

The deaf people education and Historical-Cultural Theory: The paradigms present in the L. S. Vigotski's work

Educação de surdos e Teoria Histórico-Cultural: Os paradigmas presentes na obra de L. S. Vigotski

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Summary

The topic of deaf education is the subject of fierce debates that span centuries of scientific and philosophical production. In this article, we propose to analyze the work of L. S. Vygotsky, developed in the first half of the 20th century, with the aim of highlighting that the author anticipated an innovative approach in relation to linguistic issues and the development of deaf people. Despite some initial contradictions, especially with regard to the defense of oral pedagogical methodologies for this audience, Vygotsky, in later stages of his work, moves forward by recognizing the linguistic value of sign language and by arguing that its use could benefit practices educational, contributing to the complexification of psychological development. The completeness of Vygotsky's texts about deafness points to the proposition of a single educational model, without distinction between subjects, organized on the principles of social education inspired by the Marxist conception of individual and society.

Keywords: Deaf Education. Cultural-Historical Theory. Disability.

Resumo

A temática da educação de surdos é objeto de acirrados debates que atravessam séculos de produção científica e filosófica. Neste artigo, propomos analisar a obra de L. S. Vigotski, desenvolvida na primeira metade do século XX, com o intuito de evidenciar que o autor antecipou uma abordagem inovadora em relação às questões linguísticas e de desenvolvimento dos surdos. Apesar de algumas contradições iniciais, especialmente no que diz respeito à defesa de metodologias pedagógicas oralistas para esse público, Vigotski, em estágios posteriores de sua obra, avança ao reconhecer o valor linguístico da língua de sinais e ao argumentar que seu uso poderia beneficiar as práticas educacionais, contribuindo para a complexificação do desenvolvimento psicológico. A completude dos textos vigotskianos sobre a surdez aponta para a proposição de um modelo educativo único, sem distinção entre os sujeitos, organizado sobre os princípios da educação social inspirados pela concepção marxista de indivíduo e sociedade.

Unitermos: Educação de Surdos. Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Deficiência.

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Introduction

In contemporary times, the theme of deaf education permeates various places of discussion in search of methodologies and pedagogical practices that promote the learning and development of these subjects. Whether in academic spaces or in social movements, the objective is to find ways that meet the social, economic, political, cultural and educational demands of this group, arising from struggles for the recognition of fundamental rights that touch on the recognition of their linguistic peculiarity and the guarantee of a structured communication form in and through sign language.

The issue of deaf education is a topic marked by heated debates that permeate centuries of scientific and philosophical production. In this article, we aim to make an inventory of the work of L. S. Vygotski, structured in the first half of the 20th century, in an attempt to demonstrate that this inaugurates a look at the linguistic and developmental issues of deaf people ahead of his historical time. Despite some initial inconsistencies regarding the defense of homogenizing pedagogical methodologies for teaching this audience, the author in the final phase of his scientific production, moves forward by defending the linguistic status of sign language and by establishing that its use could be an ally for

the success of educational practices and for the complexification of the psyche.

In this sense, throughout this text we reflect on Vygotski's contributions to deaf education, aiming to bring inspiration for the organization of an education that meets the linguistic and developmental demands of these subjects today. In order to construct this article, we mapped Vygotski's original texts translated into Portuguese in which the author discusses the issue of deafness and language. This sweep of the author's intellectual production, in addition to the texts where the disability theme is directly addressed, allows us to identify that the development considered atypical permeates the entirety Vygotski's propositions, not being reduced to a phase or to circumscribed texts. In this way, we list the following writings that mark the author's short, but powerful, intellectual trajectory in the field of deafness (Table 1).

It is interesting to note in this compilation that the theme of deafness is an important mark in Vygotski's scientific production, being present from his first publications to those preceding his death in 1934. This collection of texts points to deafness as a peculiar issue of experience capable of explaining the symbolic functioning of the psyche and the author's commitment to the social issues

Table 1

Vygotski's texts addressing deafness

Text	Original year of publication
Princípios da educação da criança com defeito físico	1924
A psicologia e a pedagogia da criança com deficiência	1924
Princípios da educação social das crianças surdas	1925
Psicologia Pedagógica	1925
A comprovação experimental dos novos métodos para ensinar crianças surdas a falar	1925
Prólogo ao livro J. K. Zweifel: Estudo das particularidades da conduta e da educação dos surdos	1928
Problemas fundamentais da defectologia	1929
O problema do desenvolvimento da linguagem e da educação da criança surda	1930
O coletivo como fator para o desenvolvimento da criança deficiente	1931
As Sete Aulas de L. S. Vygotski: sobre os fundamentos da Pedologia	1934
A construção do pensamento e da linguagem	1934
A defectologia e o estudo sobre o desenvolvimento e a educação da criança normal	No date

Source: Authors

that involved the new political order imposed by the Russian Revolution of 1917 - committed to universalizing the country's education and democratizing full access to cultural goods for the classes historically excluded. Thus, deafness, in addition to being a theoretical sphinx that allowed discussions about the constitution of thought and language, was also a social problem that should be resolved by the Soviet government with a view to integrating this public into educational models capable of providing the acquisition of symbolic communication and the complexification of the psyche. In this sense, a method of instruction that would enable the development of language and the structuring of thought at its most complex levels. In the meantime, Vigotski, since entering the formal Russian academic circle in 1924, was already warning about the dilemmas surrounding the condition of deaf education. In a quantitative analysis of his texts, it is possible to affirm that deafness is the disability that appears most in the discussions held by the author, as it was seen as the most serious developmental peculiarity, as it affected the mastery of words and, consequently, the entire composition of the psyche. The difficulty in accessing an effective communicative route, based on the verbal sign, hampered the development of thought and the rooting in social relations with a view to acquiring higher psychological functions. After all, "[...] significant word is the microcosm of human consciousness" (Vigotski, 2001, pp. 205-206).

Therefore, in this text, we will analytically examine Vigotski's work about deafness and deaf education, taking into account the epistemological shifts perceived as the author deepens his studies about thought and language. The strengths of his studies lie precisely in his theoretical and methodological deepening, as the author deepens his theorizations about this issue and reformulates his ideas and concepts. Our purpose, in view of this, is to revisit Vygotsky's studies on the education of the deaf, in his principles of social education as an integral formation of the cultural development of the personality. We strengthen the attempt to bring to light that, despite almost 100 years having passed

since the initial composition of his theory, we have not yet put it into practice, in its full potential, and, therefore, it is evident as contemporary and essential to discuss an effectively inclusive society.

The Historical-Cultural Theory foundations: the centrality of language for human development

The sociopolitical configuration of Russia after the 1917 Revolution drove a series of significant transformations in the economic, social, artistic and scientific spheres that mobilized the country in search of practices aligned with the communist principles defended by the revolutionaries. In the sphere of psychology, the Historical-cultural Theory proposed by L. S Vigotski (1896–1934) and his collaborators emerges as a proposition. This approach aimed to reveal the processes of transformation throughout human development, covering its phylogenetic, ontogenetic and microgenetic dimensions, with special attention to the role of culture in the formation and structuring of the psyche. The focus, therefore, was explaining the more complex psychological mechanisms, named as higher psychological functions, which are characteristic of the human species, such as language, memory, emotion and imagination, among others. Although almost a century has passed since the beginning of Vygotsky's intellectual work, Historical-Cultural Theory continues to be relevant and current, supporting research in various areas of knowledge, including literature, art, anthropology, education and psychology.

The foundations defended by the Historical-Cultural Theory were closely linked to the historical-political context experienced by Vigotski in post-revolutionary Russia. These foundations were aligned with the social, political and ideological objectives of the country, which was undergoing a profound restructuring. Based on the principles of historical and dialectical materialism as a central philosophical-methodological guide, and following the ideal of an economic, political and social reorganization promoted by the political regime in force,

Vygotski sought to develop a new understanding of the subject, emphasizing its concrete reality through a renewed psychological approach: “in the future society, psychology will, in fact, be the science of the new man. Without it, the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would be incomplete” (Vygotski, 1996, p. 417).

In these ways, it became necessary to create a new psychology, which moved away from bourgeois assumptions and came closer to the Marxist conception of the subject and the ideas of social transformation. The psychological matrices of the beginning of the 20th century were unable to explain the uniqueness of the human psyche and analyze consciousness in a concrete and objective way. Thus, it was urgent to establish a psychological theory based on Marxist principles, aimed at elucidating human psychological processes and addressing the challenges faced by social practice.

In this order, Historical-Cultural Theory was, in its epistemological genesis, Marxist par excellence, linked to the revolutionary project of a communist society with a view to overcoming capitalism. The thesis, assumed in the studies of Vygotsky and his collaborators, of the centrality of the category of social work to explain the ontological constitution bases of the being as human – that is, of the genesis of conscious activity in the cultural structuring of man – came from Marxism.

It is through the action of production, mediated by work, that individuals transform their material condition and their ways of thinking, acting, feeling and experiencing the world. As noted by Marx and Engels (2009), “the first historical act is, therefore, the production of the means for the satisfaction of these immediate needs, the production of material life itself” (p. 41). Thus, for human existence to materialize, the production of material goods essential to life is essential, which takes place in a process marked by the intentional transformation of nature through work. In this dynamic, subjects not only create the external means to subsist, but also shape their own psychological existence and the dynamics of social relations. Through these

actions, the natural course of the biological being is transmuted into an essentially cultural history, in which nature and culture overlap in the constitution of the social being. In this context, during the subject’s individual development process (ontogenesis), the two developmental lines (biological and cultural) intertwine to form a singular and intricate process. These dimensions merge and maintain an intimate relation. Therefore, biological and cultural aspects are not mutually exclusive, but manifest themselves simultaneously and interconnected in the subject’s constitution.

Another central discussion in Historical-Cultural Theory concerns the role of language in structuring the psyche. In this theoretical way, with the advent of social work and the emergence of language, a specific type of psychological development was triggered in the species *homo sapiens*. In this way, when a superior psychological function is raised, the word will play a crucial role in structuring consciousness:

The word is to consciousness what the microcosm is to the macrocosm, what the cell is to the organism, what the atom it is for the universe. It is the microcosm of consciousness. The meaningful word is the microcosm of human consciousness. (Vygotski, 2014, pp. 346-347)

The work action included in humans the possibility of operating with language, which, according to Luria (1991), gave rise to three essential changes in conscious activity: a) the ability to discriminate objects, direct attention to them and retain them in the memory; b) the ability to abstract and generalize its properties and c) the ability to transmit and perpetuate information, thus allowing human beings to assimilate experience and master knowledge historically produced and accumulated by humanity. Therefore, the sign (mainly the linguistic one), in addition to guiding the regulation of the subject’s actions, enables the structuring of its symbolic field, being the explanatory basis of conscious activity and, therefore, of superior psychological functioning.

The deaf people education in Vigotski's work

In order to analyze Vigotski's contributions to the education of the deaf people in a chronological manner, we initially highlight two texts published in 1924: "Princípios da Educação de Crianças com Defeito" and "A Psicologia e a Pedagogia da Criança com Deficiência". The first demonstrates concern in analyzing the educational principles and organizational aspects of the post-revolutionary educational system, which Vigotski (2019) makes severe criticisms about the absence of a government project that takes into account the issues of education for children with disabilities. In addition to the criticism, the author proposes the creation of a unique educational system that would allow the combination of special pedagogy with general pedagogy organized based on the principles of social education (Dainez & Smolka, 2014; Vigotski, 1997, 2019). Even though they are not aimed at the deaf, there are important references about this subject, especially regarding the most assertive method to educate them. In this text Vigotski establishes an optimism, not typical for the time, when defending that the pedagogical practices must be committed to teaching deaf children to "hear with their eyes" in a demonstration that it is possible to compensate for the disability through the use of other development routes. Despite the advancement of not understanding disability from the perspective of incapacity, the author argues that the most appropriate method for the education of deaf people is the oral method: "for us, there was no doubt that precisely the oral language, the oral method, should be considered fundamental in the education of deaf people" (Vigotski, 2019, p. 97).

In the second text, Vigotski advances by treating disability in its social dimension, a measure that removes it from an exclusively medical apprehension, focused on the organ or function considered deficient, and demonstrates that the environment constructs exclusions and barriers that are not linked to disability in it. In this way, disability is subjective aspect as a lesser expression of life that

separates those who have it from the maximum possibilities of development. It signals, imbued with the considerations of the Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler (1870-1937), that disability needs to be analyzed in a positive and prospective perspective (through the deficit-overcoming dialectic), in which organic insufficiency or injury, depending on the social environment, can transform become a driving force to engender possible compensatory processes. Regarding the education of the deaf, he considers that this is the most difficult chapter of pedagogy, as deafness, due to the semiotic character of structuring the psyche, represents an "immeasurably greater misfortune than blindness, because deafness isolates one from relations with people" (p. 125). Regarding the objective of education for the deaf, the defense persists that it must strive to make them speak, since the speaking system remains intact, however, criticism regarding the method is present, considered "forced and difficult work for the deaf" (p. 128). It is interesting to note that the author harshly criticizes the way in which the oral method is applied, but defends its reformulation as he agrees with its final objective. In this analytical vein, he recognizes that the "language of gestures constitutes his natural language" (p. 129) and the oral language assumes an "unnatural" character, however, despite admitting the linguistic status of sign language, the author qualifies it as poor and limited, in the sense of restricting broader communicative interactions. In short, he will defend a teaching organization that has as its horizon the acquisition of oral speech in a model that materializes on the premise that "language is necessary and interesting and mimicry is not interesting and useless" (p. 132).

In these initial writings, one can already see the announcement of the primacy of the word, a microcosm of consciousness, for structuring thought and grounding social experience: "without language, there is no consciousness" (p. 129). What is established here will later be condensed in works such as *The Construction of Thought and Language* (Vigotski, 2009), in which it is argued that the psychological specificities of subjects, superior

psychological functions, are constructed from social relations marked by exchanges with others mediated by language and technical instruments. Thus, the word, a sign by nature, is indispensable not only for enabling communication among peers, but it is responsible for the change that meaning promotes on the mental plane. In this way, it is through language that individuals communicate and establish their interactive arrangements, allowing the categorization of the world and the possibility of abstraction and generalization.

What is intensified in the texts in later years is the opposition to the biologizing view of disability. The author opens in developmental psychology a positive look at what was considered atypical and a perspective of psychological reorganization through compensation. In the case of deaf people, he establishes that through vision and other sense organs, access to social experience and language becomes possible. The lack of hearing, therefore, would be compensated by the establishment of spatial vision acquired through compensatory means. What was previously read by traditional psychology as supervision is now interpreted by Vygotsky as “functional richness, acquired through experience, which was mistakenly considered innate, typical of the organic structure” (2019, p. 114).

Later, in 1925, in the text “Princípios da educação social das crianças surdas” (Vygotski, 1997), the author can still be seen linked to the ideas of oral philosophy. Its central thesis was based on the creation of a pedagogical practice of social education for the deaf, according to an ordered and coherent scientific system, with the purpose of integrating fragmented experiences with a priority focus on teaching oral language. He, despite recognizing its status, disapproved of sign language and considered it a primitive form of communication, which condemned the deaf people to “remain in a stage of extreme lag and intellectual delay” (p. 388); for him, sign language did not allow the construction of abstract concepts and images. The author argued: “it is necessary to organize the child’s life in such a way that language is necessary and interesting

for him, while mimicry is neither interesting nor necessary for him” (Vygotski, 1997, p. 125). Once again we can see the attempt to replace sign language with the oral method, the focus, therefore, is on placing the first in a space of information usefulness for creating the need for oral language in the communicative context of deaf children. However, in this text, as well as in the 1924 text, sharp criticisms are presented of the methods used in oral situations, which are described as mechanical, artificial and painful procedures for children. Even so, such views do not rule out the perspective that oral communication is the most effective approach to the education of the deaf, seen as the way to allow the deaf to integrate into the hearing world and participate in broader communicative practices.

With the publication of the text “O coletivo como fator para o desenvolvimento da criança com deficiência” (Vygotski, 1997), in 1931, the first signs of an epistemological change in Vygotsky’s thinking about the deaf and sign language began to emerge. This transformation probably occurred due to Vygotski’s greater contact with deaf subjects, the evident failure of oral practices and the consolidation and maturation of his theory about language and thought. In this phase, characterized by the strong impulse to integrate people with disabilities into the social sphere, Vygotski’s (1997) defense of replacing the oral method in favor of sign language became evident, now conceived as an authentic language, as can be observed in the following excerpt:

Despite all the good intentions of pedagogues, the fight between oral language and mimicry, in general, always ends with the victory of mimicry, not because this is, from a psychological point of view, the true language of the deaf-mute. Not because it is easier - as many pedagogues claim -, but because it constitutes an authentic language in all the richness of its functional meaning. (p. 231)

It is observed, as we have tried to demonstrate so far, that significant changes occur in the author’s

convictions in relation to educational guidelines aimed at deaf children. For example, signs are no longer seen as intrusive and unnecessary and are now considered allies in the process of speech development, being recognized as a non-vocal form of language. In this context of greater theoretical maturity, Vigotski (1997) establishes that the most appropriate and productive approach for the progress of deaf children should be based on polyglot way, which would imply the mastery of different forms of language, including “mimicry and written language” (p. 232). Under this proposition, all possibilities of linguistic activity of the deaf child should be explored, so that sign language no longer occupies a secondary, intrusive or primitive place, as previously, but helps in the acquisition of forms of linguistic expression (Góes, 2002).

The text entitled “A defectologia e o estudo do desenvolvimento e da educação da criança anormal” (Vigotski, 1997, 2011, 2019), although it does not have a specific date, appears to have been written after “O coletivo como fator para o desenvolvimento da criança com deficiência” (Vygotsky, 1997), since the ideas contained therein develop and advance from the latter. In that he defends the idea that cultural development plays a fundamental role in compensating for disability, Vigotski (1997, 2009, 2011) argues that it is through social education that alternative and indirect paths to development are opened. These alternative symbolic systems, adapted to the psychophysiological particularities of children with disabilities, aim to facilitate their integration into the world of culture. In order to illustrate this principle, the author mentions the writing in the air: “in the case of deaf-mutes, typing (or manual alphabet) makes it possible to substitute visual signs, through different hand positions, for the sound signs of our alphabet and compose a special writing in the air, which the deaf child mute reads with his eyes” (Vygotsky, 2011, p. 867).

A crucial aspect to highlight is the conception of speech presented by Vigotski in his texts from the final phase (2011). The author highlights that speech is not restricted to the action of the vocal

apparatus, but can be performed through other sign systems – just like writing, which can be transferred from the visual to the tactile domain, as occurs in the Braille system. Thus, for deaf people, the expression of human language is guaranteed by a psychophysiological mechanism completely different from that commonly observed. Instead of manifesting itself orally, it reveals itself through visual-spatial communication. The emission of the word is transferred from the speaking system to the hands movements.

We have become accustomed to the idea that man reads with his eyes and speaks with his mouth, and only the great cultural experiment that showed that it is possible to read with our fingers and speak with our hands reveals to us all the conventionality and mobility of cultural behaviors forms. (Vigotski, 2011, p. 868)

The historical analysis of Vigotski’s work about the education of the deaf allows us to verify the author’s theoretical maturity as he intensifies his studies about thought and language. The change in stance regarding the best teaching methodology for deaf people demonstrates the scientist’s grandiosity who was not linked to dogmas, but to a societal project committed to elevating subjects to their maximum developmental possibilities. Even though, depending on the year of publication, there is inconsistency regarding the aspects involving sign language and oral methodology, the defense of social education for the deaf people appears to be a continuous mark since the 1924 texts: “the central and increasingly determining point of deaf pedagogy is the social education of the deaf” (Vigotski, 1997, p. 134).

For social education for the deaf people

Social education is a concept from the revolutionary period that permeates the Vigotski’s works (1997, 2011, 2019). The relevance of social education advocated by the author is fundamental for the

developmental studies of people with disabilities. In an unprecedented look at the time, Vigotski removes the disabled child from the restricted space of deficit, from the conception of biologizing, mechanistic, clinical-therapeutic and negative psychology of the time and repositions him from an optimistic perspective based on the potential for bodily restructuring and psychic through compensation.

In this way, in his first works, such as *Pedagogical Psychology* (2019) and in the densifications contained in *Fundamentals of Defectology* (2019), Vigotski points out the principles of social education as capable of establishing an educational model that provides learning and development. In these ways, Vigotski (2019) defends, based on Marxism, an educational conception linked to the socialist project. It is imperative, especially in defectology texts, the need to establish social education for the constitution of a new subject capable of establishing a new communist society. This educational model is guided by work, as a planned, organized, collective and collaborative activity, which mobilizes creative aspects necessary to maintain and improve life.

The principles of social education consist of defending quality public education that embraces human diversity and aims to transmit and assimilate school knowledge to all people – despite the multiplicity of bodies and ways of learning. In these ways, access to the goods historically accumulated by society must be of common and universal access, as it belongs to the entire human race and not just to a dominant class – hegemonic holder of privileges. This model is organized based on prospective work activity to expand humanization processes, observing the synergic modes of constituting oneself as a human and in its qualitative diversities. Work, as a founding category of social being, occupies a central place, as being the activity linked to the self-realization of human existence, oriented to objective life, involving the active (collaborative) participation of the student in (collective) relations and human productions.

In short, this conception is anchored in purposes that aim at the development of the human in its entirety, that is, to develop the individual's potential and possibilities to the maximum. Vigotski's defense has as its principle a social and political education, based on the annihilation of the boundaries that separate people with disabilities from those considered normal, including them in the most varied forms of work, because, in this field, "working does not mean knowing how to do carpentry or braiding a basket, but something much deeper" (Vygotski, 1997, p. 85). Based on these premises, the author already envisioned the active participation of deaf people in work activities linked to the complexities of life outside of school, "without an invalid philanthropic focus on deaf education" (Vigotski, 2019, p. 176). Social education would make it possible to "guarantee the deaf everything that is related to it: communication, language and consciousness" (Vygotski, 2019, p. 176).

Finally, from a Vygotskian perspective, we aim for an education for the deaf people that promotes the integral formation of the cultural development of the personality, respecting their linguistic and cultural specificities, through collective and collaborative recognition of their cultural diversity.

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