

Contributions of Historical-Cultural Theory to the formation of theoretical conceptual thinking in children aged 4 to 6 years: implications for pedagogical practices in early childhood education

Contribuciones de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural para la formación del pensamiento conceptual teórico de niños de 4 a 6 años: implicaciones en las prácticas pedagógicas de la Educación Infantil

Contribuições da Teoria Histórico-Cultural para a formação do pensamento conceitual teórico de crianças de 4 a 6 anos: implicações nas práticas pedagógicas da Educação Infantil

Abel Gustavo Garay González¹

ABSTRACT

The article aims to systematize the essential theoretical-methodological foundations to explain the formation and development of theoretical concept thinking in children aged 4 to 6 years. To fulfill the objective, some fundamental concepts found in the works of Vygotsky and his close collaborators that support his research in the Historical-Cultural Theory were analyzed. The unit of analysis is the action of the intentional activity that is executed in the teaching process, this action being the driving force of the formation and development of conceptual thinking. The fundamental essence of teaching is to produce and create the act of thinking and not the act of memorizing words. The true teaching must work the Zone of Proximal Development to develop the Higher

RESUMEN

El artículo tiene como objetivo sistematizar los fundamentos teórico-metodológicos imprescindibles para explicitar la formación y el desarrollo del pensamiento conceptual teórico en niños de 4 a 6 años. Para cumplir el objetivo fueron analizados algunos conceptos fundamentales que se encuentran en las obras de Vygotsky y de sus colaboradores próximos que fundamentan sus investigaciones en la Teoría Histórico-Cultural. La unidad de análisis es la acción de la actividad intencional que se ejecuta en el proceso de enseñanza, siendo esta acción la fuerza motriz de la formación y del desarrollo del pensamiento conceptual teórico. La esencia fundamental de la enseñanza es la de producir y crear el acto de pensar y no el acto de memorizar palabras. La verdadera enseñanza debe trabajar la Zona de Desarrollo Proximal

¹ Department of Education/IB/UNESP-Rio Claro, Brazil. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5118-1532>. E-mail: abel.garay@unesp.br; agarayhj@gmail.com.

Psychic Functions, specifically the conceptual thinking of children from 4 to 6 years old.

Keywords: Theoretical concept thinking. Children from 4 to 6 years old. Historical-Cultural Theory.

para desenvolver las Funciones Psíquicas Superiores, específicamente el pensamiento conceptual teórico de los niños de 4 a 6 años.

Palabras-clave: Pensamiento conceptual teórico. Niños de 4 a 6 años. Teoría Histórico-Cultural.

1 Introduction

We live in a world of constant technological and scientific advancements resulting from production processes and the creation of human needs. These needs must be met through the assimilation and appropriation of cultural goods. The production of knowledge, understanding, internalization, and the objectification of the essence of objects, subjects, and physical and spiritual phenomena is possible only through theoretical conceptual thinking—the only way for human beings to acquire systematic and scientific knowledge.

According to Vygotsky (1996), human thought must be understood and analyzed within the context of its historical-cultural development because that is where the key to understanding thought development lies. This includes the factors that influence the primacy of logical reasoning and the importance of the dialectical relationship between teaching and learning processes in the qualitative formation of theoretical conceptual thinking in children aged four to six. Through mediation by adults and activities with children, children can develop theoretical and logical conceptual thinking. This allows them to exercise mechanisms of rationality and overcome thinking based on sensory perception and concrete empirical arguments. Children's thinking begins to play an essential role in the development of their Higher Mental Functions. As they develop theoretical conceptual thinking, children begin to overcome eidetic thinking, which uses concrete images to remember objects and cultural phenomena. As they develop theoretical conceptual thinking, children exercise a critical and reflective spirit. They investigate and create hypotheses and insist on demonstrating historical-cultural facts and natural phenomena.

Human beings use concepts to assimilate the knowledge and skills formed throughout the process of humanization. Therefore, theoretical conceptual thinking provides a superior level of assimilation to that achieved through sensory and perceptual knowledge. This superior level enables one to generalize, execute tasks, and automate one's knowledge. The assimilation and appropriation of concepts depend on education, teaching, and learning processes, as well as the effective and necessary means for forming personality and psychic functions.

For children aged 4 to 6, this should be a time of privileged quality² teaching and learning processes for developing theoretical conceptual thinking. This can be achieved through meaningful and significant intentional activities that help them overcome the stage of merely memorizing words and exercise their thinking power.

Teachers' understanding of the psychological peculiarities of intentional activity is crucial for children's education and development because intentional activity is a social and practical activity through which the appropriation of signs and symbols, as well as the use of cultural tools, act as true mediators for human development. Through this type of activity, people interact with each other and with nature, signs, and tools. The essence of intentional activity is producing and creating meaning to enhance the development of children's higher mental functions, integrating practical, emotional, relational, and cognitive aspects.

2. Theoretical, Conceptual Thinking, and Intentional Mediating Activity from the Perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory

According to Vygotsky (1996), there are two types of mental functions: lower mental functions, which have biological roots, and higher mental functions, which have their roots in historical and cultural formation and development.

² We understand quality as the internal determination of an object expressed in the set of essential properties that distinguish it from other objects. Quantity is the external determination of phenomena and things that manifests itself in changes in their various properties.

Higher mental functions include memory, consciousness, perception, attention, and speech, types of thinking, will, concept formation, and emotion.

The formation and development of higher psychic functions, especially theoretical conceptual thinking, is achieved through systematized scientific knowledge that considers the formation of a new psychic structure. Emerging from this new psychic structure does not mean rushing through the stages of a child's psychic development; rather, it means offering systematized knowledge through a teaching system that enables children to overcome empirical thinking.

Vygotsky (1996) conducted extensive research on the formation and development of theoretical conceptual thinking in children of his time. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the children who participated in his research are entirely different from 21st-century children. This is because one of the main concepts is the social situation of development. This concept indicates that understanding and defending the possibility of the emergence of theoretical conceptual thinking in children aged four to six requires recognizing that today's concrete reality is thoroughly different from that of Vygotsky's time (1896–1934).

The signs, mediating tools, and intentional activities in which children currently engage influence the development of new psychic structures and higher psychic functions. Of course, we are not suggesting that children aged four to six can be compared to adolescents or adults. However, quality teaching leads to quality learning and drives the formation and development of theoretical, conceptual thinking. Activity guided and organized by adult mediation is how children assimilate scientific concepts in early childhood education. Spontaneous or free activity alone is insufficient to stimulate or challenge children to develop theoretical conceptual thinking because it does not provide them with the means to analyze and synthesize teaching content. Emphasizing empirical thinking in early childhood education enhances spontaneous concepts in children. Vygotsky (1996) pointed out the possibility of developing theoretical conceptual thinking in children as follows:

Knowledge in the true sense of the word, science, art, and the various spheres of cultural life can only be properly assimilated in concepts. It is true that children also assimilate scientific truths and become imbued with a certain ideology, which takes root in various fields of cultural life, but children assimilate all this in an incomplete, inadequate way: in assimilating existing cultural material, they do not yet actively participate in its creation. (VYGOTSKI, 1996, p.64).

In 1925, Vygotsky (1996) observed that children around the age of five were developing theoretical conceptual thinking by using the signs and tools of their time through intentional mediation with the help of adults. However, he believed that this assimilation was incomplete. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the fact that children today are unable to develop theoretical conceptual thinking, given the current social context of their development. The knowledge children develop today is totally different from the knowledge children assimilated in Vygotsky's time.

In his research analysis, Vygotsky (1996) highlights what happens when children begin to develop theoretical conceptual thinking in this way.

[...] profound scientific research shows that throughout the cultural development of behavior, not only the content of thought changes but also its forms; new mechanisms, new functions, new operations, and new modes of activity emerge and take shape, which were unknown in earlier stages of historical development. Similarly, the process of a child's cultural development does not mean only their rooting in one cultural sphere or another but also, along with the gradual development of content, the development of forms of thought, and the configuration of those historically emerged forms and modes of higher activity, whose development is precisely the essential condition for cultural rooting. (VYGOTSKI, 1996, p.54).

In this process of assimilating all cultural forms through intentional activity, children develop their own thinking because this is the dialectical form of the relationship between human beings and human culture and nature itself. With the gradual assimilation of cultural content, new mental structures and new forms of thought development also emerge. Therefore, the development of theoretical

conceptual thinking in children does not require certain biological maturity for conceptual development to be complete

According to Vygotsky (1996):

Thought is the practical, visual reconstruction of the situation, of the field that is perceived. Thought reaches its maximum development in generalization. During this period, children talk and are talked to about what they see. When faced with objects, they name them, thus revealing the relationship between objects and their attributes. (VYGOTSKI, 1996, p.364).

For children, the development of theoretical conceptual thinking presupposes the assimilation of the essence of objects and phenomena in reality through the process of internalization when faced with a challenging activity that has meaning and significance. Generalization indicates a state of complete abstraction about the object or phenomena being assimilated. Through thinking, children can abstract the very essence of concrete reality. When children internalize the real meaning and significance of the essence of objects and phenomena and manage to objectify them, we can say that they begin to communicate, become intelligible, and understand the forms and contents of objects, reality, and their own cognitive and affective activity. For children, designating the true essence of things in reality constitutes the emergence of something new, the formation of new theoretical conceptual thinking. What emerges is the highest quality in the development of children's thinking because this new thinking is characterized by the assimilation of the very essence of the object itself and of the phenomena of concrete reality.

In the same line of Vygotsky's thinking, Petrovski (1995) defines human thinking as:

Thought is the highest product of specifically organized matter—the brain—and is the active process of reflecting the objective world in concepts, judgments, theories, etc.

Thought is the socially conditioned psychic process of searching for, discovering what is essentially new, and it is inextricably linked to language. Thought arises from sensory knowledge

based on practical activity and goes far beyond it. (PETROVSKI, 1995, p. 292).

Human thought as a psychic process has the function of making the world of objects and phenomena of reality knowable. As a process, thought has a historical-cultural origin; that is, human thought develops in the realm of human culture, first through practical, relatively sensitive, and perceptive activity, and then, due to their ontological and cognitive needs, human beings must internalize and understand the connections between objects and phenomena. This understanding of essence is possible through theoretical conceptual thought. Theoretical conceptual thinking enables human beings to advance in the assimilation of the essence of objects, to grasp the real meaning of the objects and phenomena of concrete reality.

The development of theoretical conceptual thinking in children gives them the ability to elaborate the interconnections between different objects and to abstract their essence, their social functions, and their essential characteristics.

Petrovski (1995) concludes: "The same thing is, in itself, the same and different, since it acts in different systems of connections and relationships" (PETROVSKI, 1995, p.311).

For Petrovski (1995),

In the thought process, the object enters into new connections and, thanks to this, reveals new properties and qualities that are fixed in new concepts. In this way, new content is extracted, and the object is increasingly shown to us from a different angle, revealing new properties. (PETROVSKI, 1995, p.311).

The teacher's intentional mediation in the teaching process is essential for children to be able to understand the intrinsic connections between objects and phenomena, and the properties and qualities that compose them. The performance of an intentional activity by children between the ages of 4 and 6 is essential for the emergence of new psychological structures, in this case

theoretical conceptual thinking. Petrovski (1995) demonstrates the results of his research and concludes that:

Schoolchildren, not only in the upper grades but also in the lower grades, are perfectly capable of identifying the essentials of isolated phenomena and facts in accessible material and, as a result, arriving at new generalizations. Large-scale psychological and pedagogical experiments carried out by Soviet psychologists over many years have convincingly demonstrated that even younger students are capable of assimilating, in general, much more complex material than was assumed until recently (for example, not only arithmetic but also algebraic relationships). (PETROVSKI, 1995, p.318).

It is currently undeniable that the social situation in which children live is a rather complex physical and cultural environment, with many concrete and motivating challenges for children to develop new generalizations. All this is possible because children are capable of internalizing the essence of objects and phenomena in the material world.

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The development of theoretical, conceptual thinking occurs through activities that are intentional and meaningful to the child. The stage of object manipulation, understood as a practical activity, together with the teacher's intentional mediation, provides a fundamental and effective means of developing abstract, logical, and rational thinking. Teaching and learning processes of the highest quality enhance children's ability to generalize about objects and phenomena in reality. Therefore, the teacher's intentional

mediation is essential for learning, which is the child's activity, to allow them to develop abstractions and generalizations at a higher level of sensory and perceptive thinking.

Poddiákov (1987) also emphasizes that children's thinking is the driving force behind their full intellectual development.

Children do not simply assimilate the knowledge given to them by adults; they actively introduce content from their experience into this process, which, interacting with the assimilated knowledge, conditions the generation of new, unexpected knowledge that appears in the form of conjectures, assumptions, etc. This knowledge is not always accurate and entirely correct; however, it provides the material that constitutes the main mental activity of children. At a certain stage of this activity, children begin to express judgments that are sufficiently clear and precise that they surprise adults with their novelty and originality. (PODDIÁKOV, 1987, p.168-169).

Through the teacher's mediation, children can express thoughts in concepts, with clear and precise ideas, with the essential elements that correspond to theoretical conceptual thinking, in accordance with their experiences and social development.

Venguer (1986) highlights the importance of the development and formation of higher mental processes—one of these mental processes being theoretical conceptual thinking—in children aged 4 to 6, through an effective and meaningful teaching process for the formation of cognitive qualities, as follows:

One of the most important tasks of teaching and educating preschool children is to develop their abilities, that is, the mental qualities necessary for mastering different types of activities and for their successful completion. (VENGUER, 1986, p.207).

This means that one of the main objectives of school education for children aged 4 to 6 is to carry out intentional activities for the formation of higher mental processes.

The main task of the teacher is to enable the child to carry out their daily school tasks in such a way as to expand their conceptual repertoire with meaning

for them and their social significance, since the development of theoretical conceptual thinking provides the child with the possibility of developing their own personality through the formation of cognitive, affective, and linguistic processes. That is why the main task of quality teaching is the formation of new higher mental structures in children.

This is what Poddiákov (1987) thinks about children:

[...] by mastering these means of thought, children can then use them to perfect the external procedures of their activity. This is one of the secrets of self-development (within certain limits, of course) in children's activity. (PODDIÁKOV, 1987, p.172).

Children's mastery of the means of thought development, such as cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, is the genesis of their own logical thinking development. With these foundations of thought, children are able to inquire, develop hypotheses, solve problems, exercise their investigative gaze, and understand the essence of the objects and phenomena of reality.

Thus, according to Vygotsky (1996):

Conceptual thinking is the appropriate means for understanding reality because it penetrates the inner essence of objects, since their nature is not revealed by direct contemplation of one or another isolated object but rather through the connections and relationships that become apparent in the dynamics of the object, in its development linked to the rest of reality. The internal link between things is discovered with the help of conceptual thinking, since developing a concept about an object means discovering a series of connections and relationships between that object and the whole of reality; it means including it in the complex system of phenomena. (VYGOTSKI, 1996, p. 78-79).

In the process of forming theoretical conceptual thinking, children, through the intentional activities of the teacher, manage to assimilate the essence of objects and phenomena, understand the intrinsic links that compose them, and comprehend the relationships that exist between them.

Davidov (1988) highlights the following in his research:

Contemporary knowledge presupposes that humans master the process of the origin and development of things through theoretical thinking, which studies and describes dialectical logic. Theoretical thinking has its specific types of generalization and abstraction, its procedures for forming concepts and operating with them. It is precisely the formation of such concepts that opens the way for schoolchildren to master the foundations of contemporary theoretical culture. School teaching must be geared toward communicating such knowledge, which children can assimilate in the process of theoretical generalization and abstraction, leading to theoretical concepts. In our opinion, schools should teach children to think theoretically. (DAVIDOV, 1988, p.6).

According to Davidov (1988), theoretical conceptual thinking is the most effective way for children to assimilate and understand the process of origin and development of objects and phenomena in human reality. He also emphasizes that the process of generalization is how children objectify the essence of things, assimilated through theoretical conceptual thinking. Therefore, it is emphasized that the main objective of school, in the field of early childhood education, is to provide quality teaching so that children can develop their theoretical and conceptual thinking.

For Talízina (1988), children, through quality teaching, are able to develop this theoretical conceptual thinking:

The teaching process presupposes the transition from the spontaneous development of the child's activity to guided and organized activity. According to Vigotski, the concepts formed in children at school are characterized by the fact that their assimilation begins with an awareness of the essential characteristics of the concept, which is achieved through the introduction of the definition.

It is precisely in the awareness of the essential characteristics that Vigotsky saw the specific nature of the formation of scientific concepts. The path of concept formation, which begins with the clarification of essential characteristics, was called by Vigotsky the "top-down" path, that is, from the definition to real objects, rather than the "bottom-up" path, from objects to determination, characteristic of the formation of "vulgar" concepts. (TALÍZINA, 1988, pp. 148-149).

The process of internalizing the meanings of objects and phenomena allows children to develop higher mental functions, which are fundamental to their ontogenetic development. Children who assimilate the meaning of the essence of objects begin to live a different life in the historical and cultural context. For children, the beginning of the assimilation of the essence of the interconnections that exist in objects constitutes a great qualitative leap in the development of their higher mental processes. In this way, children begin to understand the entire functional and structural basis of the concrete reality of human beings. That is why an activity guided and organized by the teacher is the source of the assimilation of scientific concepts by children aged 4 to 6. Therefore, free, spontaneous activity without any intention for the teacher is not the appropriate teaching method for the development and formation of theoretical conceptual thinking in children.

3 The Zone of Proximal Development as the foundation for the formation of theoretical conceptual thinking

The Zone of Proximal Development constitutes a major advance for the new psychological-pedagogical paradigm for the proper understanding of the dialectical relationship between the processes of teaching and learning and the ontogenetic development of human beings.

For Vygotsky (1979), the Zone of Proximal Development is:

[...] the gap between the actual level of development, determined by the ability to independently solve a problem, and the potential level of development, determined by solving a problem under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer (VIGOTSKY, 1979, p.133).

Human development occurs in two interconnected, dialectical stages: the current or real level of development, which is the result of internalization and objectification processes that have already occurred in human beings as

understood products, and the zone of proximal development, which indicates processes of internalization that will be achieved through mediation by another human being or by mediating tools.

In early childhood education, teachers should intentionally work with children's zones of proximal development, especially in the following ways:

[...] at school, children do not learn to do what they are capable of doing on their own, but rather to do what they are not yet capable of doing, but which is within their reach in collaboration with the teacher and under his or her guidance. [...] In other words, what children are capable of doing today in collaboration will be capable of doing on their own tomorrow (VYGOTSKI, 1993, p. 241).

Quality teaching by teachers should facilitate the internalization of knowledge through intentional activities in the Zone of Proximal Development. Quality teaching involves offering intentional activities so that children, after assimilating objects and phenomena in reality, can develop their theoretical conceptual thinking, reaching the most generalized forms of objectification.

Vygotsky (1993) was quite emphatic in criticizing the type of unintentional mediation that educators used when teaching. For him, educators:

[...] They focused on what the child could do on their own in their thinking and did not consider the possibility of transition from what they could do to what they could not do. They valued the state of development, just like the stupid gardener: only for the ripe fruit. They did not consider that instruction should advance development. They did not consider the zone of proximal development. They focused on the path of least resistance, on the child's weaknesses rather than their strengths (VYGOTSKI, 1993, p.243).

In early childhood education, with children aged 4 to 6, the content offered should be problematized as a way of developing their theoretical conceptual thinking, through the intentional mediating activity of the teacher. In this way, children begin to form hypotheses and develop ways of investigating and offering solutions to the problems of humanity. Due to their ontological needs, such as forming their identity and developing their psychological structures, early

childhood education must provide children with moments of quality teaching to develop their thinking.

SMIRNOV, A.A., LEONTIEV, A.N., RUBINSSTEIN, S.L., TIEPLOV, B.M. (1960) emphasize the fundamental role of the educator in this teaching and learning process:

The mental development of children takes place in the process of education and teaching carried out by adults, who organize the child's life, create certain conditions for their development, and pass on to them the social experience accumulated by humanity in the previous period of its history. Adults are the bearers of this social experience. Thanks to adults, children assimilate a wide range of knowledge acquired by previous generations; learn socially developed skills and forms of behavior that have been created in society. As they assimilate social experience, children develop different abilities. (SMIRNOV, A.A., LEONTIEV, A.N., RUBINSSTEIN, S.L., TIEPLOV, B.M., 1960 p.498).

Teaching takes place within the realm of early childhood education because effective and valid means are found there. These include the intentional activity of the teacher and the tools necessary for developing higher mental functions, specifically theoretical conceptual thinking. This involves working within the zone of proximal development, with conceptual content in the process of internalization.

Vygotsky (2001b) demonstrates that the development of higher mental functions and the formation of the child's personality begin within the teaching process itself because quality teaching aims to promote the holistic development of individuals and elevate their theoretical conceptual thinking.

Mújina (1983) emphasizes the significance of the teacher's intentional mediation in internalizing scientific concepts.

As children acquire scientific knowledge, they assimilate concepts and logical forms of thinking based on them. [...] In the older preschool years, children can be taught certain concepts. The primary aim of this type of teaching is for children to establish special orientation relationships with the material they are

studying. Children are given a medium, an instrument, which allows them, through their actions, to highlight the essential features that form the concept in objects or in their relationships. Preschool children are taught to use this medium correctly and to record the results obtained in a schematic form that is accessible to them. (MÚJINA, 1983, p. 198-199).

When children aged 4 to 6 are faced with an intentional activity carried out through the intentional mediation of the teacher, they are able to internalize the essence of which objects are composed. To accomplish this, children are capable of performing a logical abstraction of the object.

Petrovski (1985), when analyzing the formation of knowledge and concepts in the teaching process, states the following:

[...] That is why the formation and assimilation of the corresponding knowledge and concepts constitute the premise for appropriate and effective human activity, open to new objects, situations, and tasks. The formation of concepts and the acquisition of knowledge take place in the process of activity and, based on it, reveal the properties and connections of the elements of reality. (PETROVSKI, 1985, p.249).

Currently, the psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching and learning processes advocate intentional activities and effective teacher mediation as a way to motivate children to think logically and abstractly, as a path to understanding the properties and connections that exist in the essence of objects and phenomena in objective reality. When the activity process has this methodological richness and intentionality in teaching at deeper levels, teachers are able to work on the zone of proximal development and dialectically develop the higher mental functions of children in early childhood education.

Finally, we will conclude this analysis of the formation of theoretical conceptual thinking by presenting a thesis put forward by Davídov (1987) as the result of his research, as follows:

In the lower grades, children should develop study skills (modern research indicates that this is possible precisely when children assimilate scientific concepts). Such teaching should really “carry with it” the psychological development that may still be lacking in them from the point of view of the standards and highest demands of the school of the future. (DAVÍDOV, 1987, p.150-151).

Teaching and learning processes based on dialectical logic provide the necessary means for carrying out activities that develop theoretical conceptual thinking, through which children can process analysis and logical observations and draw abstract generalizations, always considering the social development in which the child is embedded.

For this reason, Davídov (1987) defends in his thesis a school of the future, as follows:

The near future of schools will bring about a similar change, which in turn will require a modification of the principles of teaching listed above. The development of new guidelines is the main task of contemporary teaching and psychology. (DAVÍDOV, 1987, p. 150).

Mediation is at the heart of new ways of developing teaching and learning processes. The implementation of new approaches to intentional activity represents a revolution in teaching and in the way we understand the process of developing higher mental functions in children, specifically theoretical conceptual thinking. The future of school, as indicated by Davídov (1987), is the school of early childhood education in the 21st century. The influence of new objects and phenomena in reality on the formation of new mental structures in children aged 4 to 6 is undeniable.

4. Final Considerations

From the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory, studying the formation and development of theoretical conceptual thinking in children aged 4 to 6 is fundamental to their humanization process. In this study, we highlight

intentional mediation as the primary method for addressing the zone of proximal development while considering the child's social context. As an intentional activity carried out by the teacher, intentional mediation is fundamental to the development of higher mental functions, which originate in the social and cultural spheres.

According to Historical-Cultural Theory, children develop theoretical conceptual thinking through a dialectical process of internalization. In this process, children assimilate cultural assets produced by human beings during their ontological development. Teachers, signs, tools, and cultural means facilitate this process.

The prerequisite for developing theoretical conceptual thinking is constructing and refining the actions and content of activities mediated by teachers, who enhance the development of children's higher mental functions.

It is important that teachers in school education carry out intentional activities and work on the child's zone of proximal development rather than insisting on the child's current level of development. Teachers should therefore carry out intentional and challenging activities for the child, activities that work on the meaning and significance of the content for the child.

Finally, we highlight the importance of teacher training from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory as a fundamental step in the study and understanding of this theory, offering theoretical and methodological support to enable teachers to provide quality education and demonstrate a social commitment to social transformation through education.

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