

Didactic and Early Childhood Education: principles for *developmental teaching*

Didática e Educação Infantil: princípios para o *ensino desenvolvente*

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ABSTRACT

Didactic in early childhood education, from the perspective of developmental teaching, presupposes teaching as a fundamental activity, oriented towards the development of children's learning possibilities. That is why it is necessary to organize it in a way that promotes learning and development in order to form the maximum potential of the human being at all levels of education, from the childhood period. Thus, the objective of this article is to explain didactic principles directed to early childhood education in the Historical-Cultural Theory. For this, this theoretical-bibliographic study is based on primary and secondary sources of the Historical-Cultural Theory. As a result, we show that the child, through the appropriation of the objectification of culture, forms and develops the complex superior psychic functions and human possibilities of learning and development, through the mediation of school education. Therefore, school education demands the establishment of representative objectives for this purpose, to select essential contents to be taught to children from their first months of life, in order to establish a set of teaching actions and operations that awaken the enchantment for the appropriation of human culture with which to broaden the child's learning horizons.

Keywords: Didactics. Child education. Historical-Cultural Theory.

RESUMO

A didática na educação infantil, na perspectiva do ensino desenvolvente, pressupõe o ensino como uma atividade fundamental, orientada para o desenvolvimento de possibilidades de aprendizagens das crianças. Por isso é necessário organizá-lo de modo que impulse a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento, de maneira a formar as máximas potencialidades do ser humano, em todos os níveis de ensino, *desde o período infantil*. Assim, o objetivo deste artigo é explicitar princípios didáticos direcionados à educação infantil na Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Para isso, este estudo teórico-bibliográfico está fundamentado em fontes primárias e secundárias da Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Como resultado, evidenciamos que a criança, pela via da apropriação da objetivação da cultura, forma e desenvolve as complexas funções psíquicas superiores e possibilidades humanas de aprendizagens e desenvolvimento, pela mediação do ensino escolar. Por isso, o ensino escolar demanda estabelecer objetivos representativos dessa finalidade, selecionar conteúdos essenciais de serem ensinados às crianças desde seus primeiros meses de vida, de modo a estabelecer um conjunto de ações e operações de ensino que despertem o encanto pela apropriação da cultura humana com vistas a ampliar os horizontes de aprendizagem da criança.

Palavras-chave: Didática. Educação Infantil. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

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1 Introduction

*Não sei se brinco, não sei se estudo, se saio correndo ou fico tranquilo.
Mas não consegui entender ainda qual é melhor: se é isto ou aquilo.*
Cecília Meireles

*I don't know whether to play, study, run away, or stay calm.
But I still can't figure out which is best: this or that.*
Cecília Meireles

The heading that opens this chapter metaphorically announces how the field of didactics in early childhood education has been shaped: on the one hand, an emerging didactic that emphasizes the means and conditions for children's protagonism and free initiative, and therefore content emerges from their daily experiences, valuing their spontaneity and tastes over teacher direction; on the other hand, prescriptive didactics, centered on adults and preparatory content, whether for hygiene, nutrition, and safety, or for anticipation and preparation for literacy, positioning children as recipients and executors of commands and instructions. Given this scenario, Lazaretti (2013) reveals that this mismatch exposes the fragility of educational didactic concepts in which pedagogical practices in early childhood education are based on either this or that, which still surrounds educational work in this school segment. We argue that neither this nor that is representative of didactics in Early Childhood Education.

Here, we base our arguments on a critical perspective of didactics and understand that it is possible to articulate the contributions of these pedagogical concepts that hover over early childhood education without falling into relativism or eclecticism. To this end, it is necessary that the conceptions of learning and development of those involved in school education acknowledge the process of overcoming through incorporation (MARX, 2008) of knowledge, that is, identifying the limits of the propositions of emerging and/or prescriptive perspectives, incorporating their contributions, and thus providing subsidies for rethinking pedagogical practice. This understanding provides the possibility of rethinking the propositions of pedagogical practice in Early Childhood Education; in other words,

what has been built in the field of Early Childhood Education contains elements that need to be overcome, but this does not mean eliminated, but that they can be incorporated and reinterpreted in light of a theoretical-methodological conception that makes it possible to advance towards the formation and development of the child to their maximum potential. For this reason, we advocate a didactic method that defends developmental teaching (DAVIDOV, 1988).

Thus, the objective of this article is to explain the educational components directed at early childhood education in Historical-Cultural Theory.

It is essential to advocate a didactic that has clear principles to guide teaching actions without losing sight of the specificity of educational work in early childhood education. These teaching actions must have as their horizon those for whom the teaching is intended: children in the process of learning and development, who only achieve full formation by appropriating the maximum elaborations of human culture.

2 Didactic in early childhood education: in defense of *developmental teaching*

Developmental teaching, or developmental didactics, among other possible interpretations and translations (LONGAREZI; PUENTES, 2017; LIBÂNEO; FREITAS, 2013) is a set of concepts systematized mainly by Davidov (1988), based on studies by Elkonin (1987), Leontiev (1978; 1988) and Vygotsky (1996).

The principle of teaching that develops (DAVIDOV, 1998) understands that the process of child development should be guided by pedagogical means that promote the child's psychological development to its maximum potential. Based on Vygotsky's main thesis (1988, p. 114), "the only good teaching is that which advances development," it is necessary to organize and systematize teaching, ensuring the appropriation of human objectives that allow for the development, from infancy, of what is not yet formed, raising the higher levels of development, producing new psychological formations, new needs, and motives.

In this sense, teaching is a fundamental activity, oriented towards the development of children's learning possibilities and capacities. Therefore, it is

necessary to organize it in a way that promotes learning and development in order to develop the maximum potential of human beings at all levels of education, *starting in childhood*. Davidov (1988) explains that, based on an understanding of the psychological peculiarities of children, it is possible, at each stage of development, to develop pedagogical principles that guide the didactic-educational process.

Therefore, organizing teaching in early childhood education requires understanding the inner relationship between teaching and the child's psychological development. This relationship is explained by the place the child occupies in society, which includes analyzing their involvement with people, objects, living conditions, and the demands placed on them at a given stage of their development, that is, their activity. Leontiev (1988) explains that this place occupied by the child is governed by concrete circumstances of life that alter the place they objectively occupy in the system of human relations, which generates new demands for the organization of the psyche and, consequently, of consciousness. "When studying the development of the child's psyche, we must therefore begin by analyzing the development of the child's activity, how it is constructed in the concrete conditions of life" (LEONTIEV, 1988, p. 63). This means that in each period of development, there is a social situation of development that regulates the child's entire way of life or social existence. At the beginning of each period of life, the relationship established between the child and their surrounding environment, especially the social environment, is completely unique, specific, and unrepeatable. Vygotsky calls this relationship the *social situation of development*, which means "[...] the starting point for all the dynamic changes that occur in development during each age period" (VYGOTSKY, 1996, p. 264, our translation).

Thus, development is marked by qualitative changes and depends on the level of demands that arise in the child's relationship with the surrounding reality through activity. However, not just any activity promotes these psychological changes and transformations; some types of activity play a major role in development, while others play a secondary role. The child's age does not determine their development; rather, it is the characteristics and content of these

activities that guide their progress. Therefore, the main activity is defined as “[...] the activity whose development governs the most important changes in the psychic processes and psychological traits of the child's personality at a certain stage of development” (LEONTIEV, 1988, p. 65). The main activity is characterized by the emergence and differentiation of new types of activity and the formation and/or reorganization of higher psychological functions, and it is related to the main changes in personality. Therefore, in each qualitatively distinct period of development, there is a dominant role assumed by a specific type of main activity, which determines the forms of mastery and content.

Thus, a principle of developmental teaching for didactics is to understand that children are beings who live *through relations* and that their formation takes place “[...] within the material and social conditions of life and education, their activity being essentially forged by the relationships they establish with the other people who make up their surrounding reality” (PASQUALINI; LAZARETTI, 2021, p. 124). Thus, from the earliest moments of life, we observe how much children are willing to act on the world of human objects and phenomena; that is, they develop through activity.

Elkonin (1987) demonstrates that, in the baby–adult *relationship*, a peculiar form of communication is developed, in a direct emotional way, in which the adult stimulates and triggers new relationships with the social environment. During this period, due to their own social development situation (Vygotsky, 1996), babies need to be in relationship with the Other, who is more experienced, with appropriate interventions to explore, learn about, and discover the world around them as fully developing active beings.

During the first few months, this world opens up to the baby, who develops the need to communicate emotionally with the closest adult, who motivates them to act, to discover their surroundings, and to relate to them, thus creating the conditions for direct emotional communication. From this activity and the appropriate conditions for intervention, the premises of language, expansion of the ability to move in space, and primary actions with

objects are formed. From these achievements, new interests emerge in the baby, especially in the world of objects, resulting from the emotional communication established with the adult, enabling the formation of object manipulation activity. From primary action with objects, marked by repetitive actions, new domains emerge, especially the use and social function of these objects, provoking in children the need to act and appropriate the richness and complexity of the functions and meanings that these cultural instruments carry. These actions allow for the formation of correlative and instrumental actions (MUKHINA, 1996) and qualify new achievements in the development of the higher psychic functions of sensation, perception, and language, prompting the child to perform manipulative actions directed by new interests and new motives. For example, when learning to use a comb to comb their hair, children transfer this learning to combing their doll's hair, as a way of imitating their relationship with adults, and in the *absence* of a comb, they replace this real object with an imaginary one, resorting to a piece of wood, a ruler, or something else that allows them to act in accordance with the actions required in the act of combing. When this learning, of apparent substitution of one object for another, occurs within an action, we identify the genesis of role-playing as the main activity. Actions with objects, such as the comb mentioned above, are part of a new relationship between the child and social reality: combing the doll's hair, *just like mommy does*, acquires a new meaning, which is to do what adults do. For this, it is essential that the child takes on a role in role-playing, referring to some theme of people's lives and their social work functions, performing the playful substitution of objects according to the logic of real actions in people's everyday lives (ELKONIN, 1998).

Role-playing is a way for children to act like real people. They act according to the rules of society. This gradually becomes the focus of the child's attention and awareness through the teacher's activity in helping them form and develop role-playing. This enables the child to control his or her behavior voluntarily (LAZARETTI, 2013; 2016).

These unique aspects of child development and the possible achievements resulting from the child's *relationship* with the surrounding reality through their activities are a basic principle for teaching in early childhood education. To put it simply, we say that a child's mental abilities develop well only when we create the right conditions for learning. This means teaching, when done in an organized way, helps children develop and stay active. It is a basic idea that teaching plays a key role in children's development (DAVIDOV, 1988).

Given this principle, thinking about didactics from the perspective of *developmental teaching* means understanding this process of human development that *depends* on intentional and qualified actions and interventions provided by school education. Thus, to promote this development, it is essential to understand the most appropriate goals, content, and methods for this purpose. It means answering why to teach, what to teach, and how to teach, guided by Historical-Cultural Theory, whose understanding of the educational purpose is the formation of the child in a human-generic direction, which implies forming and developing complex psychic functions and capacities. This is achieved and promoted depending on the level of requirements imposed on the child's activity. Therefore, we understand that teaching children what they already know or teaching them something that is beyond their comprehension does not promote learning and does not lead to development. *Good teaching* (VIGOTSKII, 1988) is that which acts on what children cannot yet achieve on their own but which they perform through the mediation of someone more experienced, in this case, the teacher. It is he who, through teaching, organizes and promotes conditions for the development of the child's activity, allowing them to “reconstruct the activity historically developed and achieved by human beings and which is condensed in the productions of culture (language, art, science, philosophy, physical culture)” (PASQUALINI; LAZARETTI, 2021, p. 125).

Therefore, good teaching depends on adequate means and conditions, and this culture, as a synthesis of human objectives whose tools can be expressed in instruments and signs, requires the selection and organization of teachers so that it can be converted into school content. This culture is translated into different

types of content that are established according to the criteria adopted in the school curriculum. These criteria must involve content that explores knowledge based on humanity's social experience, which, as it is progressively acquired, becomes the child's individual experience. That is why this content must correspond to the proposed objectives. Mello and Urbanetz (2008) emphasize that there must be a connection between content and objectives, "since content cannot be an end in itself. They are an essential part of planning and didactic action and constitute the whole process, which is why they cannot be disconnected or isolated" (MELLO; URBANETZ, 2008, p. 88). However, the criteria for selecting this content are guided by the purpose of teaching and involve choices that prioritize scientific, artistic, and ethical knowledge, producing qualitatively human forms in children from an early age, aimed at full humanization.

It is up to the school to transform this knowledge of the objective world into teaching content, making it accessible, in order to broaden and enrich the degree of understanding of reality, always bearing in mind that teaching content must be intertwined with specific conditions related to the student's level of development. Here we identify that developmental teaching is guided by the principle that this acquisition of the culture objectified in school content is a condition for the child's development. According to Pasqualini and Lazaretti (2022), content, such as the knowledge objectified in science, the arts, and philosophy, is the result of *human intellectual activity* and consists of psychic actions and operations that must be acquired by each and every child through school education. This teaching, which develops through appropriately selected and organized content, allows us to “*unveil* the world of objects and phenomena of physical, social, philosophical, and artistic reality, promoting curiosity in children to understand and uncover this world.” (PASQUALINI; LAZARETTI, 2022, p. 41).

For this reason, content should not be prescriptive, based on definitions and instructions that are meaningless to children and/or derived from spontaneous situations and children's free expressions. Lazaretti (2013, p.

146) explains that in pedagogical practices, there is often little clarity about what to teach in early childhood education, and this results in teaching in which the content appears in standardized tasks of printed painting, letters, numbers, and children's songs with “a lot of time to instruct and establish rules and behaviors and develop motor skills and physical dexterity, without much clarity about why and for what purpose they are performed.”

As such, it is a principle of developmental teaching that the contents of human experience, expressed in science, art, and ethics, are fundamental to pedagogical practice in early childhood education. However, we recognize that in order to ensure this appropriation of content, it is equally important to consider the ways in which it is taught. To this end, teachers are responsible for defining the appropriate teaching methods, and, to this end, they equip themselves with techniques and resources as mediating elements that serve as material support for the acquisition of content. The use of teaching aids is important to convey the essence of facts and phenomena and their regular relationships in an objective manner, making them understandable to children.

The use of teaching resources guides and directs the actions and operations of pedagogical activity, helping teachers to organize specific pedagogical actions in an intentional and systematic manner toward a goal, thereby ensuring that children acquire the content. But we don't always know how to teach young children the things they need to learn. Lazaretti (2013) found that, in early childhood education, teachers often tell children to do things in a certain way. They give instructions and commands to perform repetitive and tedious tasks, such as tracing letters and numbers and painting pictures and theme-based drawings. These activities are often done in a classroom with desks and tables lined up in rows. In this setting, all children perform the same tasks at the same time, controlled by the teacher.

To overcome this impoverished and sterile form of teaching, there are four fundamental and interdependent components that should guide teaching in early childhood education: time, space, resources, and group forming. These four

components allow teachers to make choices that are more conducive to teaching activities that promote learning and child development, guided by the principles of developmental teaching. The organization of time presupposes planning the child's time at the institution—part-time and/or full-time—from arrival to departure, considering that there are teaching activities that will require flexible time for the implementation of certain learning activities, such as meal and hygiene times, which require more time for younger children. All teaching activities must take into account that acquiring the ability to orient oneself in time requires greater mastery and development of temporal perception, which is formed through daily activities carried out by and with the child. Children begin to orient themselves in time when we organize time based on the activities they perform, guiding them to perceive what happens before, after, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and so on, progressively including new ways to measure and control time so that children perceive their actions in the world. Therefore, time in early childhood education institutions cannot be governed by the needs of adults in a rigid and inflexible manner but rather should be a collaborative action that meets the very needs that ensure the child's well-being and, at the same time, promotes new social demands, such as being and participating in educational activities at the institution.

Space is another component involved in teaching organization, representing not only a place of passage and/or decoration, but an environment in its entirety, and, thus, it is necessary to consider the relationships established in that place, considering: *space for what?*; *space for whom and with whom?*; *space with what and how?* (MAGALHÃES; LAZARETTI, 2019).

Space involves the internal and external environment, corridors, walls, ceilings, floors, and other places in the institution as a component that allows for expanding the possibilities for children's exploration, movement, and action. Space communicates how children do or don't occupy environments, whether or not they participate in their composition and production, expresses and reveals how children and their group, together with the teacher, plan and organize, considering that space tells the story of this group.

Thus, time and space in the organization of teaching reveal themselves to be of fundamental importance in thinking about resources and materials as mediators of the teaching actions proposed by the teacher. These can be physical and/or symbolic resources as a means for teaching certain content, such as books, structured and unstructured materials, globes, works of art, paintbrushes, paper, fabrics, wood, and many other natural resources, as well as those produced by humanity and objectified in culture. This diversity and richness—natural and cultural—can and should be presented to children, depending on the guiding objectives, in order to broaden their experience in the world, exploring and acting with these resources and objects, mediated by the teacher's intentional action. However, depending on the objective, the teacher organizes time and space, selects materials, and needs to organize the group of children. Some teaching activities are more favorable in a collective manner, such as conversation circles, directed games, and storytelling; other activities are more appropriate in small groups, such as explaining how to use a tool and learning a new skill (using scissors, cutting, and pasting); and others are more appropriate individually (time for sharing, eating, and conversation).

These components reveal that the teacher needs to use discretion when choosing his or her teaching actions, guided by the purpose of Early Childhood Education, which is to organize teaching in an intentional and systematic way through objectives that aim to promote the child's learning and development in order to make them human. To this end, children depend, from their earliest days, on the progressive acquisition of multiple cultural elements so that they can develop complex human skills and abilities through school education. In the wake of this argument, there is a need to establish objectives that represent this purpose, essential content to be taught to children from their first months of life, in order to establish a set of teaching actions and operations that awaken a fascination with the appropriation of human culture with a view to broadening children's learning horizons. For this reason, teachers are responsible for selecting, organizing, proposing, and directing

teaching, through a mastery of coherent didactic-pedagogical knowledge, based on a critical conception of didactics, in order to carry out this complex task with children in early childhood education.

In view of the above, this critical conception of didactics, based on the perspective of developmental teaching, expresses unity between objective–content–form as a synthesis of a teaching organization that can perform its social function as an educational activity, in a generic human perspective. This is because there is a correspondence between the objectives established by the teacher in his or her planning and the selection of content to be taught to children, which must include enriched, diversified, and contextualized strategies and actions, the result of which is the formation of complex and elaborate higher psychological functions in the cultural development of children. However, the guarantee of this result depends on the unity between these elements of didactics and the specificity of the learning and child development process that determines the structuring of conditions for an educational organization in accordance with the dynamics and characteristics of this initial period of human formation. Thus, in the specificity of early childhood education, we cannot defend any type of didactics, but rather one that is articulated with a critical conception of teaching that guarantees babies and young children a generic human formation (LAZARETTI; MELLO, 2018).

3 Final considerations

Developmental teaching as a perspective for didactics in early childhood education points to principles in which children's learning and development should enable qualitative changes in the way they are, think, and act in the world, allowing them to become human, so that they progressively acquire the cultural wealth of humanity. This requires clarity about the specificity of the didactic approach in early childhood education, considering who the teaching is aimed at. In other words, in developmental teaching, children are subjects in the process of learning and development, who only achieve full formation when they acquire the

highest achievements of human culture. To this end, it is essential that teachers have criteria for selecting *what* they should teach, through appropriate conditions that guarantee *how* to teach at each stage of child development, in order to broaden and enrich the experience of babies and children with the world of culture.

From the reflections woven into this article, the effort was to position ourselves in favor of a didactic approach that has as its principle the promotion of teaching that develops babies and children. Committing to this perspective can be a promising path for the continuity of research and studies, so that we can advance in purposeful actions that can impact and subsidize pedagogical practices in early childhood education.

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