire range (Carneiro, 2014, p. 143).

Vygotski in the Education field for people with disabilities

The movement from the idea of spontaneous development, the result of biological determinism, to the focus on the relevance of the social/cultural environment for the constitution of the human being makes it possible to understand that education occupies a fundamental place in people’s development.

This conception is especially promising in relation to educational work with people with disabilities and has supported different research in Brazil, with contributions to pedagogical praxis, such as in the theses by Carvalho (2006), Padilha (2007), Carneiro (2008), Souza (2013), Dainez (2014), Pletsch (2014), among others.

Dainez and Smolka (2019, p. 4) emphasize that “Vygotski (1997) argued that the teaching of children with disabilities should be anchored in the same principles of human development – of cultural development, as he insisted on highlighting – of any person”. If cultural development is the foundation of development, would biological differences be disregarded? No. Vygotski does not disregard the biological constitution of the person, nor the existence of “defects”, a term used at the time. However,

under the same principle of development, as specifically human behavior has a social/cultural origin, biology (as or without the “defect”) is subjugated to the educational process.

In order to address this issue, Vygotski develops the concepts of compensation and overcompensation (and social compensation), the latter with an educational cultural meaning. Meccacci (2018) explains that Vygotski understood that the quantitative approach, such as that used in psychometric tests, does not adequately describe the characteristics of the psychic processes of children with disabilities. The disability explained from a quantitative perspective produced harmful effects on the education of these children, because “If in theory the problem has been reduced to quantitatively limited development and reduced in proportions, then, in practice, as it is natural, it has been raised idea of reduced and slowed down teaching” (Vygotski, 1995, p. 2). This occurs because this approach - still widely present among educators - understands that a person’s development occurs through a spontaneous maturation of their biological structure and that human characteristics result from this “purely natural” process.

Hence, a “blossoming” of the child is often expected, which, in schools, can produce effects like this: “it wouldn’t do any good for me to teach other things, or expect other things from them [from students with disabilities], if they don’t they had that skill that was still necessary...” (statement from a special class teacher, Kassar, 1995). We must ask: if we don’t teach, how can they learn?

This educational perspective, present in special classes and schools (which adopts copying and repetition of words, training sessions on daily living activities, among other practices), significantly reduces students’ development possibilities. Bayer (2005) highlights the context of restrictions in which people with disabilities often live:

The great problem or great obstacle when we think about children with disabilities lies in the frequent isolation they experience, whether in the family, in school life, or in life in society. Isolation, from a Vygotskian

perspective, is not just a social or ethical problem, but it presents a very delicate psychosocial (more correctly, psychological) facet. This vulnerability is due to the central Vygotskian premise of the need for sociogenic dynamics for healthy child development. (Beyer, 2005)

Meccacci (2018) states that in order to overcome social discrimination between the group of children with and without disabilities, Vigotski marked the difference between “primary defect” and “secondary defect” or “primary disability” and secondary disability”. In this sense, with primary disability, concerns a functional (organic) deficit and secondary disability results from a complex of social, cultural and educational factors that are grafted onto the primary defect (Maccacci, 2018). As Meccacci (2018) explains, the “secondary” effect in a child with a primary disability depends on the restructuring of their psychological system, which, as with a child without primary disabilities, develops in a certain historical-cultural context, that is, of mediations provided by family, school and her society.

It is clear that a secondary disability results from the absence of social/cultural relations that are adequate/satisfactory for the person’s full development. And this situation is relatively common, because “Whatever defect, blindness, deafness, a person suffers or has an innate mental disability, it only changes the man’s attitude to the world, but it also influences everything, in relations with people” (Vigotski, 1995, p. 53). Therefore, it is very common to find a person with a disability deprived of essential mediations for their full development. It is from this differentiation that Carneiro (2006) develops the thesis that intellectual disability is a secondary disability, therefore a social production/product. The author does not deny the existence of the disability, but understands that it is not initially present in the child and it is created as a result of the failure to offer adequate social relations for their development.

Mendonça et al. (2020, p. 166) understand that Vigotski’s conceptualization/understanding of disability reveals itself to be “totally innovative even

today, especially when compared to traditional conceptions that emerged in the clinical or medical context”.

Meccacci (2018) helps us, here, to understand how the development process of a person with a primary disability occurs so that it does not result in the formation of secondary disabilities. To this end, Maccacci (2018) seeks the concept developed by Vigotski of overcompensation, which refers to processes implemented to overcome the limits imposed by the primary defect. Vigotski (1995, p. 31), based on studies developed by Adler (1927 apud Vigotski, 1995), states that “inadaptation and overcompensation are the strongest engines of child development”.

For Adler and Vigotski, a disability is not only a source of weakness, but also a “source of strength and capabilities and that in the defect there is some positive meaning” (Vigotski, 1995, p. 31). Toledo and Martins (2009) clarify:

Adler (apud Vigotski, 1997) states that the insufficiency resulting from deficient organs and functions develops a permanent stimulus that increases development. In the same direction, Pavlov (apud. Vigotski, 1997, p. 16) says that “the existence of an obstacle is the main condition for achieving the objective”. (Toledo & Martins, 2009, p. 4131)

Meccacci (2018) adds that overcompensation is not a process of pure compensation or vicariousness. In this sense, for the author, compensation (or vicariousness) is understood as the process by which the impairment of one function is compensated by the adequacy of another function, as a visual impairment can be compensated by touch. Meccacci (2018) understands that Vigotski’s concept of overcompensation involves a more complex process, which involves a restructuring of several functions. This restructuring is possible through social/cultural mediations. With these assumptions, Vigotski “problematizes disability or organic injury as a development condition deeply affected by social and historical dynamics, which can be transformed in/by the relations and conditions of knowledge, practices, technologies production (Dainez & Smolka, 2019, p. 4).

This statement supports, for example, the sharing of classrooms between students with or without disabilities, a different proposition from that adopted in the perspective presented at the beginning of this article, which proposes the separation of students. It also forces us to reflect on the pedagogical praxis undertaken at school and the importance of access to scientific knowledge and carrying out activities that lead to the capacity for abstraction in the educational process (Carmelo Neto et al., 2020), since, under this approach, different possibilities open up to the teacher, “when he understands that disability is not just a lack, a weakness, but also a power, a great strength and attitudes” (Toledo & Martins, 2009, p. 4131).

Given these arguments, it can be stated that the enrollment and permanence of students with disabilities in common classrooms does not (only?) imply a socialization process, such as “the socialization of individual actions” (Dainez & Smolka, 2019, p. 14), but they imply the

tension in the social constitution of these actions, in the appropriation of signs, meanings, artifacts produced in relations and in the way in which this process of signification affects and drives the emergence of new psychological formations, which makes it possible to overcome organic limits. (Dainez; Smolka, 2019, p. 14)

This premise allows Beyer (2005) to state:

The more intense and positive the psychosocial exchanges are, the stronger the child’s development will be, the reciprocal being true, that is, the more weakened these exchanges, the more lacking such development will be. [...] the social segregation imposed on children with disabilities will be a weakening factor for their full development. (Beyer, 2005)

Carneiro (2014) also states the relevance of experiences in children’s development and is incisive in saying that the lack of significant stimulation compromises the child’s integral development. The author refers to the examples recorded in the literature about “wild children”, such as Victor of

Aveyron, and reiterates: “In the absence of mediating cultural signs, as in the cases of wild children, the pattern of development distances itself from the human one” (Carneiro, 2014, p. 143).

Possibilities in contemporary education – Possible final considerations

Today, we can find, in common classrooms, students with different characteristics, which can be considered an advance in relation to the historical and long hegemonic proposition of separating students considered “more” or “less” capable. Specifically, in relation to the development of students, we saw the diversity situation can provide several benefits, as the difference in intellectual characteristics is an important condition for collective activity (Vigotski, 1995). This aspect is highlighted in a bibliographical study by Façanha and Fahd (2016), for whom Vigotski’s concepts on human development and disability favor an inclusive education practice, with students with disabilities living together in regular schools.

The studies developed by Vigotski offer countless possibilities for pedagogical work aimed at students with or without disabilities, because, as Pino (2005) states, education refers to a process that enables the “humanization” of human beings, through the appropriation of culture – a human construction, since people’s development occurs in the exchanges and challenges presented in the process. Therefore, well-organized teaching enables development.

However, under what material/historical conditions is Brazilian education being constituted? Kassar (2016) asks us about the possibilities of the contemporary school presenting itself as a space for diversity and human development and concludes by verifying that, on the one hand, the country’s legal framework prohibits any form of discrimination, the Brazilian school educational policy encourages the enrollment of all students in regular schools and the importance of diversity is highlighted in educational projects and programs. On the other hand, such projects and programs are permeated

with restrictive conceptions of education, which align schooling with the market and seek supposed efficiency in meeting goals, “restricting students’ possibilities for human/cultural development” (Kassar, 2016, p 1235).

In this context, the presence of children with different characteristics at school does not necessarily ensure that everyone is involved in the learning process. In this institution we find, at least, two areas of challenges to be overcome: One is the strong presence of the education conception linked to immediate pragmatism, aimed at the formation of “human resources”, in which different fields of knowledge are seen as superfluous. The other, somewhat related to the first, is the insistent belief that those considered “less capable” hinder the efficiency of the school, in its purpose of training “human resources”.

School has a notable social responsibility in contemporary society, as it is the social facility that every child must attend. In this institution, pedagogical praxis, when well planned, enables the student’s cultural development. At this school, the knowledge produced by Vygotski enables teachers to learn to favor “possible compensations” (Toledo & Martins, 2009) for students with disabilities. But, along with this, a change in the understanding of the school is necessary: from an institution that trains human resources to an important institution in the humans’ formation.

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