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Otherness, Culture, and School Inclusiveness: Rethinking Deficiencies

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"Porque a vida, a vida, a vida, a vida só é possível reinventada".
(Because life, life, life, life is only possible reinvented.)

Cecília Meireles

Introduction

One of the most important issues under discussion in current-day sociology and psychology is the constant thinking and rethinking on the role of sociocultural context and its multiple relations with the "different" (the so-called "intellectually deficient.") To reflect on this Other, in the sense of otherness, we will return to the assumptions, conceptualizations, and epistemological roots of what we now conventionally deign "normal" and "pathological." Based on these foundations, we will analyze the representations and consequences for current-day developmental psychology, Cognition, and Inclusive Education.

More specifically, in this article we will take as a reference point Durkheim's (1983) basic assumptions on conceptualizations on this topic, given that they continue to influence the view and the interventions that professionals in psychology and education maintain about the different and the exceptional, based on the situation we researched. These assumptions will be considered alongside theoretical-methodological propositions by other authors, such as Vygotsky (1993, 2001), Canguilhem (1993), Meira (2001, 2003), and Mcdemott (1996), which are pertinent to our own approach.

We will divide this article into three main topics: (1) The Normal and the Pathological in Durkheim; (2) Soviet Defectology, Normality, and Pathology: a new look; (3) Soviet Defectology, Language, ZPD, and Special Education: overlaps. In the first topic, we will spell out the criteria Durkheim establishes to conceptualize normality and pathology. In the second, we will analyze the contribution of socioculturalists/ neuroscientists, both classical (Sacks, 2001, and Fonseca, 2002) and contemporary (Mcdermott, 1996). In the third, we will investigate the implications of these authors' thinking for the educational environment in which we include the so- called "intellectually deficient," "cognitively incapable," with "developmental delays" (concepts that often emerge in teachers' speech).

Guided by the objectives outlined above, it is important to make clear that investigating conceptualizations regarding normality and pathology requires understanding the multiple dialogues with the field of culture and subjectivity. Throughout human history, the diverse forms of intellectual deficiency have always been subject to judgments of a moral nature. In this sense, deficiencies are inseparable from what Fonseca (2000) calls "cultural relativity," that is, an obscure, tenuous, confusing way of excluding undesirables from the social order. In the Middle Ages, for instance, we see the prevalence of the conception of deficiencies as connected to the religious-mystical realm, whose representational images connect the figure of the person with deficiency with demonic possession, sin, and divine punishment. Within this context, "deformities" and "anomalies" were seen as breaks with the sacred, generating what people labeled "social disorder" and thus the object of efficient actions to cleanse the environment through exclusion/ banishment of these undesirables from society. Later, in the XVI century, with the contributions of Paracelsus and Cardano to medicine, we see the arrival of another type of discourse in the sociocultural environment: the medical discourse, whose intent was to raise the "deficient" subject to another representational level, distinct from the mystical-religious discourse; as such, intellectual deficiency is now seen through the medical prism and becomes a *disease*.

The disconnection of intellectual deficiency from the field of *demonology*, and its association to an organic, biological model transforms the phenomenon–intellectual deficiency becomes a fact which is susceptible to investigation using the logic of scientific though. Those "affected" would now be

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perceived as *patients* that should be treated with the objective of reaching their functional recovery and their social inclusion. However, despite these supposed advances that mental deficiency achieved through the medical focus, we must not be naïve and ignore what happens in the background of these propositions, in which there is an emphasis on concepts of "deficiency" and "mental illness" which prioritize their endogenous nature, ignoring the values and meanings constructed within and inherent to sociocultural reality.

The XVI, XVII, and XVIII centuries are thus characterized by the primacy of the clinical foci of psychiatry about the so-called "mad," "insane," "intellectually deficient," and "maturity delayed" (Foucault, 1991). In this sense, the history of intellectual deficiency seems to show us that, more than the existence of subjects who deviate from normality (which is, in itself, a discourse), this history is one of constant appropriation by an order (psychiatric, psychometric, pedagogical, sociopolitical, and cognitive) of the object of "mental deficiency," which is reinstated every step of the way.

In the XVIII and XIX centuries, a relevant change will take place in this socio- historical context, since the "deviants" are now the object of another discourse: the sociological. Sociology, specifically the Durkheimian variety, has something to say on the nosography, taxonomy, and categorization of the so-called socially "normal" and "abnormal." This is because sociology does, in fact, move away from the merely ontological criteria of normality and abnormality brought about by psychiatry andexpands its horizons: it studies the triadic relationship individual-collective-normality. Let us recall the assumptions that found these conceptualizations, using Durkheim's classic text *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1983) as our reference.

I. The Normal and the Pathological in Durkheim

Durkheim defined sociology as the science of social facts and institutions. Social facts are analyzed in their capacity of acting as coercive forces in determining human conduct–in other words, in terms of social control. His ideas on collective consciousness, despite the variations present therein, called attention to the ways in which social interactions and relationships influence significantly in individual attitudes, ideas, and feelings. In this framework, language is also seen as a social fact. It is seen as a system of signs and symbols that circulate in society and impose their power on individuals. However, it is not merely an external expression of thought; it is itself internalized. Furthermore, language does not only express thoughts; it also creates them. A fundamental aspect of this assumption is that language helps shape individuals' social environment–at school, for instance–imposing on said individual an irresistible pressure. This conceptualization of language as a social fact corresponds to the static view of collective representations, and, as Marková (2006, p. 179) points out, in this theoretical approach "(…) social facts are facts of collective solipsism and the collective monologue. They act as impersonal repressors of the individual and do not allow dialogue between the individual and society."

In a more vertical perspective, we can see that this author's work was influenced by certain doctrines, such as evolutionism. This doctrine appears in his theory of growth of a mechanical society towards an organic one, based on the assumption of necessary stages towards social organization, holding the view that contemporary primitive societies represent earlier periods of evolutionary development.

The treatment Durkheim gave social facts and the collective consciousness associates sociological truths to fallacious points of view. Thus, it was inevitable that it would fail in many of its interpretations of social phenomena related to individual motivations. Several unintended and undesired phenomena (e.g. economic depressions and wars) require a social interpretation instead of a psychological one, or so it stated. Thus, concomitantly and frequently, especially in discussions about collective consciousness, they reached a degree of sociological realism that seemed to deny the social meaning of volition or individual choice. In this conception, society shapes our actions and expectations, and rewards us to the extent that we play our social roles to the letter. If we try to break out of these, society activates an almost infinite number of controls and coercions.

Despite ignoring the individual in his theoretical propositions, it is undeniable that Durkheim made an important contribution to sociology and psychology, especially when he thinks of society as a *sui generis* phenomenon, representative of a compact, external reality. However, it is our understanding that the individual and society can only be understood via an interactive, dialogical basis, since prioritizing one or the other pole of this relationship inevitably leads to inconsistent, fragmented interpretations. It is worth mentioning, as Valsiner (1989, 1988) observes, that the non-developmental psychological theories have denied this interactive basis (individual↔context), considering them ontologically separate entities. This means that the individual is precariously perceived as a unit, and society as another.

However, in inclusive schools, we understand that teaching and learning are processes of shared construction of meaning through discursive activity which involves all the participants, and the classroom is the specific environment in which this process occurs. It is in the classroom that teacher and students

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intentionally dive into theknowledge previously built, and under construction, by human society. Through dialogical exchanges, they build and reorganize the shared meaning of this knowledge. The construction of knowledge at schools is forged in the interaction between people who share a social context which allows them communicative exchange and who have similar objectives in regard to the primordial purpose of teaching. However, at the same time, they have vastly diverse experiences from the point of view of individual lived experience and knowledge accumulated in their private histories. Thus, school is a social environment which reflects the macrosocial relations, as well as presenting a specific organization which guides the forms of interaction and, therefore, the discourse of its participants.

After succinctly pointing out Durkheim's importance to sociology and psychology, it now behooves us to discuss, in greater detail, the concepts of normality and pathology contained within his theoretical-methodological framework.

II. The Normal and the Pathological in Durkheim

Logical positivism had enormous influence on modern conceptions of pathology (as mentioned in the introduction to this article) since, based on the knowledge achieved by medicine on the health-disease relationship, different theories developed. Comte, for instance, established the positivist conceptual basis for analyses of normality and pathology, inasmuch as he understood that illness and health are governed by similar laws. For this author, *apud* Canguilhem (1995, p. 31):

> *(…) the pathological state is not at all radically different from the physiological state, with regard to which–no matter how one looks at it–it can only constitute a simple extension going more or less beyond the higher or lower limits of variation proper to each phenomenon of the normal organism, without ever being able to produce really new phenomena which would have to a certain degree any purely physiological analogues.*

If Comte established the pillars of this conceptualization, Durkheim (1983, p. 110) built the most complete form of this distinction between normality and pathology. The whole of Durkheimian thinking is based on the fundamental premise that, based on observation, society "mixes up two orders of facts, very dissimilar in certain respects: those that are entirely appropriate and those that should be different from what they are– normal phenomena and pathological phenomena."

These observations lead the author to establish criteria with which to define the two states. To this end, he uses the health-disease opposition, upon which he develops his whole theory. The criterion currently used to determine illness is, according to the author, suffering and pain. However, he finds the criterion insufficient, as he recognizes that certain states of suffering, such as hunger, fatigue, and childbirth, are normal. Another way to think of disease is as that of a perturbance in the adaptation of the organism to its environment. To Durkheim this would seem dubious, to say the least, because, in this case, one would need to establish principles that would define that one determined way of adaptation were more perfect than another. This principle could, however, be established in relation to the possibility of survival, defining the state of health as that in which the possibilities of life are greater, and of illness as the state which would diminish these possibilities. Durkheim questions this conceptualization as well, because a series of phenomena, such as death (necessary in the reproduction of some lower species) and old age cannot be considered pathological.

Similarly, he refutes "(…) deductive reasoning, whose conclusion have no value except as subjective presumptions" (p. 113), which are unable to demonstrate that such a phenomenon effectively "(…) weaken[s] the social organism, but that it *should* have that effect." In his understanding, these procedures led sociology down tortuous pathways, since they bring to the table the personal feelings of the researcher.

How then to distinguish the normal from the pathological? Durkheim believes thatboth biological and sociological phenomena can be reduced to two basic types: those that are common across the species and "(…) are to be found, if not in all, at least most individuals," and, if they "vary from one person to another, their variations are confined within very narrow limits" (p. 114), and the exceptional phenomena which, besides appearing in a minority, often last the whole life of the individual. Based on these two types of basic phenomena, *normal* and *exceptional*, Durkheim (1983, p. 114) establishesan average type, which serves as a generic norm for the species. In reality, the average type is a:

> *(…) hypothetical being which might be constituted by assembling in one entity as a kind of individual abstraction, the most frequently occurring characteristics of the species in their most frequent forms. We may then say that the normal type merges into the average type and that any deviation from this standard of healthiness is a morbid phenomenon.*

After defining the parameter of normality, Durkheim (*ibid.*, p. 118) states that the quality of the phenomenon (normal or pathological) must be considered in relation to its frequency. Thus, he formulates three criteria to distinguish the normal from the pathological:

(1) *A social fact is normal for a given social type, viewed at a given phase of its development, when it occurs in the average society of that species, considered at the corresponding phase of its evolution.*
(2) *The results of the preceding method can be verified by demonstrating that the general character of the*

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phenomenon is related to the general conditions of collective life in the social type under consideration.

(3) *This verification is necessary when this fact relates to a social species which has not yet gone through its complete evolution.*

We can see that current conceptualizations of exceptionality correspond exactly to these Durkheimian rules, even when the school of thought puts on trappings of aconstructivist, vanguard discourse. This is due to the fact that it uses the criteria of deviation from average normality. Secondly, because they refer to the general conditions of collective life–in other words, the need to learn at school and adjust to the established social standards. Finally, because they establish a form for this coercion: inclusion in special education processes. Here we could cite Fonseca (1987), who sharesthe content of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC), which defines the atypical child as *one who deviates from the average normal child in: 1. mental characteristics, 2. sensory aptitude, 3. neuromuscular and corporal characteristics, 4. emotional and social behavior, 5. communication abilities, and 6. multiple deficiencies* to the point that they require modification of educational practices or the creation of special education services in order to develop their capabilities to their maximum.

Through these ideas, the dichotomy between deficiencies-school-society is established: these last two correspond to the general conditions of collective life, and exceptionality is defined by individual deviation. This leads us to conclude that Durkheim was correct to state that his method guides thought and action. To this day, special education seems to be impregnated with his ideas, since it analyzes deviation based on individual characteristics and fails to take into consideration macrosocial aspects.

III. Soviet Defectology, Normality, and Pathology: A New Look

For quite some time, disease, or morbidity, has become commonplace for Sociology and mental pathology, to the extent that it only becomes real and gains value within a given culture, which recognizes it as such. However, this relativity of morbidity is not always clearly explained. This is what happens, for instance, to Durkheim as he tried to explain it through a conception both evolutionary and static. In this sense, a society would consider pathological those phenomena which, as they distance themselves from the norm, marked stages of a previous evolution that had already been overcome, or announced the next phases of a development just begun. In this respect, Durkheim (1983), in his *The Rules for Sociological Method*, defines morbidity based on the establishment of the schematic being, an average type of a species: "…any deviation from that standard of healthiness is a morbid phenomenon." (Durkheim, 1983, p. 114)

Foucault (1978, p. 73) points out that, in Durkheim's conceptualization, disease is viewed as both negative and virtuous:

> *Negative, since it is defined in relation to an average, a norm, a pattern, and in this distance resides the essence of the pathological: disease would be marginal by nature and relative to a culture only to the extent that it is behavior that is not integrated to said society. Virtuous, since the content of the disease is defined by possibilities which are, in and of themselves, non-morbid within their manifestation: to Durkheim, it is the statistic virtuosity of deviance in relation to the average…*

In opposition to this statistical perspective, Foucault (1975, p. 24) does not analyze disease only via its negative aspect; on the contrary, he points out positive aspects that underlie the negative, stating that, "In fact, disease erases, yet underlines; abolishes on one side to exalt the other. The essence of disease is not only in the void it creates, but also in the plenitude of activities that come about to fill said void."

Based on these statements, we see a game of complementarity in which negativity is affirmed in the presence of its contrary, circumscribing its own logic. That is, in returning to earlier phases of evolution, disease abolishes recent acquisitions and rediscovers behavior that had been overcome. Disease thus presents itself not as a "step back," but as a process in which evolutionary structures are unmade. In its most benign forms, there is the dissolution of recent structures and, at the end of the disease or at its greatest extremes, of more archaic structures. To Foucault (1975, 1991), then, disease is not a deficit that radically strikes this or that faculty; there is, within the absurdity of the morbid, a logic which one must "figure out," since it is not ultimately the proper logic of normal evolution. He views pathology or disease not as an essence against the nature of "normality," but as the nature of this normality itself, in an inverted process which forces us to acknowledge that society determines the texture of mental illness and of the mentally ill, based on medical and paramedical analyses, conferring to them, respectively, meaning or abnormality and the status of excluded, different, or insane. Society projects its ills on the illness of the Other and will not accept any vestige of positivity.

Corroborating this perspective and defining its limits to issues concerning learning and development, Vygotsky (1999, 1996) and Mcdermott (1999) are also opposed to theuse of psychometrics as an instrument to measure those who "deviate" from the average as a means of categorizing the "normal" and the "abnormal." It is based on these premises, for example, that Vygotsky himself disagrees with the thesis, popular in his time, that the development of the abnormal child

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obeys its own specific laws; to him, the laws of development should be the same for all children, there being a continuum between the development of these two groups. In this way he points out the primordially social aspects of learning, preparing the way for an educational approach that emphasizes not only pathology, but also the means to develop and improve teaching abilities.

Based on Vygotsky's proposals, we can assure that the child with an intellectual deficiency is now seen through a qualitative perspective, and not simply as a quantitative variation of a normal child (the Durkheimian perspective). To Vygotsky, deficiency would bring about a process of compensation, stimulating the subject towards a (re-)direction Thus, this author's proposals are attached to the so-called *compensatory approach* to education, which takes into consideration not only the gravity of the difficulty, but also the efficiency of the teaching strategy used to help students overcome their limitations. In this understanding of compensatory elements, used in the sociocultural environment, Vygotsky (1996, p. 221) points out that "(…) through experience, the child learns to compensate their natural deficiencies, based on the defective natural behavior; cultural techniques and abilities come about, hiding and making up for the defect. They make it possible to take on an unviable task through the use of new, different pathways." Thus, it would fall to the Soviet Defectology of Vygotsky and his collaborators to study the cycles and transformations in development, the compensatory practices which would allow one to overcome deficiencies, taking as their object of analysis the physical and psychological reactions of the so-called "deficient" person. The uniqueness of the development of the subject categorized as "deficient" would be in the positive effects of the deficiency, in other words, in the pathways traveled to overcome the deficit. In this view, the "deficient" subject is not understood as inferior to his or her peers, but as one who presents a qualitative different, unique development. Corroborating this argument, we defend that the proposal designed by Vygotsky destroys the crystalized, rigid conception of mental deficiency still current in Brazilian special education. This variety of conceptions (limitations, delays, stagnations, and impossibilities) has been established, as we have already analyzed, throughout human history in the social environment, going through transformations as to what we name the so-called "mentally deficient" ("idiot," "imbecile," "retarded"), as well as the means of understanding these subjects ("mad," "possessed by demons," "cognitively incapable"). However, to this day, we see the marks of these concepts and, as discussed by Ferreira (1994), are constantly faced with concepts and impressions of mental deficiency that emphasize the *deficit*, the inability, the impossibility of including the subject in regular school, in society–in life.

Within these propositions, the social environment is seen by Vygotsky as the element which may facilitate or impede the creation of these developmental pathways. The "defect," thus, is not in the individual, nor is the child who has a "defect" necessarily "deficient"–his or her degree of normality is conditioned to the social interactions established by the child throughout his or her existence.

Adjacent to this assumption, Leontiev, as cited by Ferreira (1994), defends the notion of *activity,* which is the relationship the individual establishes with objective reality. However, we point out that the term "activity" implies the nature of a social process and is related to semiotic mechanisms. Leontiev's Theory of Activity postulates that individual action, in and of itself, without insertion in a collective system, loses meaning and cannot be qualified as an object of study for the comprehension of psychological processes.

In this sense, we see that the possibilities of development and learning are broadened when one works with heterogeneity, with activities which are meaningful to the student in his or her relation to the world and, especially, with a conception of deficiency as a motor for change; as a difference and not a "loss," as Vygotsky points out in his *The Fundamental Problems of Defectology*. Corroborating this postulation, Ferreira (1994) explains that "the socio-historical approach to deficiency revolutionizes the concept of deficiency (…), seeking the development of potential, of the compensatory processes brought about by deficiency, emphasizing capacity and not the *deficit*." In the same vein, Vygotsky attempts to transcend a psychology of pathology and abnormality when he defends the premise that compensatory cultural behavior overcomes the defective natural behavior, an idea based on Adler's (*apud* Vygotsky, 1996) conception that we can see the overcoming of grave "defects" in specific organs of the human body. However, we must point out that this process of compensation is singular and *sui generis*, because there may not only be the compensation of "congenital weaknesses," but also the super compensation of these. Examples of this include people who are born with poor hearing becoming musicians, people with deficient vision becoming visual artists, and people with speech impediments becoming public speakers. The basic mechanism of both compensation and supercompensation follow a logical sequence, as Vygotsky himself points out (1996, p. 222):

> *The defect becomes the focal point of the individual's concern, and over it is built a certain "psychological superstructure" which seeks to compensate the natural insufficiency with persistence, an exercise which involves the cultural use of his or her defective function (if it is weak) or of other substitute functions (when completelyabsent). A natural defect organizes the mind in such a way that makes a maximum ofcompensation possible.*

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In this process, as defended by Sacks (2001) and González (2002), there is a focuson the defect and a neuropsychological directing towards it, showing an intermingling of the areas of neuropsychology, Soviet defectology (developmental aspects), and special education. Within these conceptualizations, we see that the position Vygotsky defended–education as a driving element of development and socialization in children– is based on the premise that education should lead students from their current state of development or learning to a future level, qualitatively different, and compatible with the sociohistorical realities of the culture or science of the times. In other words, in his conceptual model, as pointed out by Fonseca (2002), there is a prospective emphasis on the sociohistorical factors of education and development.

Within these proposals, we find a special focus given to teachers, as a fundamental element in the teaching-learning process as they play the role of mediator of the world to the child. This shows up in Vygotsky's second fundamental psychological law, investigated by Davydson and Zinchenko (*apud* Daniels, 1994). Let us refresh our memories these concepts: "(…) any function appears twice on the scene of the cultural development of the child, in two stages: first, the social, and later, the psychological; first among people (…); later, within the child itself." (pp. 162-163) According to these authors, this psychological law is manifest mainly within what Vygostky called "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD).

IV. Soviet Defectology, Language, ZPD and Special Education: Interactions

Vygotsky's thinking, as analyzed above, allows us to understand, in general terms, the foundations proposed by Soviet Defectology regarding the development of subjects with mental deficiencies. In a perspective of greater verticalization, it is possible to see that the concept of ZPD, described by Vygotsky around 1930, is based on the possibility of understanding a large range of assumptions about the social genesis of human beings, especially in regard to the process of internalization, fundamental in the development-learning relation, in games, in children's play, and in social interactions. The general meaning underlying this concept states that a child, at a determined stage of his or her development, can solve a certain range of problems only with the help of adults and, to a point, with the collaboration of more experienced peers. The concept of ZPD is relevant to professionals (such as teachers and psychologists) who study human development with a focus on the process of development, as discussed by Valsiner (2000) in his article titled "The development of the concept of development: Historical and epistemological perspectives," and not necessarily in the products of development. In Vygotsky's view, the concept of ZPD "allows us to outline the child's immediacy and his or her dynamic state of development, allowing access not only to what has already been achieved through development, but also what is in the process of maturing." (*ibid*, p. 113) Similarly, the intent is not to focus simply on the academic performance of "special" children as products of their development (statistical performance indicators), but to focus on the process of the cognitive phenomenon to be investigated in the classroom. We believe the concept of ZPD can provide us with a powerful instrument to understand notions underlying the reality of inclusive education: ideas of inclusivity, virtuousness, diversity, prospection, and potential, which has implications for rethinking educational and psychological practices and models, traditionally based on behavioral models.

However, it is valid to point out, as analyzed by Valsiner (2000) and Meira (2004), that Vygotsky used this concept in different contexts and circumstances, allowing us to identify different meanings attributed by this author to this concept. Thus, Valsiner & Van der Veer (1999) suggest the existence of three possible forms for the development of the concept of ZPD. The first was based on a critique of the traditional method of investigation and measurement of intelligence, via psychometrics (IQ tests) and emphasized the comparative analysis of levels of individual and collaborative performance during the resolution of problems, as pointed out by Meira (2004) in his article "Zones of Proximal Development in science and mathematics classrooms." In this article, Meira (2004) analyzes the trajectory of the construction of the ZPD by Vygostky in three distinct moments: a) First Moment: Emphasis on Individual Development; b) Second Moment: Emphasis on Interaction, and c) Third Moment: Emphasis on Semiotic Mediation.

Referring to the Vygotskyian paradigm, Feuerstein (…) proposes what he calls "Mediated Learning," whose evaluation has as its main objective to explore the subject's potential through a process of active involvement and interaction with an adult or a more experienced peer. In the teacher's case, he or she prepares learning situations and gradually offers the student clues throughout the activities where said student runs into barriers. Thus, the teacher may create alternative pathways for students to advance in academic tasks. This concept was also studied by Fonseca (1995), who presents identification and diagnosis as an early strategy of therapeutic and psychopedagogical intervention, with the objective of apprehending the characteristics of the learningpotential of the child. This process allows one to reflect on the inventory of adaptive acquisitions and capabilities, flexibility, and plasticity of children's competencies.

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It may be important to point out that the ideas of "mediated learning" defended by Feuerstein, and that of "modifiability," proposed by Fonseca, which show up in the discourse of Brazilian educators, reveal a reductionist understanding of ZPD. This happens because, by defining it strictly as a characteristic of the individual, as analyzed by Meira and Lerman (2001), they leave out what emerges from the dialogic relation between the subjects, revealing what is basically an individual vision of the ZPD. To these authors, though based initially on Vygotsky's proposed concept of ZPD, the studies that follow from this foundation end up in opposition to the theoretical- methodological base proposed by Vygotsky, as well as to the ideas put forth in later formulations of the concept of ZPD.

Considering this criticism to the first formulation of the concept of ZPD, and pointing out the importance of considering this concept as both relational and constituted by a process of negotiation of meanings by the relational partners, Meria (*op. cit.*) makes it clear that, in the second formulation of the concept of ZPD, Vygotsky begins to prioritize the socio-interactional aspects of the process of collaboration *per se* over the solution of individual problems. More specifically in relation to this work, Meira (2004) points out the importance of considering the ZPD as an emergent phenomenon in socially diverse contexts of interaction. The notion of symbolic mediation, on the other hand, is associated to the use of mediators–toys, for instance– which lend a symbolic dimension to the activities. In this theoretical perspective, the ZPD is not conceived as a "force field," as something belonging to the child or the adult. On the contrary, the ZPD is defined as a relational construct, a privileged space of negotiation of meaning, built on the engagement of the relational partners in social, dialogical, cultural, and linguistic activity. Thus, in this approach, we see that the ZPD is "(…) a symbolic space which emerges, based on teaching, of various types of dialogical interactions, self-help, play, or fantasy, to bring about social creation of development processes not yet reached." (Meira, *ibid*, p. 5).

In the third and last phase of construction of the ZPD, Vygotsky focuses on the symbolic and discursive aspects of various activities, still connected to international formulations, but definitively distancing itself from comparisons of performance. Meira believes this is the phase of least theoretical elaboration of the concept of ZPD, while "(…) at the same time, that which brings the most original and interesting contributions." (Meira, 2004, p. 13).

In a perspective of verticalization of Meira's contribution (2004, p. 14), we see that he builds a model of analysis of instructional activities and of the interaction among teachers and students in the classroom (such as those carried out in our study) whose conceptual bases show notions of dialogicality and time in the emergence and maintenance of the ZPD as a semiotic-temporal field. To this end, ZPD is conceptualized as "(…) a semiotic field, a symbolic space of signification, in which interaction and communication promote the guided development of learning. In this sense, ZPDs emerge, or don't, moment-to-moment, as part of the microculture of the classroom and other learning context." Thus, Meira (2004) focuses on the analysis of the variety of discourses which emerge among participants in teaching situations, especially in the classroom.

Within these propositions, we should also mention that the products which emerge from the ZPD are not directly internalized, in a movement from the outside to inside the individual. They are reconstructed and have their meanings (re-)elaborated in this symbolic space, allowing the intersubjective, shared maintenance of these products even when the subjects internalize aspects of the activity. Specifically, we could say that our emphasis will be on the mediating character of the interactions between special child and teachers creating a space of intersubjectivity between them in which knowledge is constructed and helps in the creation of developmental and learning possibilities.

By joining the historical-cultural perspective to the model set forth by Meira (2001), we can state that the pertinence of Vygotsky's theory lies in the fact that it treats the educational problems brought about by children with special educational needs in a constructive manner, seeking solutions within the systems that support students. Thus, Evans (1994) assures us that distinct school cultures have different impacts on students' cognition, making it necessary to reflect profoundly on the organizational and operational methods of said schools. In this sense, schools need to be thought of as microcultures, which aggregate the responsibility to condense culturally organized human activities.

In summary, we bring up Maturana and Varela (1995, p. 50), who propose an education which contemplates reflection on the

> *human condition as a nature whose evolution and realization is in the meeting of the individual BEING with his or her ultimate nature, which is the social being. Therefore, if individual development depends on social interaction, then formation itself, the very world of meanings in which one exists, is a function of living with others. Acceptance of the other is, then, the foundation so that the observer or self-conscious fully accept him- or herself.*

Based on this philosophical principle, we believe that a proposal of inclusive education may contribute to bringing about a more egalitarian and supportive society, one more committed to its most meaningful purpose: to HUMANIZE.

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V. Final Considerations: Searching for a Prospective View

This article revisited concepts of sociology and psychology. In contrast to Durkheim's perspective, we postulate that the concept of "normal" goes beyond the mere designation of a frequent phenomenon, given that "[a] norm is in effect the possibility of a reference only when it has been established or chosen as the expression of a preference and as the instrument of a will to substitute a satisfying state of affairs for a disappointing one." (Canguilhem, 1995, p. 212)

As stated by Canguilhem (*op cit.*), a norm is a reference to a possible order, which allows and demands a challenge (counter-norm) to become a norm.

With the evolution of scientific knowledge, another concept to observe is that of *exceptionality*, according to which the phenomenon stops being considered an *illness* to be seen instead as a *condition*. Either way, disease or condition, exceptionality is still a pathology at schools, determined by deviation from the norm, and using as a paradigm the conditions of collective life. Anomalies, in this sense, would be any particularities which differ from the common traces of the species. When we talk about anomalies, Canguilhem (1995, p. 106) says

> *(…) Statistical divergences such as simple varieties are not what one thinks of when one speaks of anomalies; instead one thinks of harmful deformities or those even incompatible with life, as one refers to the living form or behavior of the living being, not as a statistical fact but as a normative type of life.*

Thus, even from the strictly biological point of view, pathologies are not simply *a deviation from the average,* but refer to *values determined by the act of living itself.* If, from the strictly biological point of view, the positivist concept of pathology does not hold water, much can be said in relation to exceptionality, inasmuch as it is determined not by simple biological differences, even when organic in nature, but because they influence the *gestalt* or humans as individuals and members of a given social group.

The influence of the positivists remains to current day, and have been determinant the field of special education more than Cognitive and Developmental Psychology itself. The biggest problem of these authors' theoretical contributions was to present a concept of a given human phenomenon in order to, as Lowy (1988, p. 30) so poetically points out, "(…) ignore ideological conflicts, suppress passions and prejudices, and systematically drive away preconceptions." That is, the totality of the individual, within this narrow, abstract perspective, becomes simply its divergent, negative marks. But "deficiencies" should not be seen as something abstract, but as a historically constructed category. It includes subjects who possess individual characteristics, defined and produced by social requirements that interfere in their process of humanization.

Finally, we would like to point out that the great paradox of modern-day society lies in the fact that, while generating these differences, it is incapable of living with them, except through discriminatory mechanisms. This brings about the normalizing coercion mechanisms and the ceaseless fabrication of deviants. Thus, when it establishes its clientele as that which presents "deviations" in biological, psychometric, developmental, and cognitive characteristics, so-called "Special Education" reproduces, within its realm of actions, the process of participation-exclusion, contributing to the fact that these individuals continue to not be incorporated by the social environment which, more and more, demands increasing levels of schooling and socio-cognitive development of its members.

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