

# Educational inclusion, medical report and ASD: Case study in light of Vygotsky's concept of defectology

Inclusão educacional, laudo médico e TEA: Estudo de caso  
à luz do conceito de defectologia de Vigotski

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## Summary

We present a case study resulting from a situation experienced in 2019, aimed at children aged 6 to 12, in the after-hours school, in a SESC RJ unit, in Baixada Fluminense. In view of sharing the struggle and symbolic mourning of a mother when faced with receiving a diagnosis/report for her seven-year-old son, a participant in the project, we seek to reflect on the impact that a medical report can have on the learning process symbology of a child recently diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and about the possible consequences of this diagnosis in the environments frequented by the child and his family. To this end, as a theoretical foundation, we work in dialogue with Vygotski's defectology studies.

**Keywords:** Medical Report. Defectology. Vygotski. Non-Formal Education.

## Resumo

Apresentamos um estudo de caso fruto de situação vivenciada por uma das autoras enquanto atuava como professora de um projeto de educação complementar, em 2019, destinado a crianças de 6 a 12 anos, no turno inverso ao escolar, em uma unidade do SESC RJ, na Baixada Fluminense. Diante do compartilhar da luta e do luto simbólico de uma mãe face ao recebimento de um diagnóstico/laudo para o seu filho de 7 anos, participante do projeto, buscamos refletir sobre o impacto que um laudo médico pode ocupar na simbologia do processo de aprendizagem de uma criança recém-diagnosticada com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) e sobre os possíveis desdobramentos desse diagnóstico nos ambientes frequentados pela criança e sua família. Para tanto, como fundamentação teórica, trabalhamos em diálogo com os estudos de defectologia de Vygotski.

**Unitermos:** Laudo Médico. Defectologia. Vygotski. Educação Não Formal.

Work performed based on an experience at Sesc ARRJ, São João de Meriti, RJ, Brazil.

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## Introduction

Vygotskian<sup>1</sup> studies have supported our pedagogical/psychopedagogical thoughts for a long time. Despite being written at the beginning of the 20th century, Vigotski brings us concepts and reflections that echo and direct our practices to this day. Recently, through translators Zoia Prestes and Elizabeth Tunes, we had the opportunity to revisit some of his works translated directly from Russian into Portuguese. In this text, we highlight the aforementioned author's studies about defectology from his work "Problemas da Defectologia - volume I", translated by them, in which Vigotski problematizes public education for all individuals based on studies in the area of people with disabilities, which he called "defectology", as follows:

Among the main tasks presented by the new installed Soviet power and received by Vygotsky with enthusiasm and commitment, was the construction of a public, popular, free and secular school. The author committed himself to the Ministry of Education of the former Soviet Union by contributing to the education area for people with disabilities, known as Defectology. He became a member of the State Scientific Council – Methodological Center of the People's Education Commissariat (Pino, 2002) – and joined forces in the movement to build the National Education System that would come to support the organization of public education governed by democratic principles, with a view to a single school for all citizens at all levels (Krupskaya, 2017). It is worth highlighting that, in the desired society project in that revolutionary context, there were no discussions about human rights, since human dignity was a principle already assumed in the implementation of the new social order. Education was seen as a condition for the formation of the new man, therefore assumed to be an essential and transformative social dimension. (Vigotski, 2021, p. 8)

As educators, recognizing the diversity that manifests itself in our educational spaces, we are experiencing a moment of identity redefinition regarding our professional performance in the teaching-learning process of students with disabilities. Sometimes, knowledge and practices have been associated with "clinicalization" and "medicalization". Reading Vigotski's works and associating them with our daily practices rekindles our warning about emphasizing the disability before the person.

Furthermore, it makes us reflect on the value attributed to the medical report so that pedagogical activities can be carried out and, from then on, we are faced with countless other doubts. After all, how important is the diagnosis/report in the performance of our professional functions as educators? Can a diagnosis, materialized by a medical report, definitively describe a person's potential and abilities? Is it an indispensable instrument to govern our teaching planning? Is it the basis for determining what and how a person will (or will not) be able to learn?

In this report, we examine Vigotski's concept of defectology to critically investigate this growing process of pathologization of identities and to understand his theory in correlation with practice. To this end, we chose to assume a critical role regarding what is already socially imposed. Moysés and Angelucci (2021) tell us that, "without romanticized way and abstract idealizations, but on the contrary, explaining difficulties imposed by the obstacles that construct disability, we find an exciting defense of its depathologization. In summary, we can state that pathologizing processes do not flourish in Vygotskian land" (p. 11).

Souza and Dainez (2022), when analyzing defectology and school education, bring us important reflections regarding Vigotski's criticisms regarding the conceptual perspective of disability:

With this, it makes scathing criticisms of the hegemonic conception of disability based on the medical-organic model oriented towards biological reductionism. Without disregarding the biological basis, it opposes naturalistic and mechanistic views of its time

<sup>1</sup> We especially reference the Historical-Cultural Theory (Vigotski, 2000) and studies on defectology (Vigotski, 2021).

and examines disability as a human condition of development deeply marked by social and historical dynamics. In other words, it understands disability as a phenomenon of sociocultural development (p. 10)

It is worth reflecting on whether the report required by many schools is really indispensable to determine or direct pedagogical action with students with disabilities. In this sense, we present a case study to analyze the processes before and after receiving a diagnosis/report of a child, aged 7 at the time, including providing notes about possible implications in the family and social context. Our objective is, therefore, to problematize the reasons why the report imposes itself (even though it should not) as an indispensable instrument for classroom practices. Carrying out this reflection is justified because it is an investigation of the practical, essential to leverage the construction of knowledge and the students with disabilities' inclusion at a concrete level.

### Contextualizing the case study social locus

Jorge<sup>2</sup> was a seven-year-old child who was enrolled in a complementary education project, Sesc+ Infância<sup>3</sup>, located in a Sesc RJ unit in the city of São João de Meriti in Baixada Fluminense. The child attended the project twice a week, in the after-hours from school, and was enrolled in the age group between 6 and 9 years old. The activities were aimed at playing, following the leadership of the collective, based on their interests and providing opportunities for expanding perspectives and research in childhood.

The aforementioned education project is aimed primarily at the public with a family income of up to 3 minimum wages, and is completely free with the inclusion of tours, uniforms, snacks and

activities for families. When starting the activity, the mother pointed out that he did not eat outside the home under any circumstances, had difficulty with relations and learning at school and that the child's enrollment in the project was an attempt to help him with this school adaptation.

Jorge used to be a very participative child, who loved playing outside and had a good relationship with his peers in the group. He didn't like being with the group when they were telling stories, he said he found the activity boring and uninteresting and, while the group listened and read stories, he preferred to play alone, being respected by everyone. Leaving time was the most difficult moment, as he knew that, once the project was finished, he would have to return home, get ready and go to school. Every day, when he left, his dysregulation occurred: he cried, screamed, fought with his mother and hid under a table. The situation was also a cause of suffering for all the people who empathetically sought to understand Jorge.

After a few moments of conversation, Jorge would leave, but always with a lot of complaints and showing great martyrdom. During snack times, the lunch lady who helped prepare the snack insisted and talked to him about the importance of eating outside the home. With a lot of affection and determination, the lunch lady managed to captivate him and create a loving bond with him. Little by little, he began to experiment with food and, gradually, he progressed until the time came when he began eating outside the home.

At the same time, the mother sought medical consultations through the SUS to complete a "diagnosis" for the child, a requirement of the school. The fact was that Jorge showed no interest in school and was unable to take the tests within the parameters used. Without the diagnosis, the school explained that it was impossible to make adaptations and, consequently, the student was retained in the first year of Elementary School. Jorge was on scholarship at a regular private school and, if he was held back one more time, he would lose his scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Fictitious name

<sup>3</sup> The Sesc+ Infância project is a complementary education project offered by the Social Service of Commerce of the state of Rio de Janeiro - Sesc RJ. Sesc was created by businessmen in the trade of goods, services and tourism in 1946 and operates in five areas: Education, Leisure, Health, Culture and Assistance.

After long months of anguish and appointments scheduled in different places in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the mother received a medical report with the diagnosis. As his mother expressly read, in tears, during one of Jorge's visits to the project, the report was exhaustive:

Presents impairment of pragmatic language and social interaction, behavioral rigidity (...) There is no medication that improves or reverses the impairment of verbal and non-verbal communication, which is the most disabling symptom of his disease (...) Requires intensive care in full-time.

The person in charge arrived at the project very shaken, reading the paper repeatedly and questioning everything she saw and knew about her son. She questioned whether all the learning, skills, potential and qualities were covered up by the ableism prescribed in that medical report? With the latent mother's questioning, we bring to this text our concerns about the impact that a diagnosis/report has on a child's learning process. Furthermore, we are disturbed by the value that a diagnosis/report can have in the process of constructing identities for a person with a disability. When receiving the stamp of medical authority, can all a person's characteristics really be summarized in a few lines and silence their life history and potential? What can these brief lines of the report show/hide in relation to the curricular adaptations that will be made? Could Jorge and his demands and potential really be subsumed under what is in the role of the medical report?

### **Problematizing the importance of the medical report in pedagogical practices in the Vigotski light**

While the diagnosis materialized in the medical report did not reach the school, Jorge was excluded and was unable to take a closer look at his specific learning needs, having been held back and running the risk of losing his scholarship. The exclusion process (violating the very constitutional guarantee of the right to education), the indispensability of the diagnosis and the stigma that the medical report

reinforced suggest a cycle of violence with psychological and social impacts on the child, who was also a person with difficulties of oppression, due to their condition of disability and poverty, having the only support in the maternal figure in search of answers for their "non-learning".

Regarding the role of the school in this process of social, political and academic inclusion/exclusion, it is worth mentioning Vigotski (2021) and his concept of depathologization:

In the practical field, in the field of education - as we tried to explain - defectology is faced with tasks whose solution demands creative work of organizing special forms. To solve certain problems, it is necessary to find a solid foundation for both theory and practice. In order not to build on sand, to avoid the eclectic and superficial empiricism that characterized the space, to abandon the hospital-medication pedagogy and move to a creatively positive pedagogy, defectology must rest on the philosophical foundation of dialectical materialism on which it is built our general pedagogy and the social foundation on which our social education is built. This is precisely the problem of defectology. (p. 196)

In other words, as educators, we cannot distance ourselves from the people we seek to teach. It is in the relation with people that we create bridges so that the teaching-learning process can materialize. The school institution is (or should be) a humanized space, safeguarding the right to difference, an environment conducive to learning for all students, concrete people with equally concrete demands and potential. Concrete people not abstractly delimited by medical reports and stigmas. As Vigotski himself (2021) tells us "in itself, the defect says nothing about development as a whole. A child with a defect is not yet a disabled child. With defects, incentives are given to overcome them" (p. 101).

Many of the limitations are imposed by attitudinal barriers, the result of structural ableism that reinforces stereotypical and inaccessible social standards. Reinforcing Vigotski:

The entire apparatus of human culture (of the external form of behavior) is adapted to the normal psychophysiological organization of the person. Our entire culture is calculated for the person endowed with certain organs – hand, eye, ear – and certain brain functions. All our instruments, all the technique, all the signs and symbols are calculated for a normal type of person [...]. (Vigotski, 2011, p. 867)

It is up to school management not to reinforce ableism stereotypes, but to contribute to promoting individual and collective skills. Even in Specialized Educational Service, the medical report assumes a complementary role, as determined by Technical Note no. 04/2014, from SECADI - Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion Secretariat (SECADI). This is because, at school, whether in the regular class or in the AEE, assistance to students is pedagogical, not clinical. Following Vygotsky, “the child whose development is complicated by a defect is not simply a child less developed than his normal peers, but a child developed in another way” (Vigotski, 2011, p. 148).

### Considerations

Given the report and the basis from Vigotski, we can conclude that the report cannot be a determining factor for the individual’s learning, since the influence of the environment and the stimuli offered are what form the subject and highlight their potential.

It is necessary to return to the central place of education, which is pedagogical and not clinical care. See the school as a space for discoveries,

transformations, processes and not as a clinical space.

Recognizing the role of the school is to highlight all students as beings capable of creation and development, expanding the vision beyond the CID number and recognizing the student as a human being with subjects and rights.

Being in 2023 and still having to discuss and defend concepts from the beginning of the 20th century makes us realize how far we still need to go, but that studies in the light of Vigotski’s thoughts and concepts allow us to understand school as an inclusive space, of creativity, diversity and knowledge.

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