

Vygotsky's defectology and ASD diagnoses at school

A defectologia de Vigotski e os diagnósticos de TEA na escola

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There are no precise limits of any kind between normal and abnormal behavior. (Vygotsky)

Summary

This paper aims to problematize the expansion of diagnoses and reports attributed to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), based on the studies of Lev S. Vygotsky, in the fields of pedology and defectology, between the years 1924 and 1935. Our problem is based on the increase in the number of children being referred and diagnosed with the disorder and, especially, on their return to school activities after the pandemic. A search on the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations indicates that theses and dissertations investigating the subject have been expanding significantly, culminating in 37 studies completed in 2021 at list. We analyzed the research produced at Postgraduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in the area of Childhood Education, discussing studies quote Vygotsky's cultural-historical perspective. The analysis is based on Vygotsky's contributions in the defectology and pedology fields. How do legal advances collaborate with school conditions for inclusion? How has the school been organizing itself in the face of increasing diagnoses of ASD in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? And how do Vygotsky's studies for an inclusive and transformative education contribute to overcoming the fragmentation of teaching work?

Keywords: TEA. Childhood. Inclusive Education. Defectology.

Resumo

Este trabalho tem por objetivo problematizar a ampliação dos diagnósticos e dos laudos atribuídos às crianças com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA), com base nos estudos de Lev S. Vygotski, nos campos da pedologia e da defectologia, entre os anos de 1924 e 1935. Nossa problemática se delinea a partir da ampliação do número de crianças que vêm sendo encaminhadas e diagnosticadas com o transtorno e, especialmente, no retorno das atividades na escola, na pós-pandemia. Uma busca na Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações indica que as teses e dissertações que investigam a temática vêm se ampliando de modo expressivo, culminando com 37 pesquisas concluídas somente no ano de 2021. Analisamos as pesquisas produzidas no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, na linha Educação Infância, discutindo os estudos que citam a perspectiva histórico-cultural de Vygotski. Como os avanços legais colaboram com as condições escolares para a inclusão? Como a escola vem se organizando frente aos diagnósticos crescentes de TEA na pós-pandemia de COVID-19? E como os estudos de Vygotski para uma educação inclusiva e transformadora contribuem para a superação da fragmentação do trabalho docente?

Unitermos: TEA. Infância. Educação Inclusiva. Defectologia.

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What defines the normality of human behavior?

In 2024 we record one hundred years of Vygotsky's publication first studies about Defectology. According to Mecacci (2017), the concept of "defectology" in the USSR at the time of Vygotsky was understood as the "science of defects" and dealt mainly with psychological problems in children and adults, in the functioning of the sense organs or the brain.

Between 1924 and 1935, Vygotsky invested deeply in studies about sensory and motor limitations in children and adolescents. His objectives were, on the one hand, to contribute to a revolutionary and inclusive education, which would guarantee a socialist educational process for all people in Russia, at that historical moment. And, on the other hand, Vygotsky also sought to overcome the crisis in Psychology. He sought to understand globally the relation between the fields of psyche and physiology (Vygotsky, 1984). His intention was to understand the constitution of human consciousness, supporting it as a study of social relations and historical forces. Investigate consciousness, in the field of a new Psychology, under a general law of development, as a highly dynamic and moving phenomenon.

With this double objective, Vygotsky begins by criticizing the simplistic and static categorizations of "normal" and "abnormal" in human behavior and seeks to overcome it based on the perspective that "knowledge of the singular is the key to all Social Psychology [...], gain for Psychology the right to consider the singular, that is, the individual, as a microcosm" (Vygotsky, 1996, p. 368). To this end, Vygotsky seeks, in this way, to investigate the child in his dramatic life situation, in his environment, with the aim of understanding the processes of human development.

The psychology proposed by Vygotsky can be recognized by its dynamic and dramatic approach to human development (revolutionary approach). Vygotsky takes on development as an active process, in which human beings are constantly

involved in cultural and historical social relations. He emphasized conflicts, contradictions as the driving force of development. It is these principles that mobilize him in the study of children with "defects", whether of a sensory, motor or other nature.

From this perspective, one of the key concepts developed by Vygotsky is the process of overcompensation. He argues that human beings with some disability or limitation search for another possible systemic organization to overcome their challenges. This compensation process makes us reflect about the dramatic dynamics of human development as individuals become active agents in the search for solutions to the obstacles they meet.

Mecacci (2017), in one of Vygotsky's writings about psychology and pathology carried out from 1930 onwards, points out that overcompensation is a more complex process, in which there is not just replacement of an impaired function with an intact one, but rather a restructuring of all the person's higher functions. Mecacci's reflections are mainly based on the texts: *Psychology of Schizophrenia*, 1932; *Thought and Language*, 1934; *The Problem of Mental Retardation*, 1935.

The man's humanization process implies the transformation of basic elementary functions (attention, memory, perception, typical of the human being) into higher psychological functions (cognitive functions such as voluntary, intentional memory, thought, language and volitional behavior) which constitute themselves and transform social, cultural and historical relations.

According to Vygotsky (2022), compensation and overcompensation have distinctions. In compensation we have an adaptation to normality, to standards, what follows a course. While in overcompensation we have the development of a social position from actively living the social context.

Full social esteem is the ultimate aim of education inasmuch as all the processes of overcompensation are directed at achieving social status. Compensation strives not for further deviation from the norm, even in a positive sense, but for a superior, if somewhat

one-sided, twisted, hypertrophied development of personality, it nevertheless strives in the direction of the norm and toward an approximation of a certain normal social type. A definite social type always serves as the norm for overcompensation. (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 57-58)

This reflection about compensation through a prerogative of overcompensation reveals an approach that brings closer the creation processes, forming a dynamic cycle that characterizes human development in all its dimensions. Overcompensation, in this context, represents a creative response to initial challenges or limitations driven by the movement of social relations, in life.

The human possibility of imagining and creating is fundamental in our evolution as a species. This ability allowed us to advance from simple logical explanations for the condition of human beings. It is this typically human capacity that allows the control of our actions, a “wild hand” led by a cultural mind. (Baroque & Tuleski, 2007).

The organic basis of this capacity lies in the nervous substance’s plasticity, typically human, which allow the transformation of elementary functions into higher functions. This plasticity is a mechanism that allows the brain (and the human body) to modify its structures in response to environmental influences, which can be significant and permanent. However, brain activity is not limited to simple adaptation to constant and habitual conditions. Human beings are capable of projecting themselves into the future, creating and modifying their present, which differentiates them from common adaptation to a static environment (Vygotsky, 2009).

Mecacci (2017) also highlights Vygotsky’s argument about the dynamics between intellect and affection as an integrated unit, transformed throughout ontogenetic development and influenced by personal, social and historical factors. Vygotsky challenges the traditional approaches to psychology of his time, which isolated intellect and affect, arguing that both are related (and that, for Vygotsky, they constitute a unit).

The understanding of cognitive and affective processes was investigated by Vygotsky with the aim of understanding mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia. He explores the disconnection of schizophrenic thinking from sharing, leading to absent or impaired communication and autistic and non-social behavior. However, he argued that the illness manifestations are influenced by the cultural environment and social relations, which has led to a more contextual approach in schizophrenia research (Mecacci, 2017).

What we highlight here is that the studies carried out by Vygotsky about defectology had an objective beyond diagnosis. They were not restricted to the simple categorization of children with limitations, but sought to understand how social, historical and cultural factors affect individual development and how education could move towards and contribute to overcoming these specific needs.

Vygotsky criticized educational approaches that separated children with disabilities into special classes at a lower level than regular classes. He argued that special schools need to develop specific ways of working that meet the uniqueness of each child, so that they can keep up with regular schools (and that can support an inclusive educational project, accessible to all children).

He proposed an articulated approach to pedagogical proposals between special programs and specialized teachers, in accordance with the individual needs of each child, while at the same time including them in collective activities with other children. The search for “social education” under the prerogative of the importance of providing educational environments that go beyond linear ways of transmitting information.

The educational goal is to create contexts in which children can engage in discussions, collaborations, group activities, and meaningful exchanges with others. Value the possibilities of relations with children in order to create opportunities. This is an essential question for inclusive education.

School education, diagnosis and school inclusion

In a thesis research published in 2004, Garcia (2004) carried out a dense study about school inclusion policies in Brazil. The research, of a documentary nature, sought to map Brazilian educational policies from the 1990s onwards, with the aim of understanding how much these policies impact the children's lives who have some type of disability. And, also, investigate developments in Brazilian public policies, that is, how much these policies comply with current legislation and guarantee conditions so that inclusion can happen in the school space.

It must be considered that, especially since 2004, we have experienced the publication of different legislation that regulate the movement that aims to be increasingly inclusive in education systems in Brazil.

The movement for inclusion in Brazil, legally supported by several documents, including international conventions to which the country is a signatory, has as its most recent legislation the Estatuto da Pessoa com Deficiência (Law no. 13,146, 2015) or A Lei Brasileira da Inclusão (LBI). This law, which ratifies agreements already signed aimed at inclusion in its broadest sense, dedicates a chapter to education, in which it agrees with the vision that everyone must be in school and that all schools must receive any and all students, regardless of the student's needs and/or school conditions. (Fontenele et al., 2023, p. 2).

This movement towards a more inclusive school has taken different forms in Brazil. A systematic review article carried out by Fontenele et al. (2023) sought to analyze school practices that involve the use of reports and diagnoses in the context of school inclusion in Brazil, from 2009 to 2019. When examining the available literature, several discussions and tensions related to this use were identified, which can be highlighted here in four points.

The first is the use of pedagogical assessment to replace clinical diagnosis. Although this approach has the potential to reduce the medicalization of educational practices, it also raises questions about how to adequately characterize the public that should be served in Specialized Educational Service (AEE). The second, the importance of teachers having access to diagnosis to support their practices. However, this raises doubts about the value of direct observation as a valid pedagogical method. Third, the effects of using reports and diagnoses on inclusion practices are ambiguous. On the one hand, it is argued that inclusion can only occur through these devices. On the other hand, there is recognition that, in many cases, it is not known how to act with children and adolescents who have a report or diagnosis, which can lead to dependence on these documents. And fourth, some studies problematize reports and diagnoses as agents of stigmatization and medicalization of pedagogical practices. They point to limiting effects, which questions the meaning of considering aspects related to diagnoses towards social and inclusive education.

A research recently released by the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) presented alarming data: 1 in every 36 American children under the age of 8 is diagnosed with autism. The content of this article is available on the BBC Brazil website (2023). This is a survey carried out every two years, indicating a consistent trend of growth in cases. In the previous edition of the survey, the rate was 1 case for every 44 children. The percentage of boys is also higher, but the evidence for girls has also increased considerably year after year.

Until a few years ago, it was believed that autism occurred in approximately every fourth of 10,000 children. These numbers have undergone major changes in recent years. A survey carried out by the "Center of Disease Control and Prevention" (CDC) in the USA showed that, in the year 2000, the prevalence of autism was one in 166; in 2002, one in 150; in 2004, one in 125; in 2006, one in 110 cases;

and, in 2008, the prevalence was one in 88 individuals. In 2010, new studies highlighted a milestone of one in 68 diagnosed cases with approximately one in every 42 boys and one in every 189 girls. In 2012, there was a 78% increase in the rate of autism when compared to 2002. In terms of percentage, it is estimated that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder has risen by more than 75% in the last ten years. (Galdino, 2016, p. 75)

However, in Brazil, we do not have official statistics or similar updated epidemiological studies.

The ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) is defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2014) as a neurodevelopmental disorder. It is characterized by the presence of stereotyped behaviours, in addition to significant changes in social relations and communication. The factors that contribute to ASD are a complex combination of genetic and environmental influences (APA, 2014).

People with ASD often face challenges adapting to social contexts, understanding gestures and facial expressions, participating in shared games, or starting and maintaining conversations. Furthermore, it is common to observe speech disorders, variations in intonation and voice volume. Restricted and repetitive behavioral patterns can manifest themselves through stereotyped motor movements, resistance to changes in routine, adoption of rituals and fixed interests. It is also important to mention the possibility of Sensory Integration Dysfunctions in people with ASD. This involves challenges in sensory regulation, such as hyporeactivity or hyperreactivity to sensory stimuli, difficulties in differentiating sensory stimuli, and motor problems related to sensation. These characteristics require therapeutic interventions, school and social support with the aim of minimizing the impacts associated with ASD (APA, 2014; Mattos, 2019; Brasil, 2014; Monteiro et al., 2020; Rodrigues & Almeida, 2017).

Paoli and Machado (2022), reveal a complex and multifaceted panorama of autism, going beyond

the superficial appearances that often involve this condition. They warn of the risks inherent in a one-dimensional approach to autism, highlighting the importance of avoiding a “single story” of this spectrum, as warned by Adichie (2019). This “single story” can be dangerous because it simplifies understanding of autism and perpetuates stereotypes.

One of these stereotypes lies in the tendency to categorize autism in a binary (and biological) way, as a condition defined only by deficits or differences, something that ends up being framed by biomedical standards. This can lead to a limited and decontextualized view of autism, which does not reflect the complexity of people’s experiences about the spectrum. Nor does it reflect Vygotsky’s perspective, who, almost a century ago, took a stand against the biologizing conception of people with atypical development. The terms “atypical” and “typical” are being used in this text, as they are currently considered less stigmatized by the authors.

This article also addresses the advances made by social movements in favor of diversity, which have contributed to a more inclusive understanding of people with autism. However, the research recognizes that there is still resistance to progressive and inclusive perspectives in relation to disability and autism and warns that ASD should not be reduced to a single narrative because it manifests itself in a plural and unique way in each person. Therefore, it is essential to consider the neurodiversity of the spectrum and recognize that everyone has potential to be explored and challenges to be overcome.

The pandemic impacts: what can we think?

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic, the discussions permeated by Vygotsky become especially relevant. Firstly, the persistence of prolonged school closures, due to health needs, impacted the daily lives of children and their families and was evidenced by reports of stress and anxiety. As highlighted by data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Brazil recorded the longest

period of school closures in 2020 compared to 35 nations analyzed. In total, Brazilian schools remained closed for 178 days, while the average for OECD member nations was 48 days, considering early childhood education and primary education levels. Topic discussed in an article made available on the Interdisciplinaridade e Evidência no Debate Educacional (IEDE) website (Oliveira, 2021).

Vygotsky (1996) brings as an example the context of war, which we can compare to the contemporary post-pandemic period. Both prove to be traumatic events that can manifest themselves in an intensified way or even through exceptional situations such as memory lapses, exhaustion, agitation. Both war and pandemic are unexpected events that can entail adversity. Vygotsky's (1996) perspective that unconventional behaviors are not restricted to serious disorders, but permeate our everyday lives, assumes particular relevance in such circumstances. Furthermore, the increase in ASD diagnoses during the pandemic can be reflected from the same perspective.

We carried out research in the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), with the aim of mapping recent national academic production on inclusion in schools. For this search we used some combinations of keywords, as explained in the following table (Table 1), in order to evaluate the temporal evolution of the production of theses and dissertations. We did not use any time frame so that the database returned all recorded production. One of the objectives was to investigate the possible increase in academic studies after the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The search resulted in a total of 394 academic works, encompassing both theses and dissertations. By applying an Excel spreadsheet, we eliminated duplicate titles, culminating in obtaining 260 works, of which 61 correspond to theses and 199 to dissertations.

When observing the evolution of productions over the period, we see that from 2014 onwards there has been a notable increase in publications, with 2021 standing out as the year with the greatest

Table 1

Keywords used to search and number of works found - 2023

Keywords	Number of works located
Criança AND diagnóstico AND Autismo AND TEA	224
Criança AND laudo AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista"	5
Criança AND parecer AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista"	34
Infância AND diagnóstico AND Autismo AND TEA	43
Infância AND laudo AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista"	0
Infância AND parecer AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista"	3
Criança AND diagnóstico AND Autismo AND TEA AND educação	73
Criança AND laudo AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista" AND escola	5
Criança AND parecer AND "Transtorno do Espectro Autista" AND Inclusão escolar	8

Source: Made by the author.

expressiveness, totaling 37 published works. It must be considered that the impacts of the pandemic are still being researched and its publications may not be referenced in this mapping.

The academic institutions that stand out in conducting this research are the University of São Paulo (USP), with a total of 31 productions, followed by the Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, with 25, and the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), with 17 contributions (Table 2).

We read the titles of the works, looking for those that dealt with diagnoses and observed the expansion of studies about childhood and autism, although there are few studies that refer to the historical-cultural perspective.

Another ongoing research, conducted by Pinheiro (2023), which aims to carry out a comprehensive analysis of studies that incorporate references to

Vygotsky in theses and dissertations, helps us to have a local parameter of production related to special education.

The investigation consisted of a mapping of academic productions defended in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, which, according to Sarmento (2006), is recognized as an important hub for the dissemination of historical-cultural psychology.

Pinheiro (2023) searched for works in the UFSC repository and, using the following set of keywords: “Teoria Histórico-cultural”, “Psicologia Histórico-cultural”, “Psicologia Soviética”, “Psicologia Marxista”, “Abordagem Histórico-Cultural”, Vygotsky, Vigotski, Vygotskiana, Vygotskyano, “Perspectiva Histórico-cultural”, identified a total of 273 works in the global set of productions, including theses and dissertations, of the program, which totaled 1630 works. Data collection consisted of obtaining the following information: title, author, year of publication, qualification level (dissertation or thesis), supervisor, co-supervisor, work keywords and line of research.

Table 2

Number of works by year of publication - 2023

Year of publication	Number of works
2007	1
2008	1
2009	2
2010	2
2011	3
2012	4
2013	4
2014	16
2015	14
2016	26
2017	27
2018	30
2019	34
2020	29
2021	37
2022	28
2023	2
Total Geral	260

Source: Made by the author.

With the compiled data, we proceeded to an exhaustive reading of the titles, abstracts and keywords of the 273 identified works, with the aim of detecting which of them addressed the theme of special education. In this process, we identified a total of 19 works related to this topic, 15 of which were dissertations and 4 theses.

The productions deal with public policies aimed at inclusion, education of deaf people, inclusion of blind and autistic people, teacher training, Specialized Educational Services and children with disabilities.

Among the works identified, it is worth highlighting a research that focuses more specifically on the area of early childhood education, entitled “The Psychological Foundations of Early Childhood Education and Special Education in the Organization of the Municipal Education System of Florianópolis (2000-2010)”. This study addresses two main axes of investigation: the first concerns the organizational strategies adopted in early childhood education to serve special education subjects, while the second explores the psychological foundations underlying early childhood education and special education in the context of the municipal system of Florianópolis.

The research points to the problem of considering difference as a synonym for inequality and equating deficiencies with the idea of “abnormality”. This approach leads to the stigmatization of children with disabilities and the pathologization of social and educational issues. Kuhnen (2011) suggests that the pedagogical approach implicit in official guidelines serves an ideological purpose of maintaining bourgeois hegemony in education. She argues that this approach obscures the possibility of systematized knowledge accessible to all in capitalist society and contributes to the alienation of children from an early age.

Final

The debate about what defines the normality of human behavior leads us to deep reflections on the nature of human development, influenced by social, historical, cultural and individual factors.

In light of Vygotsky's studies about Defectology and Pedology, it is understood that the notion of normality cannot be reduced to static and simplistic categories. It is necessary to contextualize it in the intricate social and historical dynamics that transform the human experience.

Vygotsky's approach invites us to rethink educational practices, especially with regard to inclusion in educational institutions. His criticism of segregationist approaches and his defense of a social education that recognizes and values the uniqueness of each child points to the need for policies and practices that promote diversity and equity in the school environment.

However, discussions about inclusion in schools face complex challenges, especially regarding the use of diagnoses and reports in the inclusion process. The need to balance the search for individualized support strategies with the prevention of stigmatization and medicalization of pedagogical practices is crucial to guarantee an education that breaks with the labels of normal or abnormal children. The report can serve as a diagnostic tool, favoring school organization and the teacher's work.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to education from an inclusive perspective, especially due to a possible increase in the number of diagnoses, for example, it is emerging that the school assumes its role. Beyond the reports, who are these children? How to guarantee equitable access to education in times of social crisis? To this end, listening and dialogue with families and the school community, listening and attentive observation of children in their individualities and social relations is urgent.

It is important to highlight that data from research carried out at BDTD, cited here, reveal a significant increase in the number of theses and dissertations on childhood and autism in recent years, especially after 2014, with emphasis on the year 2021. Which indicates a growing academic interest in the topic, possibly related to the increase in the diagnosis of ASD. The identification of the problem, therefore, is recognized.

These results, taken together, show progress towards problematizing the issues that permeate the process of school inclusion in Brazil. But they show us that despite their strengthening, they still leave gaps in knowledge to be debated. There is a lot to investigate on how to translate inclusive ideals into concrete actions capable of actually promoting the participation and learning of all students.

Furthermore, the research mapping carried out shows that studies that articulate Vygotsky's contributions to the current context of increasing ASD diagnoses and the challenges faced by schools in the post-pandemic period are continuously emerging. Above all, because the author's contributions to the field of defectological and pedological debates play a fundamental role in re-signifying strategies to face challenges and the process of an education that is, in addition to being accessible, social and human.

It is also important to recognize that there is still much to be done. It is necessary to invest in teacher training, development of inclusive pedagogical practices and deconstruction of stigmas and prejudices in relation to individual differences. Furthermore, it is essential to promote a more contextualized approach, recognizing the diversity of experiences and potential within the spectrum.

Ultimately, the reflections presented in this article invite us to rethink our conceptions of normality and to seek more humanized and inclusive approaches to understanding and supporting human development in all its diversity and complexity. The school constitutes a powerful social, cultural and historical space, which can be transformative, revolutionary and inclusive.

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