

# The place of Psychological Theory in Education<sup>1</sup>

## O lugar da Teoria Psicológica na Educação

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### ABSTRACT

Education is a field of study and of social, cultural and historical practices, a synthesis of knowledges. Around it orbits a multitude of satellites: Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and other sciences. In the present text, two possibilities of understanding the relationship between psychological theory and educational research, particularly Special Education, are examined. The first, the instrumental perspective, understands the field of education as a large laboratory of application of psychological laws and principles. The second - the perspective of a concrete psychology, according to Vygotsky's vision - understands Education as synthesis of knowledges and linked to the concrete world of social life. As a consequence, it becomes larger than any particular science and has the power to guide the investigation of its satellite sciences. This second way of thinking the relation between psychological theory and Special Education, by inverting the vector, enlarge the horizons of Psychology. So, Psychology can touch the living world.

**Keywords:** Concrete psychology. Education. Special education.

### RESUMO

Educação é campo de estudo e práticas sociais, culturais e históricas, síntese de saberes. Em torno dela orbita uma multidão de satélites: Psicologia, Sociologia, Antropologia e outras ciências. No presente texto, examinam-se duas possibilidades de se entender a relação da teoria psicológica com a pesquisa educacional, particularmente, com a Educação Especial. A primeira, a perspectiva instrumental, entende o campo educativo como um grande laboratório de aplicação de leis e princípios psicológicos. A segunda – a perspectiva de uma psicologia concreta, conforme a visão de Vigotski –, por entender que a Educação é síntese de saberes, vinculada ao mundo concreto da vida social, vê-a maior que qualquer ciência em particular, o que lhe confere poder para orientar a investigação de suas ciências satélites. Esse segundo modo de pensar a relação entre teoria psicológica e Educação, ao inverter o vetor, permite um alargamento dos horizontes da Psicologia, possibilitando-lhe pisar o chão do mundo dos viventes.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicologia concreta. Educação. Educação especial.

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## 1. Introduction

In this text, two possibilities for the relationship between psychology and education are examined. One of them, the most common and most widespread among us, is what could be called an instrumental vision: psychology, among other sciences, is given the role of guiding and conducting educational practices, assuming that this is one of its fields of application.

The second possibility is deduced from Vygotsky's historical-cultural psychology, especially his theoretical formulations in the field of defectology and what he understands as concrete psychology. Starting from the idea that education is a synthesis of knowledge, in this text we aim to demonstrate that education is greater than any particular science and that psychology is enriched by following its traces.

## 2. Education: the housing

A visitor's place in a house depends on many factors: who are the people who have made their home there, who the visitor is, what their relationships are like with them, how big the house is and so on. In the house here called Education, an infinite number of social practices take place aimed at a specific group of people: children and young people who have found their home there. In the same rhythm, tone and intensity with which those responsible for these practices are interested and dedicated to these young people and children, they also seek to understand and improve the ways of doing them, perhaps for the same reason. Therefore, they are always examining them and they do so from different perspectives.

Education is a vast field of social, cultural and historical practices aimed at children and young people and, at the same time, a field of study and investigation, around which orbit various sciences that seek to understand the challenges it imposes. It can, therefore, be configured as a field of synthesis of knowledge, with a multitude of satellites gravitating around it, among them,

Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, to name just a few (TUNES and DOMINGOS, 2018).

As we know, soon after being born, the baby is in a transition phase between intrauterine and extrauterine life and does not exactly have an identity, since he is in unity with its mother; it is still a primitive form of individual existence, a *proto-us*, as Vygotski (1996a) highlights. To survive, it needs to be sensitive to what is outside of him, even if only in terms of its immediate physiological needs. This sensitivity to what is outside of him is a *sine qua non* condition for him to learn. Learning implies, so to speak, a form of relationship with what is outside oneself. The baby – that is, the newcomer to the world – is faced with what was already there when he arrived – that is, the old. Therefore, Education is what happens in the gap between the past and the future and always involves assimilation. The two are related concepts, although not equivalent.

It is necessary to recognize, however, that education is a polysemic term and, among other reasons, its polysemy, perhaps, is due to the fact that the process of educating is too intertwined in everyday life, the place *par excellence* of particularities, of variation, diversification. Therefore, the varied meanings and senses of the word educate imply multiple and distinct relationships with other concepts, which are also polysemic, for example, the concept of family, school, childhood, psychological development, learning and work. Such polysemy is not, however, an evil to be combated. On the contrary, it should even be praised for denoting the welcome diversity of human thought and demonstrating the richness of our culture, our history and our social life, but, at the same time, it is necessary to recognize that this fact imposes numerous challenges to the Education scholar (TUNES and DOMINGOS, 2018), as will be briefly pointed out below.

According to Hannah Arendt (2005), “the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings *are born* into the world” (p. 223, author’s italics); “education is among the most elementary and necessary activities of human society, which never remains as it is, but is continually renewed with the birth, with the arrival of new human beings” (p. 234). As it is renewal, its

heritage character cannot be denied, as it keeps our culture alive and “what keeps a culture alive is exactly the permanent updating of the meaning of its cultural assets” (VASCONCELLOS, 2008, p. 8). Because it is renewal, it is, without a doubt, linked to the past, to what “already was” and, at the same time, its meaning is the future, what “is not yet”. It is important to highlight the dual character of education: preserving and renewing. It is only possible to renew what has been preserved, since

this indicates where the treasures are found and what their value is – there seems to be no conscious continuity in time and, therefore, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, but only the everlasting change of the world and the biological cycle of the creatures that live in it. The treasure was thus lost [...] because no tradition had predicted its appearance or its reality (ARENDDT, 2005, p. 31). Without tradition – that selects and names, that transmits and preserves,

I don't think it can be said that, for man, the relationship between past and future is the continuous and peaceful flow of the pointers of a clock. Past and future antagonize each other due to the presence of man who is located in the middle between the two, that is, in the present: “It is the insertion of man with his limited life span that transforms the continuous flow of the current of pure change” (ARENDDT, 1971, p. 225). Therefore, there is always a tension between the past and the future. Therefore, every educator lives a drama: he is responsible for the life and development of children and young people while he is also responsible for the continuity of the world. Being responsible for the child's development means not usurping their power to transform the world; being responsible for the world means being the guardian of traditional treasures, preventing their destruction by newcomers. Renewing is exactly what education means: leaning firmly on the past and, with that firmness, embracing the future. One foot back and the other forward, in the uncertain and unknown future. Between the two feet, just a crack, the present:

The present, in ordinary life the most futile and slippery of verbal tenses – when I say “now” and point to it, it has already passed – is nothing more than the collision of a past that is no longer, with a future, that is approaching and yet it is not. Man lives in between, and what he calls the present is a lifelong struggle against the dead weight of the past pushing him forward with the hope, and the fear of a future (whose only certainty is death) pulling him back to the “tranquility of the past” with nostalgia and the memory of the only reality he can be certain of (ARENDDT, 1971, p. 227).

In all times and in all cultures, children arrive in an old world, in a world that was already there when they arrived. Its growth and cultural development take place in the dynamics of assimilation of the past and constitution of the future, in the gap we call the present. It is the insertion of the human being with his limited life span in the process of perennial change - which we divide into past, present and future verbal tenses - which transforms the continuous flow of change in time as we know it (ARENDDT, 1971, p. 225).

### **3. Psychology: the visitor**

It is very common to say that science is overvalued in our society, which points to the importance of examining how this overvaluation manifests itself. Simone Weil (2017) makes an enlightening contribution to the examination of this issue. For her, people believe in the results obtained by modern science without possessing or seeking any information about the methods used to obtain them and, thus, scientific knowledge assumes the condition of dogma. She says:

Science is today a monopoly, not due to a deficient organization of public instruction, but due to its very nature; the profane only have access to the results, not the methods, which is equivalent to saying that only belief is possible for them, not assimilation (WEIL, 2017, p. 14).

It is known that the method used by science defines the field of validity of the knowledge it produces. For this reason, when the methods of science are not taken into account, it is not surprising that scientific knowledge is assimilated as

absolute and universal truth, thus denying its historical character. Hence, it follows, quite lightly, its use as a definer of individuals' actions and, therefore, an effective instrument of social control.

This social way of absorbing science also manifests itself in the relationship between Psychology and Education, creating a vertical association that gives psychological science the power to guide directions and define practices in the educational field. This is a technical, instrumental vision, according to which Psychology – and several other sciences – is understood as one of the foundations and, by the way, one of the most important, of educational practice. Many who adopt this view tend to believe that, led by the sciences that orbit it, Education has a scientific character. However, they do not realize that, in fact, by doing this, they deprive it of its identity by understanding it only as complying with the canons of the sciences that govern it.

As already said, Education is, at the same time, preservation and renewal. Therefore, educating is linked to both the past and the future. Science, in turn, deals with the study of what has already happened, that is, its focus is on the past. Even if it is admitted that one is also interested in predicting the future and seeks to carry it out, it is necessary to recognize that this is always done based on what is known about the fact that has already occurred, and there is always a field of manifestation of the unpredictable, as

... unpredictability arises directly from the story which, as a result of the action, begins and is established as soon as the fleeting moment of the act passes. The problem is that, whatever the nature and content of the subsequent story [...] its full meaning only reveals itself when it ends. [...] the light that illuminates the processes of action and, therefore, all historical processes, only appears when they end (ARENDRT, 2001, p. 204).

The performance of a criminal investigator serves as an illustration and analogy for what is being said: he investigates the crime already committed and, although it is possible to establish preventive actions to combat crime based on what is known about the conditions in that occurs, we

must take into account the ingenuity and creative power of human beings, what they are capable of learning and developing, even if it is for socially reprehensible purposes.

Education, in addition to being a field of knowledge, is a sphere of action with enormous power for creation and renewal. One of its vectors always points to the future. Psychological science, like the criminal investigator, follows the trail that indicates the facts to be investigated.

Thus, the understanding that Education is a synthesis of knowledge links it, in some way, to the concrete world of social and cultural life, making it greater than any particular science and, above all, giving it enormous creative power in its way of guiding psychological investigation or research of any of its satellite sciences.

At the same time, by allowing itself to be guided by the directions and challenges proposed by Education, Psychology opens up to the concrete world of social life, gaining strength and vitality. It seems, then, that this second way of thinking about the place of psychological theory in research in Education, by inverting the vector, allows a broadening of the horizons of Psychology, enabling it to step onto the ground of the world of the living, as will be seen below. The instrumental way of seeing the relationship between Psychology and Education is hegemonic in our society and results from the dogmatic representation of psychological science and the lack of knowledge of its historical character.

#### **4. A thoughtful visitor**

Although the instrumental way of understanding the relationship between Psychology and Education prevails in society, in general, there are those among eminent scholars and theorists who are guided by another vision. This is the case of Lev Semionovitch Vygotsky, today, already well known among us.

Among the countless ideas, concepts and postulates he developed, widely known and disseminated, some will be highlighted, starting with the following statement. It concerns the process commonly called internalization about which much is said and, sometimes, little is understood: “the relationship between higher psychological functions was once a real relationship between people. I relate to myself just as people have related to me” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 25, author’s italics). It follows from this why we understand that reasoning is discussion with others turned into discussion with oneself; thought is talking to others turned to talking to oneself.

With this major premise – or, as he calls it, general law – and with results from his studies and research, he postulated three stages of the child's cultural development, namely, development in itself, development for others and, finally, development for oneself. What is observed in relation to the indicative gesture illustrates, briefly, what this means. In its first manifestations, before it becomes an indicative gesture, there is only the child's unsuccessful attempt to grasp an object; it follows, however, that the adult interprets it as indicating the target object of the action and then the child begins to indicate. Thus, for Vygotsky, everything that is internal in the higher psychological functions – that is, for oneself – was, once, external – that is, for others or social. Any higher psychological function was a social relationship between two people before it became a function; all “forms of verbal communication between the adult and the child later become psychological functions”, that is, the general law is “*any function in the cultural development of the child appears on the scene twice, on two planes – first on the social plane, then, in the psychological one*” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 26, italics by the author; see also VIGOTSKI, 2018).

There are many consequences that can be drawn from Vygotsky's ideas presented here in a very synthetic way. Highlighted below are those linked to the topic under examination. From what was stated:



1. It makes no sense to look for the special centers of higher psychological functions in the cerebral cortex as their source, since these are external, social. It is not the brain that controls the person, but the person who controls the brain. “In truth, it is impossible to understand the functioning of any nervous system without the person”; the brain is a man's brain; the hand is the hand of a man (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 32);
2. higher psychological functions are not natural structures, but cultural constructions;
3. since the nature of any higher psychic function is social, it cannot be deduced from individual psychology. On the contrary, individual functions must be deduced from collective forms of life;
4. the aim of development is not socialization, but the individuation of social functions, which is the same as saying: the aim of cultural development is the “transformation of social relations into psychological functions” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 29);
5. man is, then, the social personality, “*the set of social relations incarnated in the individual* (psychological functions, constructed by the social structure)” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 33). Ultimately, one can even say: “I am the social relationship between me and myself” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p.34, author's italics).

Here are some of the foundations of Vygotsky's theoretical postulates regarding the child's cultural development as an “abstract elaboration of concrete psychology” (VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 35). These ideas are unfolded in several of his works. Some unfoldings are presented in one of the volumes of his chosen works, entitled *The Fundamentals of Defectology*, composed of texts published for the first time between 1924 and 1935. Here, reference is made to the Spanish edition, by Editora Visor, Tomo V, published in 1997.

## 5. Conclusion: fundamentals of defectology

The writings on Defectology, understood as a branch of pedagogy, constitute a revolutionary synthesis of ideas and theories in force at the time of Vygotsky. One of the main theses he presents concerns the cultural development of children with some biological defect. This thesis constitutes the central methodological axis of his project and concerns the qualitative peculiarity of psychological development, as he says: “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, 1997, p. 12). By presenting this thesis, he marked the watershed between his thinking and what prevailed at the time in the field of Psychology, highlighting the main task of Defectology:

The child development processes it studies present an enormous diversity of forms, an almost unlimited number of different types. **Science must master this peculiarity and explain it, establish the cycles and metamorphoses of development, its disproportions and changing centers, discover the laws of diversity** (VIGOTSKI, 1997, p. 14, emphasis added).

We know that modern science has as its starting point the identification of regularities and their causes. We are looking for the essential attribute that allows us to group events from the human world and nature that are, thus, united by similarity, despite countless dissimilarities between them. They seek recognition of the brand that gives them identity. Taken as a starting point, the identification of what is common has, however, a price: most of the attributes of each particular event are disregarded, so that, in this abstractive process, the concrete world distances itself from us and ends up slip out of our hands.

The idea of the principle of variation as intrinsic to the human phenomenon, that is, that the processes of cultural development are qualitatively peculiar, led Vygotsky to define as the first task, as the starting point of defectological science,

the search for understanding how and why this variation occurs. Furthermore, relying on historical-dialectical materialism and Spinoza, he admitted the historical character of the child's cultural development, understanding social cooperation as its primary source. These are the founding principles of the method he defined for the construction of what we now know as the historical-cultural perspective of development (see TUNES, 2017).

Thus, for him, the singular concrete forms of manifestation of the infinite modes of cultural development are found within the scope of life and social cooperation. In the form of the concept of social compensation, he incorporated the concept of adaptation into his theory. According to his thinking, each man fights not only for his survival as a biological organism, but, above all, for his social existence: “Just as the life of every organism is guided by the biological requirement for adaptation, the life of the personality is guided by the demands of their social being” (VIGOTSKI, 1997, p. 45) and, since the concept of adaptation concerns a relationship (adaptation of something or someone to something), social inadaptation, then, would concern the relationship between one concrete organic and psychic singularity and its conditions of social life. It would be a contradiction in terms to say that inadaptation concerns, exclusively, characteristics specific to a singularity, as it is a relationship between certain conditions of the individual and certain conditions of the social environment. For this reason, from a logical point of view, the quality of anomaly or imperfection cannot be attributed to any of its components (see TUNES, 2017).

Education or, in particular, special education, thus becomes the field for realizing social compensation. The study of atypical cultural development therefore concerns the search for scientific understanding of the concrete singularities with which it presents itself. This is how Vygotsky carries out his proposal for concrete psychology in this field. In the theory he developed, the social and historical practices of education are integrated with the psychological theory of the child's cultural development, in such a way that its history comes to constitute the “abstract elaboration of concrete psychology”

(VIGOTSKI, 2000, p. 35). As Puzirei (2000) highlights, there is a radical overcoming of the “academicism” of traditional psychology:

This should mean first of all the *rejection of the experimental paradigm of research*, within the limits of which the psychologist tries to create with the help of the special form of engineering activity the “experiment” – the artificial conditions in which it would be possible to carry out the prescribed in the model – of the *ideal* and “natural” object of study, which lives in accordance with the laws, an object that in relation to the real “objects” of practice, whether the practice of teaching or training, psychotherapy or psychological consultation (“pedological clinic”), is always a peculiar kind of artificial case (laboratory) degenerate remote from life. [...] this means the transfer to an entirely new type of research, [whose...] *historical-cultural* object [...] *is being developed* [...]. This project of radical reconstruction of psychology throughout the history of later psychology remained essentially unrealized (PUZIREI, 2000, p. 43-44, author's italics).

The guiding question from which Vygotsky starts to theoretically compose the system he proposed concerns the origin of the diversification of forms of cultural development. Guided by this question, he walks along the ground we walk on, through life concretely lived, paving it with the abstract elaboration of such concrete psychology, by identifying the regularities, the general laws of cultural development. The laws and principles that he identified and described throughout his work are certainly not the final word – especially because scientific knowledge has a historical character and, agreeing with Puzirei, remains unrealized in its essence. They still require a lot of analytical, interpretative and empirical study. But, after all, as Vygotsky himself (1996b) states, it is better to obtain a provisional answer to a correctly formulated question than a definitive answer to an incorrectly proposed question.

## El lugar de la Teoría Psicológica en la Educación

### RESUMEN

La educación es un campo de estudio y de prácticas sociales, culturales y históricas, una síntesis de conocimientos. A su alrededor orbitan multitud de satélites: Psicología, Sociología, Antropología y otras ciencias. En este texto se examinan dos posibilidades para comprender la relación entre la teoría psicológica y la investigación educativa, en particular la Educación Especial. La primera, la perspectiva instrumental, entiende el campo educativo como un gran laboratorio de aplicación de leyes y principios psicológicos. La segunda –la perspectiva de una psicología concreta, según la visión de Vygotsky–, entendiendo que la Educación es una síntesis de conocimientos, vinculados al concretos de la vida social, la ve como superior a cualquier ciencia particular, lo que le confiere poder para orientar la investigación de sus ciencias satélites. Esta segunda forma de pensar la relación entre teoría psicológica y Educación, al invertir el vector, amplía los horizontes de la Psicología, permitiéndole pisar el suelo del mundo de los vivos.

**Palabras clave:** Psicología concreta. Educación. Educación especial.

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Received in August 2024.  
Approved in October 2024.