

# The political dimension of studies in Defectology by Lev S. Vigotski: revisiting conceptions and formulations<sup>1</sup>

A dimensão política dos estudos em Defectologia de Lev S. Vigotski:  
revisitando concepções e formulações

*Débora Dainez<sup>2</sup>*  
*Ana Luiza Bustamante Smolka<sup>3</sup>*

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses L. S. Vygotsky's theoretical and methodological assertions on Defectology and places them in perspective in the 21st century. The objective is to focus on the conceptual core of studies on disability, considering the explanatory principles and the political dimension of his theorizing that envisions human development prospectively and the role of education in this process. Based on a theoretical study, the article focuses on Vygotsky's writings, situating the historical context of his production and highlighting the heuristic value of his theses. The article analyzes the new proposal for investigation and intervention that emerges in the historical-cultural theory regarding the education and development of people with disabilities. From this, social education is highlighted as a construct that nucleates Vygotsky's elaborations in Defectology and highlights the political strength of this premise that revitalizes the theory in contemporary times, in such a way as to promote the dispute for a socially designed, participatory and emancipatory public education.

**Keywords:** Defectology. Especial Education. Cultural-Historical Theory.

## RESUMO

O artigo tematiza as asserções teórico-metodológicas de L. S. Vigotski à Defectologia e as coloca em perspectiva no século XXI. O objetivo é focalizar o núcleo conceitual dos estudos sobre a deficiência, considerando os princípios explicativos e a dimensão política de sua teorização que vislumbra o desenvolvimento humano prospectivamente e a função da educação nesse processo. A partir de um estudo de natureza teórica, focaliza-se os escritos vigotskianos situando a conjuntura histórica de sua produção e destacando o valor heurístico de suas teses. Analisa-se a nova proposta de investigação e intervenção que emerge na teoria histórico-cultural acerca da educação e do desenvolvimento da pessoa com deficiência. A partir disso, evidencia-se a educação social como constructo que nucleia as elaborações de Vigotski em Defectologia e realça a força política dessa premissa que revitaliza a teoria na contemporaneidade, de tal modo a impulsionar a disputa por uma educação pública socialmente projetada, participativa e emancipatória.

**Palavras-chave:** Defectologia. Educação Especial. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

<sup>1</sup> English by version: Ana Luiza Smolka. E-mail: [asmolka@unicamp.br](mailto:asmolka@unicamp.br); Débora Dainez. E-mail: [ddainez@yahoo.com.br](mailto:ddainez@yahoo.com.br).

<sup>2</sup> Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação da Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Campus Sorocaba, Brasil. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8223-098X>. E-mail: [ddainez@ufscar.br](mailto:ddainez@ufscar.br).

<sup>3</sup> Programa de Pós-Graduação da Faculdade de Educação da Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brasil. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2064-3391>. E-mail: [asmolka@unicamp.br](mailto:asmolka@unicamp.br).

## 1 Introduction

The writings of Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) began to arrive and be disseminated in Brazil in the 1980s. It is worth remembering that this was a meaningful historical period, in which the country was undergoing a complex transition scenario, moving from an authoritarian/dictatorial regime to a proposal for greater political participation, consistent with a democratic process. The debates of the Constituent Assembly were beginning amid contradictions, fueling optimism for social change.

Within the academic sphere, there was a growing organization of educators who criticized the educational situation resulting from the reforms established during the civil-military dictatorship. Representative associations and scientific meetings were proposed as a form of struggle in the search for a public, secular, free, democratic and high-quality social education, as a right for all and a duty of the State (FRIGOTTO, 2005; SAVIANI, 2011; BOLLMANN, 2010).

More specifically regarding special education, in 1985 the book “The Struggle for the Education of the Mentally Disabled in Brazil” was published, written by pedagogue and historian Gilberta Sampaio de Martino Jannuzzi. Based on historical-dialectical materialism and Gramsci’s studies, the author analyzed the situation of people with disabilities when they are deprived of civil, political and social rights, highlighting the silencing that has existed for a long period in history, to the point where there are no records of these people, the forms and the place of educational care. She also addressed the concept of disability that was based on the dichotomy between normal and pathological, subordinating pedagogical processes to medical knowledge and promoting the classification of so-called abnormal individuals as useful/functional to capitalist society.

By historically analyzing the conditions and clarifying the contradictions that permeated the recognition of the educability of people with disabilities in the history of Brazilian education, Jannuzzi's work (1985, 2006) inaugurates a field of

production of critical knowledge in special education and argues that it should be addressed within the scope of general education.

In the specificity of this situation, marked by resistance movements and political dispute, which had a broad front of popular participation and intellectuals committed to social problems and the propagation of knowledge production, Vygotsky's writings found fertile ground for reception and dissemination.

It is worth considering that the first Brazilian editions presented translation problems (PRESTES; TUNES, 2012). However, they played a historical role: access to this author's seminal ideas implied a paradigm shift. The understanding that the principle of signification, that is, sign production, characterizes what is specifically human led to thinking about human development in a way that considered its social nature, situating the role of education in the process.

As for studies on Defectology, they were slow to arrive in Brazil and access was restricted. The full version of the work “Fundamentals of Defectology” translated from Russian into Spanish was made available on a limited basis in the late 1990s. The first texts on “Defectology” translated from Russian into Portuguese were only published after the mid-2000s, namely: “On the issue of the dynamics of child character” (2006), translated by Zoia Prestes; “Defectology and the study of the development and education of abnormal children” (2011), translated by Martha Kohl de Oliveira, Denise Regina Saler and Priscila Nascimento Marques; “Compensatory processes in the development of mentally retarded children” (2018), translated by Priscila Nascimento Marques, Denise Regina Saler and Martha Kohl de Oliveira. A first volume bringing together eight texts on the issues of Defectology with direct translation from Russian was published in 2021 by Zoia Prestes and Elizabeth Tunes.

In the last decade, the publication of texts on Defectology with a first-time direct translation from Russian into Portuguese has increased considerably. Hence the reason for paying greater attention to the author's ideas about disability.

Along with this new condition of production, another important factor to consider is the critical tendency that emerges in relation to special education policies from the perspective of inclusive education, both part of the set of neoliberal counter-reforms of social policies (GARCIA, 2024). In contrast to the limits of the notion of school inclusion, there is a movement in Brazilian research to seek subsidies in Vygotsky's works that anchor the fight for schooling and integral human development of children with disabilities.

Considering the set of historical determinations that lead to the relevance of Vygotsky's studies in the field of special education, it is clear there is a need to advance theoretically, taking into account the political meaning implied in his formulations on disability as a socially attributed condition.

Thus, this article discusses Lev S. Vygotsky's theoretical and methodological assertions on Defectology, developed in the Soviet context, and puts them into perspective in the 21st century. The purpose is to focus on the conceptual core of studies on disability, considering the explanatory principles and the political dimension of his theorizing, which envisions human development and the role of education in this process.

In reading Vygotskian writings, we consider the historical context in which they were produced and the heuristic value of his theses. The power of their statements stands out, reflecting a truly revolutionary scientific position that has not yet been surpassed.

## **2 The status of Defectology: a scientific, societal and human project**

To understand how a thinker innovates his field of research, it is necessary to know the time in which he lived and the conditions of knowledge production. Thus, Vygotsky's historically situated thought is coined as a product of a revolutionary period that aimed to build a socialist society supported by a certain conception of the human as a historical and social being.

Immersed in the specificities of the Russian context, between the years 1917 and 1933, Vygotsky lived the Soviet political experience marked by the chaotic situation of a post-war society, concomitantly mobilized by the

profusion of ideas in the scientific, literary and artistic fields of a generation that sought to break the narrow limits imposed by tsarism under the utopia of the new man (LAMAS, 2022).

By incorporating Marxism as a political and scientific parameter in the creation of a new science of human development (LURIA, 2022), Vygotsky brings the dialectical conception of development and society anchored in an epistemological basis that centralizes the sociopolitical ethos of equality and social justice. The author's project is governed by the commitment to transformative praxis and the emergence of radically new forms of social life (STETSENKO, 2010; 2018).

Although Vygotsky had no party affiliation, he was active as a member of the People's Commissariat for Education/Ministry of Education (Narkompros), working in the supervision of schools – including the special schools – and contributed to the project of a new education based on scientific socialism, together with important representatives of Soviet educational policy, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya (PRESTES, 2010). This political participation had a strong impact on his theoretical-conceptual elaboration on the relationship between education, disability and human development, as well as on his practice at the Institute associated with Moscow University, where he taught children with multiple disabilities.

Vygotsky's (1997) interest in studies on the development of children with disabilities is notable and has been present since the beginning of his activity in the field of education. The theoretical problematization he elaborates about what is specifically human involves the condition of disability.

Contemporary authors such as Gindis (1995), Bottcher; Dammeyer, (2012) and Shuare (2017) highlight Soviet defectology as one of the main investigative domains for Vygotsky to develop focal concepts in his theoretical system, a guiding thread in the political enterprise and scientific investigation of historical-cultural theory. This aspect is emphasized by Vygotskaya and Lifanova (1996) when they indicate the study of disability as central, as it triggers the understanding of the genesis of human development processes.

Nowadays, the term defectology sounds strange and inappropriate due to the negative connotation it carries, as it refers to the idea of a defect. As Stetsenko and Selau (2018) observe, defectology was not a term created by Vygotsky, but he adopted it because, in Russia, this is still the name given to the scientific and practical field related to the development and education of people with disabilities, and even undergraduate courses in Defectology can be found (TUNES, 2022).

By focusing on the educational problems involving special schools at that historical moment, Vygotsky (1997) sought to situate the crisis that permeated defectological science. Seeking to defend the scientific status of such area of knowledge, he contested the traditional approach based on methods that are consistent with a quantitative/comparative analysis of development and a stagnant analysis of disability. He fiercely criticized the biological reductionism that prevailed in the field and led to the understanding of disability as the absence/lack of sensory, motor, linguistic and cognitive organs or functions. From this perspective, defectology dealt with a non-existent phenomenon and, consequently, had no scientific rigor and value. The need arose for a new consideration of the theoretical and methodological foundations of special education.

In view of this, Vygotsky (1997) took on the task of reconstructing defectology as a science, proposing a radical change in the predominant approaches in that historical context. By arguing that it is necessary to conceive the problem of defectology as a social issue, the author shifts the focus from organic insufficiency to the cultural development of personality, proposing an integral vision of the human.

### **3 A new proposal for research and intervention in disability studies**

Vygotsky's studies on defectology, as well as his work of intervention with children with disabilities – physical, auditory, visual, intellectual – permeated his academic production since 1924 (VYGOSKAYA, 2022). The six volumes of the “*Obras Escogidas*” include on their final pages a chronological

index of the articles that make up the collection, indicating their respective publication dates in Russian.

Volume III of the “*Obras Escogidas*” contains a set of texts written in 1931, which make up the “History of the development of higher psychic functions”. Chapter V of the set, “The genesis of higher psychic functions”, expands on the outline presented in the 1929 manuscript, “Essay on Concrete Psychology”, and explains the argument around what we can call the hard core of Vygotskian theory.

In this text – a condensed version of his theoretical elaborations – Vygotsky questions the preformist assumptions of human nature, problematizes the notion of linear, standardized development; proposes child development as an object of study and expresses concern about the method of investigation. Reiterating the emphasis on historical movement and defending a dialectical view, he speaks of the importance of knowing the genesis of processes, while inquiring about the specificities of human behavior, the development and functioning of the brain, and points to the crucial, revolutionary changes, the involutions and the qualitative leaps that occur in the cultural development of the child.

By explaining the foundations of the theoretical perspective assumed in the weaving of several argumentative threads, Vygotsky brings the *sociogenesis of the higher forms of behavior*, arguing that “All higher psychic functions are internalized relations of social order, they are the foundation of the social structure of personality” (VYGOTSKY, 1981, s/p; VYGOTSKI, 1995, p. 151).

To support this thesis, he discusses the importance of speech in human development, resuming his discussions with Jean Piaget and demonstrating how language, initially a means of communication with others, becomes a means of internal reflection. In this process, Vygotsky (1981, 1995) emphasizes the *principle of signification*, seeking to explain the emergence of the sign at the level of ontogenesis through the interpretation/transformation of the child's movement (of trying to reach an object) into an indicative gesture for the other. When formulating the *genetic law of cultural development*, Vygotsky



(1981, 1995) highlights the function of mediation – of the other and of the sign – in the social formation of personality.

It is in these discussions that the author (1981, 1995) situates the relevance of intervention and research work in the context of special education, defending the historical-genetic or genetic-experimental method in studies of the processes of internalization of social practices, and highlighting the fundamental importance of socially produced conditions and resources in educational work with children who present limitations of a biological nature. His effort is to demonstrate how the child's cultural experience integrates the development of psychic functions (VYGOTSKI, 1981, 1995, 1997).

Thus, while questioning and problematizing the characteristics generally identified in the conditions of disability as impeding development – organic insufficiency of the brain, lack of will, insurmountable difficulties in controlling behavior, rigidity in personality development – in a summary, Vygotsky (1995) presents four postulates that anchor his investigative work:

- recognition of the natural basis of cultural forms of behavior, which means assuming that there is a diversity of human conditions, some marked by damage to the organic base;
- in these conditions considered adverse, it is still possible to create socially proposed collateral pathways with completely new possibilities for development;
- the structural basis of cultural forms of behavior is a mediated/mediating activity, the use of external signs created and made available by adults in the cultural environment as a means for the further development of the child's behavior;
- in these conditions, the social construction of will, of mastery of behavior, of self-mastery is possible, as a result of the experience in social relationships.

The set of these premises, present in the “History of the development of higher psychic functions”, generated the following formulation in the condensed text of “The social formation of the mind”, which remained obscure



and provocative for several years, due to lack of access and more comprehensive knowledge of the author's complete works: "There are reasons to believe that voluntary activity, more than highly developed intellect, differentiates human beings from phylogenetically closer animals" (VYGOTSKY, 1984, p. 42).

An effort to explicate this issue in an argumentative manner becomes accessible in the translation of the text on "The Problem of Mental Retardation"<sup>4</sup> into Spanish, which is part of the *Obras Escogidas* (1997) and the Cuban collection of Complete Works (1989). This text, one of the last written by Vygotsky in 1934, is significant for its attempt to articulate some topics that were the object of concern in the final period of his life: the unity of affection and intellect, the problem of will and freedom (ZAVERSHNEVA; VAN DER VEER, 2018). Studying and reflecting on the human condition of disability through the prism of these issues was an extremely challenging task.

By assuming the principle of the systemic organization of consciousness in intense dialogue with Kurt Lewin's field theory, Vygotsky (1997) argued about the relevance and importance of shifting the focus from intellectualist theories of disability to the forms of social constitution of personality. It is worth remembering that the author had been conducting studies on the status and development of emotions in the human psyche, whose collection of texts would only be published posthumously (VYGOTSKY, 1998).

The experimental studies of voluntary behavior carried out by Lewin with children considered normal and others who presented disorders provided fundamental support for Vygotskian reflections. The investigations into psychic

---

<sup>4</sup> There is no direct translation of this text from Russian to Portuguese available until 2025. A partial translation of it into English, "The problem of mental retardation (a tentative working hypothesis)", became available in 1987, in volume 26, no. 1, of the "Soviet Psychology" journal, pp. 78-85. The translation is incomplete, full of ellipses and with no indication of the translator. The text is followed, in the same issue of the Journal, by the complete translation of "Diagnosis of the development and pedagogical clinical care of difficult children", pp. 86-101, also with no indication of the translator. A translation of Volume V of the Complete Works of the Cuban version, made by the Program for Actions Relating to People with Special Needs, in Cascavel, Paraná, was made available in PDF, online, in 2022, and counted on the resources of MEC/SESU/UNIOESTE.

saturation and unsatisfied needs, as well as the effects of interrupted actions and substitute actions, provided a consistent empirical basis for the discussions between the two authors on the affect-intellect relationship.

Lewin's research revealed particularities in the affective sphere of children with disabilities when performing the proposed tasks. However, his conclusions reiterated the characteristics commonly attributed to the conditions of disability: rigidity of the psychic system, difficulty in abstraction, lack of imagination, etc. Despite acknowledging the affective dynamics, Lewin examined affection outside of the link with psychic life as a whole and apart from the conditions of development; thus, in reacting to intellectualist theories, he slipped into voluntarism, without explaining the conditions for the emergence of voluntary activity in children.

Vygotsky (1997) valued Lewin's contributions but pointed out the limits of his theorizing. Drawing attention to the different ways of interpreting and qualifying children's actions and reactions, he pondered the negative and positive characteristics of the psychic material and the psychic system of children with disabilities, asking how to clarify the specific differences in the study of the personality structure of children with intellectual disabilities. And he focused on the contradictions:

The slowness of the psychic systems in the retarded child can lead, under certain circumstances, to the replacement function manifesting itself not more weakly, but more intensely than in the normal child (VIGOTSKI, 1997, p. 257).

By taking the dynamic field theory as a reference, modifying the experiments of saturation, interruption and replacement of children's activity, Vygotsky (1997) discussed how the two *units of dynamic functions* – thought and action – interacted in a concrete situation; how the dynamics of action transformed into the dynamics of thought and vice-versa. His analyses led him to conclude that “action refracted through the prism of thought transforms into another action

*attributed with meaning*, conscious and, therefore, voluntary and free”<sup>5</sup> (VYGOTSKI, 1997, p. 267, our emphasis). This implies that thought interwoven with language, that is, the verbal form of thinking, originating in social relations, enables forms of orientation and regulation of human (inter)actions and (oper)actions. This interfunctional dynamism only becomes viable in the historical and social conditions of human development, and only a dialectical analysis of such development can give visibility to the dynamics of this movement.

The detailed study of Lewin's dynamic theory, the analytical refinement of the empirical records in dialogue with the results of the research carried out by his colleague and the concomitant search for greater consistency and theoretical-methodological depth from the perspective of historical-dialectical materialism provided the conditions for Vygotsky's reformulations regarding the ways of conceiving the interrelations of psychic functions and the plasticity of brain functioning affected by meaning and historically developed forms of language. The principle of semantic structuring and the urgency of a semiotic analysis of consciousness became more clearly outlined (ZAVERSHNEVA, 2016), issues that did also become focused on his elaborations of “Thought and Word”, the last chapter of “The Construction of Thought and Language”, also published in 1934. It was a time when the concept of *perezhivanie* was potentially configured as a theoretical construct, as a possible unit of analysis that condensed multiple meanings of the conditions and contradictions experienced by the child, as argued in “The Seven-Year-Old Crisis” (VYGOTSKI, 1996).

---

<sup>5</sup> We find more elements on the issue of freedom in chapters 12 and 13 of Volume III of *Obras Escogidas* (1995), in which Vygotsky discusses the *Mastery of One's Own Conduct* and the *Education of Higher Forms of Conduct*, respectively, in which he dialogues with Spinoza, Hegel, Marx and Engels, Lewin, among other authors. He quotes Engels when he says that “freedom consists fundamentally in knowing the needs of nature, in knowing how to master both our own nature and the external; for this reason, it is an indispensable product of historical development.” (ENGELS, apud VYGOTSKI, 1995, p.300). Toassa (2004) contributes to the understanding of the concept of freedom in Vygotsky, pointing to the centrality of language, contextualizing Spinoza's idea of “free necessity”, highlighting the participation of imagination in creative activity, and commenting on the implications of these ideas on the relations and working conditions in capitalist society.

The articulated readings and studies of Vygotsky's various texts, bringing together his concerns around the constitution of the human, the formation of personality and the issue of consciousness, make it possible to understand his statement that

*the unity of dynamic semantic systems, the unity of affection and intellect*, constitutes the fundamental thesis on which – as if it were a cornerstone – the theory about the nature of congenital mental deficiency in childhood must be built. (VYGOTSKI, 1997, p. 271, our emphasis).

In other words, the *meaning of the activity* for children becomes central and deserves to be (re)cognized. The implications of this thesis lead us directly to the problems of education. As Vygotsky admits, “the transformation of natural material into historical form is always a complex process of changing the type of development itself, and not a simple organic transition” (VYGOTSKI, 1995, p. 310). Thus, history and culture support and enable new ways of conceiving and transforming the human condition of disability, of working with the processes of humanization of each and every person. The *cultural development* point of view presupposes a true revolution in educational principles, especially with regard to the education of children with disabilities, since access to historically produced technical and semiotic resources and instruments will provide new conditions for the constitution of personality due to the possibilities of appropriation of means and forms of mediation in the cultural environment: “Cultural development is the most important sphere from which it is possible to compensate for the deficiency. There, where organic development is impossible, there are infinite possibilities for cultural development” (VYGOTSKI, 1995, p. 313).

#### **4 Social education as a political project from a historical-cultural perspective**

The notion of *social education* as a concept that governs Vygotskian elaboration has not been privileged and valued in contemporary studies. In Brazil, few works (BARROCO, 2007; BARROCO, 2011; DAINEZ; FREITAS,

2018; SOUZA; DAINEZ, 2022) highlight and address this aspect in Vygotsky's production. *Social education* still lacks understanding within the scope of this approach.

One of the reasons inherent to this issue has to do with the way Vygotsky adopts the notion, namely as a presupposition in the elaboration of his theoretical system. Although it is present in several passages of his texts and permeates the work, especially the writings of “Pedagogical Psychology” and “Defectology”, the concept remains subliminal. The author assumes the principles of social education in such a way as to leave them implicit in his general formulations about the status of education in human development, as well as in the propositions concerning the organization of the school and its social function. But after all, what *education is not social*? What characterizes or specifies *social education* as a theoretical construct?

In addition to the new translations and publications of Vygotsky's original texts, today we have the translation of the work “The Construction of Socialist Pedagogy” by Nadezhda Krupskaya (FREITAS; CALDART, 2017) and “Fundamentals of Social Education” by Viktor N. Shulgin (2022), with translations by Luiz Carlos de Freitas and Natalya Pavlova. These readings help to anchor and deepen social education as a theoretical construct, to understand its genesis and the close relationship with the educational policy of the Soviet school. Both Krupskaya and Shulgin develop the concept of social education while occupying management positions of public educational policies in the movement to implement a new social model. And Vygotsky adopts this concept, politically engaged as a member of the People's Commissariat for Education. Therefore, embracing social education as a theoretical construct brings together the strength of political experience.

It is in the text “The socialist remaking of the human being” (1930), translated from Russian to Portuguese and recently published in the collection “Psychology, human development and Marxism”, organized by Gisele Toassa and Priscila Marques, that Vygotsky (2022) explains and expands the

arguments on how the principles of Marxist social education resonate and support the postulates of the historical-cultural theory of human development.

By assuming that the survival and natural selection mechanisms of the species *homo sapiens* are subordinated to the new laws, and at the same time, begin to guide the course of human history, capturing the material and ideological development of society, Vygotsky (2022) highlights the social class structure and determines aspects of the constitution of personality. According to him,

the formulation of the human type has a class character, a class nature and class distinctions. The internal contradiction of this type of structure is also expressed in the constitution of the personality, in the structure of the human psyche of a given era (VYGOTSKY, 2022, p. 163).

The author adds Karl Marx's contribution to his thinking about how the capitalist mode of production leads to the disintegration of human nature and hinders development. With the social division of labor and the separation of the physical and intellectual dimensions implied therein, there is a unilateral formation of the human personality, that is, of isolated and fragmented capacities. However, contradictorily according to him, the production needs that emerge from the mismatch between the growth of productive forces and the non-corresponding social organization require individuals capable of changing the forms of work, of planning, organizing and directing the production process. This would be the remaking of the human, which requires a new form of organization of the modes of production and social relations.

He argues that

Education plays a central role in the remaking of human beings. It is the path to the conscious social formation of new generations, the main way of replacing a historical type of human. New generations and new ways of educating them are the main road along which history passes, creating a new type of person. In this sense, the role of political and polytechnic education is absolutely exceptional (VYGOTSKY, 2023, p. 171).

Vygotsky (2022) highlights work as a creative human activity that allows the individual to transform the environment and develop in the process, generating unlimited possibilities for development. Considering the role that education plays in the conscious social formation of personality, the author postulates the intrinsic relationship between work and the teaching-learning process. He enunciates a new form of education that integrates physical and intellectual work.

According to Vygotsky (2022), based on the social and historical meaning of work, polytechnic education consists of the accumulated knowledge of scientific principles and practical activity. The inseparability between science and technology is assumed to be inherent to this conception, which allows ensuring the historical essence of the knowledge it produces in the face of demands and needs of social practice.

In the text “Psychological approach to education through work”, which is part of the book “Pedagogical Psychology”, Vygotsky (2004) argues that, in the proposal of social education, work is not an object of teaching, nor is it characterized as a methodology/means of learning: work is understood as a principle/foundation of the educational process, which is oriented towards the prospect of development, that is, it “makes the child advance in the knowledge of history” (VYGOTSKI, 2004, p. 251).

With this, the author makes meaningful statements about teaching:

To understand the pedagogical meaning of this, it is necessary to remember that education through work introduces entirely new educational didactic procedures. The old so-called akramatic method of simply transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the student, as well as the erothematic method, that is, the joint discovery of knowledge by the teacher and the student through questions, as well as the heuristic method, that is, the search for knowledge by the students themselves, do not, in general terms, encompass the didactic essence of education through work. All of them presuppose the existence of a final meaning of knowledge not in the student, but in the educator who guides him and therefore differ in principle from education through work, in which the meaning of knowledge and its final goal to which this education should reach are passed on to the student himself in the form of the production where he begins (VYGOTSKY, 2004, p.264).



Since knowledge of nature occurs through work via processes of transformation of the dialectical relationship between human beings and the environment, its systematization into school knowledge requires conscious work. To this end, children must actively participate in teaching relationships and activities, following the entire production process, that is, the social attribution of meaning, and thus be intentionally led to the systematization of school knowledge. Human creative work is a source of development and occurs via social relationships in which human actions are organized and regulated so that “they can integrate as a component part the general fabric of collective behavior” (VIGOTSKI, 2004, p.262).

For teaching to have justification and meaning, and for knowledge to carry social value, with education assuming the role of constitutive mediation in human development, the school must be related to the concreteness of life, capable of establishing new bonds of participation of each person in the community. The social function of the school consists of promoting the integral formation and cultural development of the personality in order to form active participants engaged in a project of collective construction.

Vygotsky (1997, 2021) argued that advances in the field of general education under this approach should reach special education, which carried a naturalist, welfare-based, philanthropic, and segregating tradition. He called for attention to special education in the revolutionary context, arguing for the urgency of situating this problem socially. Educational work with children with disabilities lacked a link, in its theoretical and practical dimensions, to the general bases of social education and the Soviet public education system.

The author criticized the special schools of his time which, “instead of removing the child from an isolated world, tend to develop habits that lead to greater isolation, accentuating their separation”, and “creates special positions for the defective child, even after they leave school” (VIGOTSKI, 2021, p. 28-29).

Regarding the postulate of social education, the author argues that “special pedagogy must be diluted in the child’s general activity” (VYGOTSKY, 2021, p.39). This means creating a synthesis between the general laws of development and their specific manifestations. In this sense, the task of pedagogy “is to ensure that the change in the social connection with life takes another path” (VYGOTSKY, 2021, p.30). In other words, it consists of overcoming social displacements that may occur due to the non-coincidence between the biological and cultural lines of development.

Pedagogical work is oriented beyond disability. Aiming to promote the integral formation of the personality, it focuses the person on the educational action and locates their development in the imminence of new processes, freeing them from the situation of social invalidity and introducing them into the process of social development.

Thus, Vygotsky (1997, 2021, 2024) presents proposals on how to overcome the limiting consequences circumscribed by the social situation marked by the fatalistic conception of disability. In his considerations, the organizational elements of a teaching based on collectivity and the argument about the importance of creating mediators stand out, in order to enable the appropriation of knowledge and the mastery of the means to expand the struggle for existence of each individual as a cultural being.

We highlight the political force implied in the construct of social education, which revitalizes historical-cultural theory in contemporary times. By allowing us to understand the complex relationships between human development processes and the possibilities of social change, it provokes the critical production of knowledge, which involves the field of studies on disability and drives the continuation of the struggle for a socially designed, participatory and emancipatory public education.

## **5 Final considerations**

As we celebrate one hundred years of Vygotsky's studies on defectology, we put into perspective what we know about his work, his ideas, his arguments, his

theoretical positioning, his engagement in educational and investigative practice, and his political commitment.

The theoretical system of scientific knowledge of the general laws of human development that he developed encompasses the analysis of conditions of disability. His legacy provided a scientific turning point in the field of defectology in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continues to be a source of inspiration, provocation and scientific basis. It is not about equalizing people's needs and standardizing the channels of humanization, but about working to transform concrete conditions – policies and practices – which will allow for all people, including people with disabilities, to effectively participate in the processes, means and modes of production in society, so as to foster the development of critical consciousness in the tireless struggle for the collective appropriation of knowledge and values, in the movement of the production of existence itself. The school institution is an important locus of this production.

Far from designating a specialized educational program for people with disabilities, Vygotsky brings elements that are consistent with the transformative action of education and the forms of organizing teaching in the school environment. To this end, he puts into perspective a broad social action and an educational praxis in which the following Vygotskian premise is considered: regardless of the specificities of the human organism, processes of cultural development become possible in each person, in a society in which class conflicts are overcome. This utopia, when presented as a guide for actions in the process of humanization, constitutes a radical argument that resonates with strong implications for designing public educational policies in contemporary times.

## La dimensión política de los estudios em defectología por Lev S. Vygotski: revisando concepciones y formulaciones

### RESUMEN

El artículo analiza las afirmaciones teórico-metodológicas de L. S. Vygotsky sobre la Defectología y las pone en perspectiva en el siglo XXI. El objetivo es centrarse en el núcleo conceptual de los estudios sobre discapacidad, considerando los principios explicativos y la dimensión política de su teorización que vislumbra prospectivamente el desarrollo humano y el papel de la educación en este proceso. A partir de un estudio teórico, se centra en los escritos vygotskianos, situando el contexto histórico de su producción y destacando el valor heurístico de sus tesis. Se analiza la nueva propuesta de investigación e intervención que emerge en la teoría histórico-cultural respecto a la educación y desarrollo de la persona con discapacidad. A partir de ello, la educación social se hace evidente como un constructo que nuclea las elaboraciones de Vygotsky en la Defectología y resalta la fuerza política de esta premisa que revitaliza la teoría en la contemporaneidad, de tal modo de impulsar la disputa por un diseño social, participativo y emancipador.

**Palabras clave:** Defectología. Educación especial. Teoría histórico-cultural.

### 6 Referências

BOLLMANN, M. G. N. Revendo o plano nacional de educação: proposta da sociedade brasileira. *Educação & Sociedade*, v. 31, n.112, p.657-676, 2010.

BARROCO, S. M. S. *A Educação Especial do Novo Homem Soviético e a Psicologia de L. S. Vigotski: implicações e contribuições para a Psicologia e a Educação atuais*. Tese de doutorado, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação Escolar, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Araraquara, 2007.

BARROCO, S. M. S. Pedagogia Histórico-crítica, Psicologia Histórico-cultural e Educação Especial: em defesa do desenvolvimento da pessoa com e sem deficiência. In: MARSIGLIA, A. C. G. (org.). *Pedagogia histórico-crítica: 30 anos*. Campinas: Autores Associados, 2011. p. 169-194.

BOTTCHER, L.; DAMMEYER, J. Disability as a dialectical concept: building on Vygotsky's defectology. *European Journal of Special Needs Educations*, London, p.01-14, 2012.

DAINEZ, D.; FREITAS, A. P. de. Concepção de educação social em Vigotski: apontamentos para o processo de escolarização de crianças com deficiência. *Horizontes*, Itatiba, v. 36, n. 3, p. 145-156, 2018.

DAINEZ, D.; SMOLKA, A. L. A função social da escola em discussão, sob a perspectiva da educação inclusiva. *Educação e Pesquisa*, São Paulo, v. 45, p. 1- 18, 2019.

FREITAS, L. C.; CALDART, R. S. N. K. Krupskaya. *A construção da pedagogia socialista (escritos selecionados)*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2017.

FRIGOTTO, G. Escola pública brasileira na atualidade: lições da história. In.: LOMBARD, J. C.; SAVIANI, D.; NASCIMENTO, M. I. M. (Orgs.). *A escola pública no Brasil: História e Historiografia*. Campinas, SP: Autores Associados, 2005, p.221-254.

GINDIS, B. The social/cultural implication of disability: Vygotsky's paradigm for special education. *Educational Psychologist*, v.30, n.2, p.77-81, 1995.

JANNUZZI, G. de M. *A luta pela educação do deficiente mental no Brasil*. São Paulo, SP: Cortez: Autores Associados, 1985.

JANNUZZI, G. de M. *A educação do deficiente no Brasil: dos primórdios ao início do século XXI*. Campinas, SP: Autores Associados, 2. ed., 2006.

LAMAS, F. G. Panorama da cultura e da ciência nos primeiros anos da experiência soviética na Rússia (1917-1933). In.: COSTA, B. M. F.; LOPES, J. J. M.; PEREIRA, L. M. (Orgs.). *A ciência romântica de Luria: contextos de uma época e estudos contemporâneos*. São Carlos: Pedro & João Editores, 2022, p. 23-42.

LURIA, A. R. Sobre Lev Semionovitch Vigotski. Discurso proferido por Aleksandr Romanovitch Luria na reunião em homenagem a L. S. Vigotski, em 6 de janeiro de 1935. In.: COSTA, B.M.F.; LOPES, J. J. M.; PEREIRA, L. M. (Orgs.). *A ciência romântica de Luria: contextos de uma época e estudos contemporâneos*. São Carlos: Pedro & João Editores, 2022, p. 117-122.

PRESTES, Z. Guita Lvovna Vigodskaja (1925-2010), filha de Vigotski: entrevista. *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, São Paulo, v. 40, n. 141, p. 1025-1033, 2010. <https://publicacoes.fcc.org.br/cp/article/view/159>.

PRESTES, Z.; TUNES, E. A trajetória de obras de Vigotski: um logo percurso até os originais. *Estudos de Psicologia*, Campinas, v. 29, n.3, p. 327-340, 2012.

SAVIANI, D. *A nova lei da educação: trajetória, limites e perspectivas*. Campinas: Autores Associados, ed.12, 2011.

SHULGIN, V. N. *Fundamentos da Educação Social*. Traduzido por Natalya Pavlova e Luiz Carlos de Freitas. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2022.

SHUARE, M. *A psicologia soviética: meu olhar*. São Paulo: Terracota, 2017.

SOUZA, F. F.; DAINEZ, D. Defectologia e educação escolar: implicações no campo dos direitos humanos. *Educação & Realidade*, v.47, p.1-18, 2022.

STETSENKO, A. Teaching-learning and development as activist projects of historical becoming: expanding Vygotsky's approach to pedagogy. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, New York, v. 5, n. 1, p. 6-16, 2010.

STETSENKO, A.; SELAU, B. A abordagem de Vygotsky em relação à deficiência no contexto dos debates e desafios contemporâneos: mapeando os próximos passos. *Educação*, Porto Alegre, v. 41, n.3, p. 315-324, 2018.

STETSENKO, A. Research and activist projects of resistance: the ethical-political foundations for a transformative ethico-onto-epistemology. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, v.26, 2020.

TOASSA, G. O conceito de liberdade em Vigotski. *Psicologia, Ciência e Profissão*. Brasília, v, 24, n. 3, p. 2-11, 2004.

TUNES, E. Entrevista. A revolucionária concepção de deficiência da Teoria Histórico-Cultural de Vigotski. In.: ABREU, F. S.D.; PAOLI, J.; MIRANDA, M.A.B.A.; LIMA, M.S.M. (Orgs.). *Diversidade e Inclusão: o que a teoria histórico-cultural tem a contribuir?* Curitiba: CRV, p. 2022, p.25-32.

VIGOTSKI, L. S. *Psicologia Pedagógica*. 2 ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2004.

VIGOTSKI, L. Sobre a questão da dinâmica do caráter infantil. (Tradução Zoia Prestes). *Linhas Críticas*, Brasília, v. 12, n. 23, 2006. <http://seer.bce.unb.br/index.php/linhascriticas/article/view/1615>.

VIGOTSKI, L. S. A defectologia e o estudo do desenvolvimento e da educação da criança anormal. (Tradução Denise Regina Saler, Marta Kohl de Oliveira e Priscila Nascimento Marques). *Educação e Pesquisa*, v. 37, n.4, p. 863-869, 2011.

VIGOTSKI, L. S. Princípios da educação de crianças fisicamente defectivas. In.: PRESTES, Z.; TUNES, E. (Orgs.). *Problemas da Defectologia*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2021, p. 27-50.

VIGOTSKI, L. S. O refazimento socialista do ser humano. In.: TOASSA, G.; MARQUES, P. (Orgs). *Psicologia, desenvolvimento humano e marxismo*. São Paulo: Hogrefe, 2023, p. 161-176.

VYGODSKAIA, G.; LIFANOVA, T. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 1996.

VYGOTSKI, L. S. *Problemas del desarrollo de la psique*. Obras Escogidas, v.III. Madrid: Visor Distribuciones, S.A., 1995.

VYGOTSKI, L. S. *Problemas de Psicología Infantil*. Obras Escogidas, v.IV. Madrid: Visor Distribuciones, S.A., 1996

VYGOTSKI, L. S. *Fundamentos de Defectologia*. Obras Escogidas, v.V. Madrid: Visor Distribuciones, S.A., 1997

VYGOTSKI, L. S. *Fundamentos de defectologia*. Obras Completas. La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1998.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. *Théorie des émotions*. Traduzido do Russo por Nicolas Zavialoff e Christian Saunier. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. The problem of mental retardation (a tentative working hypothesis). *Soviet Psychology*, v. 26, n. 1, p. 78-85, 1987.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. Diagnosis of the development and pedagogical clinical care of difficult children. *Soviet Psychology*, v. 26, n. 1, p. 86-101, 1987.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. The genesis of higher mental functions. In: J.V. Wertsch, (Editor, Translator). *The concept of activity in Soviet Psychology*, 1981.

ZAVERSHNEVA, Y. “El camino a la libertad”: Vygotski en 1932. In: YASNITSKY, A.; VAN DER VEER, R.; AGUILAR, E.; GARCIA, L.N. (Eds). *Vygotski revisitado: Una historia crítica de su context y legado*. Buenos Aires: Mino y Dávila, 2016.

ZAVERSHNEVA, E.; VAN DER VEER, R. *Vygotsky's notebooks: A selection*. Singapore: Springer, 2018.

Received in February 2025.

Aproves in March 2025.