

Vygotsky and Bakhtin: The educational action as a dialogic project of meaning production / *Vigotski e Bakhtin: a ação educacional como projeto dialógico de produção de sentido*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at establishing a dialogue between Vygotsky and Bakhtin, using Vygotsky's concepts associated with the zone of immediate development and Bakhtin's concepts related to dialogism as theoretical parameters. By using these parameters, it proposes to reflect upon the educational process through the theoretical principles or aphorisms which claim the specificity of the mediation that establishes the educator/educatee relation.

KEYWORDS: Vygotsky; Bakhtin; Zone of immediate development; Dialogism; Mediation

RESUMO

Este texto se propõe a estabelecer um diálogo entre Vigotski e Bakhtin, tomando como parâmetros o quadro referencial de conceitos associados à orientação vigotskiana sobre Zona de Desenvolvimento Imediato e à orientação bakhtiniana sobre o dialogismo da linguagem. Utilizando tais parâmetros, propõe-se a refletir sobre a fundamentação do processo educacional através de princípios teóricos ou aforismas que afirmam a especificidade da mediação com que se realiza a relação educador/educando.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Vigotski; Bakhtin; Zona de desenvolvimento imediato; Dialogismo; Mediação*

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Introduction

Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) figure prominently among the theoreticians from the beginning of the 20th century who favored the interactive dimension of the educational work as a reference resource for education. Their contribution, inspired by historical materialistic presuppositions, drew attention to relation dimensions and mediated actions (VYGOTSKY, 1978; BAKHTIN, 1990).

One of the problems faced by both authors was to understand, in the word and the consciousness domains, intersections, disjunctions, displacements, approximations, withdrawals and limits, whose materialization could enable different ways of language realization in the social relations of learning and knowledge construction.

Bound to their own time and space and based on their experiences resulting from the historical materialism investigation in the beginning of the 20th century, Vygotsky and Bakhtin were capable of perceiving the fundamentals of the dialogic nature of human experience as an essential element for the understanding and the transformation of reality. In educational relations, the dialogic space *par excellence*, knowledge and social skills are built in an interactive process which presupposes encounters and collisions of ideas with polyphonic movements and enunciative positions between educators and educatees. These positions are understood as totally contingent and singular occurrences with decisive effects on the subjective appropriation of cultural construction, whether they are scientific, artistic or experience-acquired.

In this paper, we will first consider key concepts that will help understand the dialogic dimension of the presupposed interaction in educational actions. Next, based on the Bakhtinian perspective, we will synthesize, in ten thematic categories, theoretical articulations on the discursive effects of the Vygotskian project realization of the zone of immediate development.

Dialogism and Zone of Immediate Development

Bakhtin (1990) problematized the perspective on mediation as a reciprocal determination of interlocutors' answerability and responsibility: Answerability - due to the fact that each movement in the dialogic relation occurs as a response to the position of the other, constituting it as a dialogue (BAKHTIN, 1990); responsibility – to the extent that there is no alibi related to the effects of the architectonic position of each agent in the dialogic relation (BAKHTIN, 1993). This condition is already materialized in the image of the bridge:

A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.86).

For this author, the richness of the utterance constitution process is a result of the language utterance force, whose movement expresses the agents' non-coincidental meaning of what they say. The mediation, thus, is exactly the territory of tension between utterances as the tie represented by the bridge is constructed.

Another essential element of mediation to Bakhtin refers to the excess of seeing which is present when interlocutors meet. Both are placed outside (exotopy) of what the other is saying (BAKHTIN, 1990). The interlocutors' answerability and responsibility are based on and manifested in this distinction, which is the index of both the otherness and the approximation made present in discursive possibilities. The dialogue constituted in the interaction realized with verbal and non-verbal language materialization is endowed with certain finalization. However, given the dialogic tension between coincidental and non-coincidental utterances, the feature that prevails is non-finalization, which stresses the constitutive movement of dialogism as an anteposition of interlocutors' words and counterwords.

Vygotsky (1978; 1986; 1987), in the investigation into his dialectical conception of the relations between the subject and the social, the individual and the group, coined the notion of the Zone of Immediate Development (ZID). It is not an ideal “zone” through which the lived and the possible were abstractly confronted; neither is it a reductionist conception through which a mechanical transference from group capacities

to individual capacities is considered. When he attempts to understand the act of thinking present in operations such as “deduction, and understanding, evolution of notions about the world, interpretation of physical causality, and mastery of logical forms of thought and abstract logic” (VYGOTSKY, 1978, p.79), inversely related to what was conceived from a naturalizing position of the human thought, Vygotsky sees these operations necessarily constituted in the I-other relation.

For Vygotsky, “instruction and development are neither two entirely independent processes nor a single process but two process with complex interrelationships” (VYGOTSKY, 1987, p.201). Nevertheless, the social relations implicated in learning situate the development of thinking in a place of learning dependency and not of learning cause. That is why formal education is so valued in our societies.

Focusing principally on learning, Vygotsky gives the notion of development a new feature: the act of thinking will have a cultural and historical meaning and not a naturalizing one. He thus differs from the psychologists at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and his work is named as a “social and historical” theory, an expression used by Leontiev¹. According to the latter, in his notion of development, Vygotsky contrasts the cultural and the natural (LEONTIEV, 1983, p.19 *apud* PRESTES, 2010, p.126)². To distance his thinking from the idea that “learning is considered a purely external process that is not actively in development” (VYGOTSKY, 1978, p.79), Vygotsky conceives an unusual theory of the development of thinking as an element tensioned by the learning to which the subjects are submitted throughout their lives, and not the opposite (VYGOTSKY, 1986; 1987). The belief in a pure ideal form of thinking was, in Vygotsky’s conception, a consequence of one’s forgetting the dialogic dimension, constituent of social relations.

In every educational situation, the asymmetric relation between an apprentice and the source of knowledge that s/he searches for (more experienced people, cultural objects, work instruments) reveals the difference between acquired capacities and the ones developed by the social group. It is in this direction that Vygotsky recognizes the

¹ LEONTIEV, A.N.,1983 (*apud* PRESTES, 2010).

² IAROCHEVSKI, M.G. (2007). Work in Russian, quoted by Prestes (2010), who affirms that “Vygotsky did not name his theory. Besides, it is also known that nowadays different names are attributed to it: socio-historical, socio-cultural, socio-interactionist”.

theoretical necessity to formulate a founding concept: an intermediary between what the group has already developed, collectively, as a potential capacity of each individual that comes to belong to the group, and what one apprentice may present as developed capacity. Vygotsky names the developed capacity, that is, the one that, “is generally assumed as only those things that children can do on their own”, as “actual developmental level” (VYGOTSKY, 1978, p. 87), once it is thus referred to in most investigations of his time. He names the social group’s already developed capacity that can be somehow transmitted to the apprentices as “potential development” (VYGOTSKY, 1978, p.87). Between these two logical moments of knowledge constitution is the zone of proximal development (or imminent)³, which represents, in Vygotsky’s theory, the capacity pertaining to the apprentice and to the social group at the same time. However, it is only exercised by the apprentice in relation to others, that is, in a mediation situation.

The possible approximation between Bakhtin and Vygotsky, focused on the understanding of educational interactions, requires that we think about them as social occurrences, inserted in a political and economical structure and shaped by the constitution of culture. In order to explicit, in an articulated way, some meanings of this approximation between the two authors, we will present ten aphorisms which intend to inspire our reader to reflect about the dialogic dimension of the educational action.

I - Society constitution operates through mediation

The relation that constitutes society can be understood from the viewpoint of mediation. In other words, the relation between the infrastructure and the superstructure does not happen as casual relation in which the infrastructure would unilaterally determine the functioning of the superstructure. The relation happens through the reciprocal determination of the superstructure and the infrastructure (VOLOSHINOV, 1986), which means that such relation happens by mediation. Therefore, it is possible to

³ Prestes, (2010, p.109-110), when discussing the translation of the Russian expression *zona blijaichego razvitiia*, says that, in Portuguese, the correspondent expression of “zone of imminent development” would be better translated than the words “proximal” or “immediate”, having been the last one proposed by Bezerra (2009, p.X-XI). This discussion, besides attaining to the mistakes of language use, indicates the difficulties of the translation of Vygotsky’s concepts, whose purport deserves terminological attention. At any rate, for the purpose of this article, the *immediacy* or the *imminence* of the development depends on mediation, without which it cannot take place.

say that education, in the construction of society, is not a phenomenon which would be in the superstructure only, but a superstructure phenomenon which is determined, in part, by society's infrastructure. This also means that such phenomenon is determined, in part, by the superstructure, which would reproduce the economic project of the infrastructure even if it operates as a force which contradictorily acts with the specificity of what is proper to education, regarding the transformation of relations in the economic level. Thus, it is possible to say that education within society, as a mediating force, acts in the reciprocal determination of the structural or structuralizing position of social organizations, taking a direction of meaning traversed by reproduction and contradiction.

II - Mediation in education operates through interaction

The mediation that operates the relation between the educator and the educatee, at the specificity of what constitutes the educational phenomenon, happens through the interaction between interlocutors, who are enunciatively located in the language movement of educational agents. In other words, the educator, acting as the speaker, builds a meaning production project with verbal and non-verbal language which identifies him/her as an educator, typifying, simultaneously, from the educator's point of view, the educatee's identity, which means that the educator and the educatee thus constituted constitute themselves from the mediation of a language project. It is clear that this project, in the meaningful direction drawn by the relation between educator and educatee, needs to be marked by the meaning direction of reproduction even if it must and can be admitted that the educator's project can and must be traversed by the changes drawn from the meaning direction constituted by the meaning production project articulated by the force of contradiction. With this in mind, it is necessary, thus, to admit that the construction of language, instituted in the mediation educator/educatee, is traversed by the reciprocal determination of reproduction and contradiction at the constituent specificity of what is proper to the dialectic, or dialogic, construction of education in the structuralizing limits of society organization.

III - Interaction in education operates through utterances

If the educator and the educatee - in mediation, or reciprocal determination, built with the voices of the speaker and the receiver which traverse the position of educational agents as interlocutors of a meaning production project - act with language, it is through this action that the interlocutors are operating with a language property which is not reduced to a simple vehicle of production and reception of meaning, but especially with the property of the action which mobilizes them in interaction. This action, which occurs with the interlocutors' participation, is what makes the experience of language happen as an utterance, that is, as an interlocutory action practiced by the speaker and the receiver in the mediation which draws them close and apart as mobilized educational agents through reproduction and contradiction. (VOLOSHINOV, 1986)

IV - Utterance in education operates discourse

If the interlocutors, educator and educatee, in the specific position of speaker and receiver, act with the language property in the verbal and non-verbal interaction which draws them close and apart, the language movement that occurs in this interaction will constitute what the experience of the discourse would be, that is, that utterance experience – of the interlocutors' action – which is the mobilizing force of what is constituted as the effects produced with language (VOLOSHINOV, 1986). Such meaning effects which do not, evidently, reduce themselves to the effects expected by the speaker's word project are amplified due to unexpected effects that in part originate in the receiver's counterword project. It is clear that this experience of meaning production, as an experience of discourse, that is, of utterance action, is not reduced to the strict limits of the utterance. That is why the process that institutes it is only realized with language as a materializing force in the legible and visible form of utterance possibilities – utterance product, the force of the theatrical utterance process which is reduced neither to the surface of language product, the utterance, nor to the extension of the process action spaces, the enunciation. This brings up the postulate that every

product brings, in its own body, the marks of the process which institutes it: the utterance brings in its own body the marks of the enunciation (BAKHTIN, 1990).

V - The discursive effects of dependence and independence in the educational interaction: reproduction and contradiction – educational operators

The educator, in non-systematic and systematic relations with the formal and informal education, keeps a verbal and non-verbal interaction with the educatee, based on non-systematic and systematic learning projects, under the form of an enunciative construction which institutes the discourse from the more experienced to the less experienced. What is socially expected is that the less experienced discourse, the educatee's, be submitted to the instituted discourse, the educator's, in which the discursive construction of the more experienced is located. Furthermore, what is enunciatively and discursively built is the dependence discursive effect, submitting, in the pedagogic mediation, the educatee's dependence to the educator, and vice versa, with the sole purpose of instituting, as a result, the discursive effect of the educational agents' dependency. Thus, in the educational process, whether informal or formal, dependence is a temporary discursive effect that, while it is a project, acts as a process to the gestation, or the development, of another discursive effect: independence. Therefore, it is possible to say that at the dependence temporariness lives the independence project in a dialogic tension, which confers, on the educational process, the character of a dialogic movement of meaning production traversed, as a pedagogic mediation, by reproduction, in which the expected by tradition and contradiction and the unexpected by innovation are located.

VI – The discursive effects of dependence and independence in the educational interaction: the operation of educational discourse

If the discursive effect of what is expected, as tradition's enunciative construction, institutes an interaction in the educator/educatee relation centered in reproduction, it is possible to say that the educator occupies the enunciative position of the one who detains control of the educational discourse in order to produce the discursive effect of dependence to perpetuate it, guaranteeing the educator the bureaucratic place of the one who makes decisions and the educatee, the bureaucratic

place of the one who does not decide. However, the expected discursive effect, the educatee's dependence in the reproduction of bureaucratic relations of society's organization with the mediation of the specificity of bureaucratic relations in education, can - in the practice of education - live with the discursive effect of the unexpected. Here, the educatee, up to a certain point, reproduces the expected discourse, producing, in part, dependence discursive effects, but, on the other hand, contradictorily indicating the enunciative force of the independence discursive effects as a responsive and responsible discourse activity which raises the expression of the unexpected. Thus, the educatee, up to a certain point, does not make any decisions because the decision ritual is controlled by the bureaucratic action of the one who decides: the educator; nevertheless, up to a certain point, the educatee makes decisions as well, for his/her enunciative and discursive action places him/her in the contradictory position of breaking the reproductive demands of the decision ritual of the bureaucracy which controls the educational relations.

VII – The Zone of Immediate Development (ZPD) as a phenomenon of overcoming the dependence of educational interactions: discursive operation

If the discursive effect of dependence is produced in the relation between educator and educatee, what is expected from this effect is that the language construction will modulate the pedagogic mediation for the qualitative leap toward independence. This is why it happens: if the educatee is already capable of, by his own means or by the means originated from more experienced peers, accomplishing, with verbal and non-verbal language, those tasks which before would only be possible through the dependence discourse instituted in the relation with the educator, we will have the educatee at the position of someone who, up to a certain point, reproduces the initial dependence and who, up to a certain point, contradicts such reproduction with manifestation of the new contradiction which is now instituted and manifest as a discursive effect of independence. Thus, from the utterance point of view that the educatee experiments, what really occurs is the enunciative position of a speaker who integrates the project of the expected independence production, which can turn the discursive experience into a space of meaning production inaugurating a new enunciative position: the zone of immediate development position, that is, the position in which the educatee operates in the limits of a

new pedagogic mediation and shows capable of doing with independence what s/he used to do with dependence (VYGOTSKY, 1978; 1986; 1987).

VIII – The educational agents in the dialogic constitution of the pedagogic relation

The educator, when occupying the dialogic position of the self, projects towards the educatee, in the dialogic position of the other, a certain displacement, which places him/her in certain outsideness: an outside place, an *extralocality* (BAKHTIN, 1990). It is from this position that the educator can observe the educatee in a singular way in the pedagogic mediation: the position of being able to see, in a singular way, what the educatee cannot observe about himself/herself, that is, the observed does not see what the observer observes. And it is exactly from this position – of seeing the other from the outside – that the educator seizes the possibility of acting responsively, responding to the student and assuming, thus, the responsibility toward the other. Still, it is exactly from this outsideness of the educatee, projected by the educator, that an excess of seeing to the educatee is constituted, materializing a meaning that the educatee cannot see because the educator, from his/her outsideness, sees more than the other effectively can see. The educator sees the educatee from a time and a place guided by values that singularize the interaction profile in which concretely happens the pedagogic mediation, seeing that the educational relation is traversed by the relative incompleteness of the pedagogic agents who provisionally acquire certain completeness and finalization, which is in harmony with the inevitable condition of incompleteness and non-finalization constituent of human beings.

IX – The zone of immediate development (ZID) as a phenomenon of dialogic realization: from dependence to independence – discursive effects on education

The zone of immediate development, as an enunciative construction of a discourse which operates with the potentiality of the educatee's dependence on the educator to overcome, relies on the pedagogic projection by the educator to effectuate his/her educational work. The educator, in this case, responds to the demand for dialogic production of certain outsideness: the educator projects another place of meaning production to the educatee. From this position, the educatee starts to be observed by the

alternative eyes of the educator because s/he starts to be the observed as an educational agent to whom a certain excess of seeing is produced, that is, a new project of meaning production. Here, the subject who embodies the educatee position is being articulated in a project of temporary dependence because there is, from the realization of this functional dependence, the inclusion of a new alternative project: the discursive effects of independence. In this regard, the constitution of the experience of the zone of immediate development previously and provisionally presupposes the dialogic construction of a discourse project marked by the discursive effects of the educatee's dependence in relation to the educator. On the other hand, there is still, in the realization of the zone of immediate development, the dialogic projection of a new outsideness and a new excess of seeing: once the constitution of the dependence discursive effects is effectuated, the educatee now is projected to a new place by the educator, leaving the place of dependence to which s/he was projected, assuming, in this new place of outsideness, a new excess of seeing: the meaning project accomplished by his/her enunciative and discursive action as language demonstrations which indicate the presence of the independence discursive effects related to the teacher. Thus, it is possible to say that Vygotsky's zone of immediate development can be thought of, along with Bakhtin's dialogism, as a social space of enunciative and discursive production of meaning effects which are dialogically articulated in the tension between the reproduction of the educatee's dependence to the educator and, contradictorily, the surpass of these dependence discursive effects with the incorporation of the educatee's independence discursive effects related to the educator. After all, the zone of immediate development as the process of human development production through education does not occur as language work done by educational agents' mediation in the interaction that mobilizes them but through the dialogic duplicity of outsideness and the excess of seeing which outline the educatees' dependence and independence.

X – The zone of immediate development (ZID) as mediation, the place where answerability and responsibility of educational relations is practiced

In the mediation that constitutes the educator/educatee's interaction, such interaction will only effectively take place if the teacher acts with the answerability of the one who responds to the student, realizing, thus, the practice of answerability which

makes the educator assume and constitute himself/herself – as a dialogic position of one who organizes himself/herself as the *self* – as an agent that is constituted by this educatee, organized in the dialogic position of the *other* – without which the interaction could not happen. Therefore, the dimension of answerability and responsibility orientations ethically promote the birth of a constitutive interaction mediated by educational agents. In this regard, such dimensions act as forces which dynamize, within interaction, the dialogic constitution of the educatee's outsideness, a being with relative incompleteness, as s/he is detached from the usual condition in which s/he found himself/herself through the action practiced in the history of the concretely effectuated systematic and non-systematic educational mediation. Based on that, the educator, in the position of the *self*, in the relative incompleteness of the condition which also inhabits him/her, observes the educatee with a *sui generis* observation style. S/He is the one who embodies such spirit, for the educatee cannot see himself/herself with the eyes of the observer, the one who responsively and responsibly proposes himself/herself to the project of detaching the educatee from the relative incompleteness condition which s/he occupies. Without that, for this educatee, it would not be possible to project an excess of seeing production, for s/he, not being able to see himself/herself with the outsideness the educator projects, cannot see, with his/her own eyes, those meanings which materialize such excess. Thus, to educate or, in other words, to bring the educatee out of his/her relative incompleteness, with the relative incompleteness of the educator's responsive and responsible project, materialized in the outsideness and in the excess of vision outlined for the educational agents' interaction, constitutes an action which incorporates a certain finalization that is also relative; therefore, the agents are beings traversed by the incompleteness which makes them human. Thus, at the zone of immediate development, the constitution of the first project – in which the outsideness and the excess of seeing materialized by the dependence language or discursive effects, which reports to a certain completeness and a certain finalization in the educator/educatee relation – needs to have a dialogue, in a dialogic tension, with a second project. Here, the first project engages in a dialogue with the outsideness and the excess of seeing that responsively and responsibly materialize the overcoming of the educatee's dependence on public demonstrations that defy the educational relation to overcome the limits imposed by his independence. Thus, in this second project, the completeness and the finalization relativity experienced in the first

project which effectuated the dependence discursive effects is expected to surpass. With that in mind, it is possible to say that the meaning production project, in discourse or language, of the zone of immediate development is constituted as a dialogic realization of two projects which, contradictorily, would be mobilized together: the project of dependence discursive effects and the project of independence discursive effects which would be dialectically mobilized as constructions in the dialogic mediation of the discursive or language movement of the educational agents.

Final Considerations

According to the assertions supported in this paper, educational relations constitute mediation actions. The cultural elements coming from artistic and scientific creations and from everyday life are the material to which the teaching and learning encounters give personal and unrepeatable confirmation. This becomes possible in the educational dialogue once the respect and the incentive to autonomy projects and the symbolic and material heritage appropriation in the social arrangements of each era is configured.

In this heritage, the language condition and potentiality to permit the appropriation of the word is highlighted in all its creative possibilities and during the whole extension of life of social groups. In Vygotsky's terms, it is necessary to permit the exercise of the zones of immediate development to endow the apprentices with the potentiality of human groups, whose work, in Bakhtin's terms, is constituted of the responsive and responsible – therefore, dialogic - dialogues. The educational action occurs, thus, in the articulation of Vygotsky's knowledge and Bakhtin's thought, a privileged *locus* of dialogism investigations for the creation of zones of immediate development as the realization of language possibilities.

In this regard, mediation is nothing less than the conformation of the social relation itself and, consequently, of whatever is substantive in human societies, producers of a symbolic patrimony. The privilege of the educational interaction and its tense feature comes from its role to bring different projects of meaning production together – the educator's and the educatee's – aiming at overcoming the second one's alienation, that is, aiming at the emergence of a integrative independence project, which permits active

operation in the social structure. The discourses generated by the educational action as well as the ones which condition them as a place of contradictions are representative of the opposition of multiple sayings in the social realm.

To articulate the notion of the zone of immediate (or imminent) development with the experience of language as a dialogic experience can bring us to the understanding that the educational action is an eminently humanizing activity, in the sense that invention can always be recast from human beings as an infinite possibility. Moreover, the relation of language with the specificity of language teaching and with the whole educational context becomes more plausible, and that includes the teaching of science and arts and the constant apprehension of the cultural objects inherited by successive generations.

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