

CHILDHOOD AND DISABILITY: HISTORICAL CONCEPTIONS AND DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Infância e deficiência: concepções históricas e perspectivas dialéticas

Infancia y discapacidad: concepciones históricas y perspectivas dialécticas

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Edeson dos Anjos Silva

Doctor of Education

E-mail: edeson.anjos@hotmail.com

Claudete Beise Ulrich

Doctor of Theology

E-mail: claudete@fuv.edu.br

Rogério Drago

Doctor of Education

E-mail: rogerio.drago@gmail.com

Geisa Hupp Fernandes Lacerda

Master of Religious Studies

E-mail: ge.lacerda@hotmail.com

Michell Pedruzzi Mendes Araújo

Doctorate in Education

E-mail: michellpedruzzi@ufg.br

ABSTRACT

This theoretical and bibliographic article revisits the historical constructions of the concepts of childhood and disability, analyzing them in light of the dialectical perspective defended by authors such as Ariès, Sarmiento, Corsaro, Heywood, Kramer, and Vigotski. It argues that childhood, previously neglected as a social category, has come to be understood as a historical, cultural, and plural construction, influenced by factors such as class, gender, and context. Furthermore, the concept of disability, initially linked to biological determinism, is reinterpreted from a historical-cultural psychology perspective as a social phenomenon, emphasizing the decisive role of cultural mediations, inclusive pedagogical practices, and the school environment. Thus, it is argued that the school is a privileged space for promoting the overcoming of historical barriers, consolidating emancipatory, humanizing, and dialogical educational practices. Finally, it is reaffirmed that the articulation between childhood and disability requires policies and pedagogical actions that recognize the multiple childhoods and potentialities of each subject, overcoming exclusionary and adult-centered paradigms.

Keywords: childhood, disability, historical-cultural theory, inclusion, emancipatory education.

RESUMO

Este artigo, de natureza teórico-bibliográfica, revisita as construções históricas dos conceitos de infância e deficiência, analisando-os à luz da perspectiva dialética defendida por autores como Ariès, Sarmiento, Corsaro, Heywood, Kramer e Vigotski. Argumenta-se que a infância, antes negligenciada como categoria social, passou a ser entendida como uma construção histórica, cultural e plural, atravessada por fatores de classe, gênero e contexto. Outrossim, o conceito de deficiência, inicialmente atrelado a determinismos biológicos, é reinterpretado a partir da psicologia histórico-cultural como fenômeno social, ressaltando o papel decisivo das mediações culturais, das práticas pedagógicas inclusivas e do ambiente escolar. Destarte, advoga-se que a escola é espaço privilegiado para promover a superação de barreiras históricas, consolidando práticas educativas emancipadoras, humanizadoras e dialógicas. Por fim, reafirma-se que a articulação entre infância e deficiência demanda políticas e ações pedagógicas que reconheçam as múltiplas infâncias e potencialidades de cada sujeito, superando paradigmas excludentes e adultocêntricos.

Palavras-chave: infância, deficiência, teoria histórico-cultural, inclusão, educação emancipatória.

RESUMEN

Este artículo teórico-bibliográfico retoma las construcciones históricas de los conceptos de infancia y discapacidad, analizándolos a la luz de la perspectiva dialéctica defendida por autores como ariès, sarmiento, corsaro, heywood, Kramer y Vigotski. argumenta que la infancia, previamente descuidada como categoría social, ha pasado a ser entendida como una construcción histórica, cultural y plural, permeada por factores de clase, género y contexto. asimismo, el concepto de discapacidad, inicialmente vinculado a determinismos biológicos, se reinterpreta a través de la psicología histórico-cultural como un fenómeno social, destacando el papel decisivo de las mediaciones culturales, las prácticas pedagógicas inclusivas y el entorno escolar. así, argumenta que la escuela es un espacio privilegiado para superar barreras históricas y consolidar prácticas educativas emancipadoras, humanizadoras y dialógicas. finalmente, se reafirma que la conexión entre infancia y discapacidad exige políticas y acciones pedagógicas que reconozcan las múltiples infancias y potencialidades de cada individuo, superando paradigmas excluyentes y adultocéntricos.

Palabras clave: infancia, discapacidad, teoría histórico-cultural, inclusión, educación emancipadora.

1 A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

As researchers and education professionals, we understand the concepts of childhood and disability as analytical categories that constitute themes

central to the fields of human sciences and contemporary education, revealing themselves as historical and cultural constructs that transcend biological and deterministic explanations, tracing a fixed and finished destiny, disregarding the unfinished nature of the student as a being who is constituted and reconstituted based on the relationships they maintain with their peers and the social environment in which they are inserted.

Ariès (1973; 1981) points out that childhood in medieval Western society lacked recognition as a specific stage of human development, with children being perceived and treated as miniature adults, inserted prematurely into productive and social dynamics. Heywood (2004) and Corsaro (2011) show that the emergence of compulsory schooling, the consolidation of the nuclear family, and advances in medical and psychological sciences were fundamental elements in the social reinterpretation of childhood as a period of vulnerability and protection.

The concept of disability that we advocate was conceived in a way that is disconnected from the social and cultural environment and is also often understood as an essentially organic anomaly, finds in Vigotski's Historical-Cultural Theory (1997; 2022) a dialectical reading that emphasizes the centrality of the social environment, interactions, and cultural mediations in the development process of individuals with functional limitations caused by the environment, which sees and perceives them as such, disregarding their potentialities. We, like Vigotski (1997, p. 39), work from the understanding that "organic anomaly alone does not determine the child's destiny; the social factor is decisive," emphasizing that disability should be interpreted as a social construct susceptible to transformation through educational action.

In view of the above, we understand that it is essential to critically revisit these categories (childhood and disability) in light of the contributions of classical and contemporary authors, questioning the impacts of these conceptions on inclusive pedagogical practices that see and perceive students beyond their particularities.

Thus, this study is characterized as theoretical research, based on a critical analysis of classic and contemporary works on the concepts of childhood and disability, especially from a historical-cultural perspective. The selected academic works are reference works by researchers and authors such as Ariès (1973, 1981), Sarmiento (2002, 2005), Kramer (2003), Corsaro

(2011), and Vigotski (1997, 2022), as well as contributions from contemporary researchers in inclusive education.

The methodology adopted is analytical and interpretative in nature, seeking to identify the main historical, epistemological, and pedagogical movements that shaped conceptions of childhood and disability, linking them to the assumptions of Historical-Cultural Theory and the contemporary debate on inclusive pedagogical practices. With this, this article aims to reflect on the challenges posed to schools in the task of welcoming multiple childhoods and overcoming the barriers imposed on students, which historically marginalize children with disabilities, reaffirming the principle of a humanizing and emancipatory education.

2 THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

Our review of the literature allowed us to engage in dialogue with French historian Philippe Ariès (1914-1984), known for his promising studies on the concept and history of childhood and the family. In this context, we understand and work from the concept of childhood as not a fixed biological fact, but a social and historical construct that has changed and continues to change over the centuries.

Ariès (1981, p. 129) was one of the pioneers in demonstrating that, in the Middle Ages, childhood was almost invisible as a distinct social category, since "In medieval society, children quickly passed from infancy to young adulthood, integrated into collective life without major differences."

According to Ariès (1978, p.125), "In medieval society, children were not perceived as beings essentially different from adults; the notion of childhood as a separate stage is a social construct that emerged later." The author highlighted this concept through analyses of texts, paintings, and documents, which show that in the Middle Ages, children were seen as "little adults," without a specific social category that distinguished them from adults.

Given this context, we emphasize the understanding of childhood as a historical, social, and cultural construct, its unveiling being an important advance in the studies of human sciences and education. We note in Philippe Ariès (1978), particularly in his work "Social History of Children and Families," that childhood is not

a natural and immutable category, but rather a social invention that has been redefined over the centuries. Furthermore, we can cite Ariès (1978) again to emphasize that, in the Middle Ages, children were treated as miniature adults, participating precocously in social and work activities, which highlights the lack of a perception of childhood as a distinct phase of human development.

In *Social History of Children and Families*, Ariès (1986) points out that, during the medieval period, it was common for children of different age groups to share the same school space, without this heterogeneity causing any strangeness. Thus, based on Ariès' interpretation (1986, p. 35), we emphasize that

It is very rare to find precise references to the age of students in medieval texts. This absence of references to age persisted for a long time and is often still found in 17th-century moralists. We can see, however, that beginner students were generally around 10 years old. But their contemporaries did not pay attention to this and found it natural for an adult eager to learn to mix with a child audience, because what mattered was the subject taught, regardless of the age of the students. An adult could listen to the reading of Donat's book – synonymous with rudimentary grammar – and there was nothing strange about that.

In this theoretical dialogical movement, Corsaro (2003) emphasizes that with the advent of the institutionalization of school, a transformation in the conception of childhood gradually began. This process occurred through the insertion of children into the school environment and the development of a pedagogy specifically aimed at them, which allowed childhood to be recognized as a social construct.

From Sarmiento's (2002) perspective, the concept of childhood, as currently understood, is a relatively recent construct. During much of the Middle Ages, children were seen only as biological beings, devoid of social recognition or autonomy, so that although children have always existed, childhood as a social category was not recognized.

Thus, the presence of children as biological individuals did not necessarily imply an understanding of childhood as a specific social and cultural category, which highlights the importance of differentiating between the two concepts. This notion of childhood became established as a result of historical and social transformations and, according to Ariès (1973), emerged around the 13th century. Even so, until the end of this period,

children were not represented with their own characteristics, being portrayed, in most cases, as miniature adults.

In this context, Sarmiento (2002), referring to the historical trajectory of childhood, explains that this concept is intrinsically linked to the development of education, since the few records on the emergence of the concept of childhood indicate that the need for children's education and literacy was recognized. Initially, the practice of separating children by age group was restricted to the wealthier classes, motivated by a perception of care and distinction in relation to adults, not for methodological reasons, which only became established in modern times.

Gradually, the literature we have reviewed and revisited shows us that society has advanced to a stage where children no longer live indiscriminately with adults, but now have specific activities, clothing, games, and educational processes, valuing their particularities, even if from the perspective of a phase marked by imperfection.

Castro (2013) explains that childhood ceased to occupy a marginal role in society and came to be understood as an incomplete, vulnerable stage of life deserving of protection. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, child development began to receive greater attention from the medical and psychological fields, seeking to scientifically substantiate knowledge about this stage of life. However, it was at the beginning of the 20th century that psychology exerted a more significant influence on educational approaches and practices aimed at children, highlighting the growing importance attributed to childhood.

Sarmiento (2002) emphasizes that issues related to childhood then became a relevant topic on the political agenda and in the fields of research, and although studies were still fragmented between medicine, psychology, and pedagogy, their inclusion in formal systems of knowledge production reflects the recognition of their centrality.

Based on these explanations, we find that scholars' attention has turned to understanding how childhood articulates with society. Contemporary research reveals, especially in the field of Sociology of Childhood, the idea that children are active participants in the social fabric, overcoming the perspective of mere passivity. These studies propose to analyze childhood in its specificity, breaking with

with adult-centrism and conceiving the child as a social, historical, and culture-producing being who appropriates culture and returns it to society in a re-signified form.

We observe in Heywood (2004) that, in European modernity, the emergence of compulsory schooling and the consolidation of the nuclear family contributed to reinforcing the idea of a separate phase of life, with specific rights and care. In this regard, we highlight Heywood (2004, p. 22), when he points out that “it was from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards that childhood began to be perceived as a period of innocence and vulnerability, requiring differentiated protection and education.”

18th centuries that childhood began to be perceived as a period of innocence and vulnerability, requiring differentiated protection and education.”

In contemporary social sciences, we understand that childhood is a plural cultural construct, influenced by factors such as class, gender, and historical context. For this reason, Corsaro (2011, p. 33) argues that “children are active agents in the production and reproduction of culture, not just passive recipients of socialization.” Thus, we can broaden the current concept of childhood as a phase of preparation for adulthood, recognizing its intrinsic value as a stage of citizenship and social participation.

We note in Sarmento (2005, p. 15) the existence of a shift from a tutelary perspective to a participatory perspective, emphasizing that “the new sociology of childhood understands children as subjects of rights, capable of interpreting, negotiating, and constructing meanings in their daily practices.”

Based on the principles of Historical-Cultural Theory, particularly in dialogue with Vigotski (1991), we understand childhood as a decisive phase of human development, in which social interaction and cultural context play a structuring role in the constitution of higher psychological functions, such as language, logical thinking, voluntary memory, and directed attention. For Vigotski (1991, p. 93), “child development is a dialectical process in which social learning precedes individual development,” highlighting that the internalization of cultural signs occurs first on the interpersonal level and is then reconstructed on the intrapersonal level.

We agree with Vigotski (2000) when he emphasizes that the social environment is the main agent of transformation of the child's biological nature, mediating their access to the symbolic universe of their culture. Thus, childhood is not only a stage of biological maturation, but a period of intense cultural construction, made possible by the

mediation of adults, teachers, and more experienced peers, who guide and enhance the zones of real—current—and imminent development.

From this perspective, and also according to Vigotski (1998), we understand that childhood should be viewed as a phase of plasticity and openness, in which individuals actively appropriate tools and signs that enable the reorganization of their elementary mental functions into higher psychological functions. Given the above, we can say, based on Vigotski's studies, that cognitive and linguistic development does not occur in isolation, but is inextricably linked to the social, historical, and cultural context of the developing subject.

From the perspective of Neto and Bastos (2006), by recognizing children as social beings in the process of development, Vigotski breaks with innatist or maturationist views, affirming that the educational environment plays a decisive role in the formation of the child's psyche. In line with the findings of the researchers cited above, Rego (2010) emphasizes that school is understood as a privileged space for cultural mediation and for promoting collective experiences that expand children's development possibilities.

In order to broaden the understanding of the concept of childhood, we bring Kramer's (2003) concept into the dialogue, a concept that goes beyond the biologizing and naturalizing view that has predominated in Western societies for centuries. For Kramer, childhood is a historically and socially constructed category, which means that the way children are perceived, cared for, and educated is the result of cultural, economic, and political practices specific to each time and place.

Kramer (2003, p.18), in his work *Childhood and Early Childhood Education: Daycare and Preschool*, emphasizes that childhood should not be viewed as a static essence, but as a period of life that "is built on social interactions, in the context of institutions and family relationships." Like Kramer, we argue that schools, daycare centers, and preschools are fundamental spaces for the exercise of children's rights and the recognition of their voices.

Kramer (2002) also warns us of the risks of standardizing children's experiences, ignoring inequalities and cultural specificities. According to Kramer, children experience plural childhoods, permeated by socioeconomic conditions, ethnic and racial diversity, and regional inequalities. In this sense, Kramer (2002,

p.12) states that "there are many childhoods, because children are shaped by the living conditions and contexts in which they grow up and socialize."

We note another central aspect in Kramer's (2003) approach, which is the criticism of the adult-centric view that underestimates the power of children as subjects of rights and culture, since it is essential to recognize children as active subjects, capable of interacting, producing meanings, and reframing the world around them. Therefore, Kramer (2003, p.25) states that "Children are not only the future of society; they are an active presence and producers of culture in the present."

In this context, we note Kramer's proposal, or rather, his conception of a pedagogy of listening and dialogue that values the multiple languages of children and respects the uniqueness of each child. Kramer (2003, p. 29) argues that quality early childhood education needs to "break with authoritarian practices and create conditions for children's autonomy and participation."

Based on Kramer (2003), we agree with the idea that children's rights, especially in the Brazilian context, are still marked by inequalities, ambiguities, and contradictions today (2025). Still in the words of Kramer (2003, p. 32), we emphasize that "Brazilian childhood is also marked by social exclusion, and schools face the challenge of being a space for inclusion and the expansion of rights."

For now, we conclude with Vigotski that childhood is a historical-cultural category and, due to its characteristics, is not limited to biological aspects, but results from social practices, shared values, and meanings that guide the way each society conceives, educates, and protects its children.

Therefore, we highlight that the evolution of the concept of childhood reflects changes in modes of production, family structures, and pedagogical concepts, marking a continuous tension between care, control, and autonomy. We emphasize that, in today's scenario, public policies and critical theories reinforce childhood as an absolute priority, emphasizing comprehensive protection and the promotion of dignified conditions for holistic development, recognizing this phase of human life as a social category and citizen with rights and duties.

In this sense, it is pertinent to refer to Kramer when we think and work with childhood, because, according to the researcher, this requires teachers, managers, and public policy makers to recognize children as full citizens, holders

rights, and not mere recipients of care. This perspective is essential for strengthening pedagogical practices that respect diversity, participation, and children's protagonism.

2.1 DISABILITY: A SOCIAL CONCEPT THAT STIGMATIZES

From the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory, Vigotski was one of the pioneers in proposing a dialectical understanding of disability, rejecting the biological view that reduced it to a purely organic limitation. For Vigotski (1997), disability should be understood as a complex phenomenon, resulting from the interaction between biological factors and the sociocultural conditions in which the individual is inserted.

In this sense, we agree with Vigotski (1997) when he argues that organic limitations, whether sensory, motor, or intellectual, are only the starting point for the development of a "secondary social disability." To corroborate this, we refer to Vigotski (1997, p. 39) when he states that "organic anomaly alone does not determine the child's fate; the social factor is decisive." Thus, the social context and the way society organizes educational and inclusion practices have a direct impact on the development and full participation of children with disabilities.

We propose here a reflection based on the concepts of Vigotski (2022, p. 32), when he emphasizes that "The specificity of the organic and psychological structure, the type of development and personality, are what differentiate children with intellectual disabilities from normal children, and not necessarily qualitative proportions."

In this context, Silva (2024, pp. 87-88), in his doctoral thesis entitled "Alice and her learning experiences: teaching and learning mathematics with a student with intellectual disabilities," states that:

Education professionals must be attentive to the processes that permeate teaching and learning (instruction and development), since exposing the subject to impoverished cultural resources, inadequate classes, an inappropriate social and emotional environment, and pedagogical practices that are not consistent with the subject's zone of proximal development can be ineffective, as they can contribute to deficiencies and limitations in the subject's development possibilities.

And still with this humanizing view of Vigotski (2022, p. 41), we emphasize that

[...] the defect itself does not determine the fate of the personality, but rather its social consequences, its socio-psychological realization. Compensation processes are also directed not at the direct behavior of the defect, which is largely impossible, but at the elimination of the difficulties created by the defect.

In Silva's interpretation (2024, p. 88), when Vigotski (2022, p.121) tells us that "disability is a social concept," he means that "disability is a social concept because biologically all human beings are different; what can make a human being disabled is the social context that sees and perceives them as less capable than other beings."

Thus, we agree with Vigotski (2022) in emphasizing that disability is a social construct, shaped historically, although in most cases it is associated with organic factors. In this sense, it can be inferred that individuals are not born disabled, but become so, depending on the social, cultural, and historical mediations to which they are subjected. The biological condition, in turn, can take on a determining character in the subject's life trajectory or be understood as one of the many particularities that constitute human diversity.

In accordance with Araújo's thinking (2020), we understand that if social exclusion occurs in a group due to political, ethnic-racial, religious, phenotypic and/or genotypic differences, among others, it is because it was socially constructed. Therefore, inclusion is also a social construct and can lead to equity for all human beings in the various spaces they enter.

Considering the aspects presented, we highlight the relevance of Vigotski's (2022, p. 121) contribution when he states that "Social education will overcome disability." From this perspective, social education is understood as the process of transforming human beings through humanization, which implies a change in perceptions, thoughts, and ways of relating to others. It is from the perspective of an education that promotes transformation, humanization, and emancipation, without being restricted to measurements, that this article proposes to address disability.

We agree with Rego (2010) in affirming the importance of the role of cultural mediation based on Vigotski, as the author demonstrated that disability should not be seen as an insurmountable limitation, but as a condition that can be reframed through pedagogical resources, mediation strategies, and social support. Therefore,

we defend, like Vigotski, a proposal for humanized education that is not segregating, but rather oriented toward enhancing the child's preserved psychological functions according to their particularities.

In this context, Vigotski (1997, p. 48) emphasizes that "the compensation of compromised functions occurs through the reorganization of the remaining psychological functions, which is made possible by social interaction and systematic teaching." Thus, disability is not understood as a static factor, but as a dynamic condition, subject to change as the social environment favors the overcoming of barriers.

Along the same lines, we agree with Rego (2010), who reinforces Vigotskian's approach and breaks with biological determinism, placing emphasis on the plasticity of human development. Thus, the role of the teacher is central as a mediator, creating learning situations that expand the zone of imminent development of children with disabilities.

Therefore, Vigotski's contribution is still a reference for inclusive pedagogical practices today, as it recognizes disability as a socially constructed phenomenon that can be overcome through dialogical interaction between the subject and culture.

3 CHILDHOOD AND DISABILITY: AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS

We realize that the concept of childhood, once diluted in the indistinctness between children and adults as demonstrated by Ariès (1973; 1981), has been redefined since the advent of compulsory schooling and the strengthening of the nuclear family, as stated by Heywood (2004). Sarmiento (2002; 2005) and Corsaro (2011) show us that childhood is understood as a plural construct, traversed by relations of power, gender, and class, whose meaning is negotiated in spaces of coexistence and learning.

Simultaneously, we can affirm, with Vigotski (1997; 2022) as a reference, that the view of disability shifts from a pathologizing perspective to a historical-cultural approach. In this sense, Vigotski emphasizes that organic anomaly is not an inexorable fate, but a starting point for culturally mediated compensation processes. In the words of Vigotski (1997, p. 39), "organic anomaly, by itself, does not determine the child's destiny; the social factor is decisive."

From this perspective, we can say that childhood and disability are found in the dialectical weave between biology and culture; thus, we can affirm that both are categories that are historically constituted in relation to the other, with social education, in the words of Vigotski (2022), being the privileged vector for overcoming the barriers imposed by organic limitations and stigmatizing constructs.

In addition to overcoming adult-centered perspectives, the inclusive paradigm demands a pluralistic school system capable of recognizing the multiple childhoods and singularities of human development, investing in pedagogical practices that are meaningful and contextualized for students. In this sense, the school environment is a privileged *locus* for cultural mediation and the expansion of the potential of all individuals, regardless of their functional conditions, recognizing the child as a phase of human life, childhood as a social category, and disability as one of the infinite human conditions.

Below, we propose some reflections considering the concept of childhood and disability. These are extremely relevant topics for the social and cultural context of students. These themes demand constant reinterpretation in the school environment, involving discussions about the importance of inclusive processes.

We can affirm that it is undeniable that childhood, conceived as a social and cultural category, is intrinsically linked to the contemporary understanding of disability as a social construct. Both emerge as expressions of the same dialectical principle: human beings are made in intertwining with the social environment, reframing limitations, elaborating meanings, and recreating culture.

From this perspective, schools take on a leading role in the task of forging an inclusive ethos, based on listening, mediation, and the promotion of experiences that transcend the reproduction of exclusionary stereotypes. The legacy of Vigotski, as well as that of authors who study childhood as a social category, remains an epistemological beacon for overcoming deterministic conceptions, reaffirming the principle that all biological limitations can be resized through culturally rich and socially engaged interactions.

Therefore, it is urgent to consolidate policies, practices, and teaching knowledge that recognize the plurality of childhoods and the potential of each individual, promoting an education

that, more than integrating, emancipates and humanizes, subverting normative logics that have historically confined children and people with disabilities to the thresholds of social invisibility.

4 SOME CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis developed in this article shows that both childhood and disability cannot be understood as natural or essentially biological categories, but as social and historical constructions. The theoretical journey has shown that childhood, once invisible, has come to be recognized as a unique stage of human development, marked by cultural plurality and the centrality of schooling.

Similarly, disability, previously understood from a biological and pathological perspective, has been redefined by the historical-cultural theory of Vygotsky and his interlocutors, who emphasize the decisive role of social context, pedagogical mediation, and culture in human development.

Thus, childhood and disability are dialectically linked as categories that reveal the power of education as a practice of emancipation and humanization. The role of the school is reaffirmed as a privileged space for overcoming exclusionary and adult-centered paradigms, consolidating inclusive practices that recognize the multiple childhoods and singularities of each individual.

We conclude, for now, that the implementation of inclusive public policies, curricula, and pedagogical practices is a fundamental condition for guaranteeing the right of all children to an education that promotes participation, recognition, and emancipation, overcoming historical and social barriers.

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