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The research productions on imagination: an integrative review

As produções em pesquisa sobre imaginação: uma revisão integrativa

Thiago Girardi de **Andrade**¹ , Vera Lúcia Trevisan de **Souza**¹ , Wanderlei Abadio de **Oliveira**¹ 

¹ Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas (PUC-Campinas), Escola de Ciências da Vida, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia. Campinas, SP, Brasil. Correspondence to: T. G. ANDRADE. E-mail: <thiagogita2@gmail.com>.

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Abstract

This investigation aimed to present the conceptions of imagination in the research conducted in the field of education and psychology. The work, of a qualitative and investigative nature, is an Integrative Literature Review; the analysis was based on the theoretical and methodological foundations of Cultural-Historical Psychology. The search sources used included: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), PsycINFO and Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) as well as studies published between 2010 and 2020 in Portuguese, English or Spanish. The review corpus was eventually composed of 71 selected materials and included 46 articles, 18 dissertations and 7 theses. Two categories were constructed: imagination that favors the capacity for action and imagination that inhibits the capacity for action. It was concluded that there is a prevalence of papers defining imagination as an activity that promotes freedom, human development and emancipation, but not associated with processes of alienation, suffering and non-development.

Keywords: Development; Imagination; Inhibition.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo apresentar as concepções de imaginação em estudos desenvolvidos no campo da educação e da psicologia. De caráter qualitativo e do tipo investigativo, trata-se de uma Revisão Integrativa da Literatura, cuja análise foi realizada com base nos fundamentos teórico-metodológicos da Psicologia Histórico-Cultural. As bases de dados utilizadas foram: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS), PsycINFO e Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações (BDTD), incluindo-se estudos publicados entre 2010 e 2020 nos idiomas português, inglês e espanhol. O corpus da revisão foi composto por 71 produções, sendo 46 artigos, 18 dissertações e 7 teses. Foram construídas duas categorias de análise: imaginação que favorece a capacidade de ação; imaginação que inibe a capacidade de ação. Concluiu-se que há prevalência acerca da imaginação como atividade promotora de liberdade, de desenvolvimento humano e de emancipação, no entanto sem relação com processos de alienação, padecimento e não desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento; Imaginação; Inibição.

The subject of imagination has been considered to be of great relevance in the development and in the teaching and learning processes (Jesus, 2020; Neves, 2020; V. L. T. Souza, 2016; V. L. T. Souza & Arinelli, 2019). It has also been the subject of studies that aim to postulate it as an ontological dimension, that is, at the basis of the constitution of the human psyche and a condition for humanization (Sawaia & Silva, 2015). From such perspective, imagination begins to be studied and advocated as essential in the teaching and learning processes, given its driving dimension for creative processes, responsible for expanding the relationships between higher psychological functions, creating conditions for complex reasoning and abstractions and generalizations (V. L. T. Souza, 2016; Vygotsky, 2014). Several studies developed by the group to which the investigation object of this article is linked have demonstrated the important role of imagination in the learning and development process of adolescents, but, despite some progress, the material produced does not discuss what we believe characterizes the imagination dialectical dimension, which would incorporate aspects that hinder development, as they favor the paralysis of the subject and permanence in his or her life condition. This study, therefore, seeks to understand how and which aspects have been addressed in academic research on imagination, notably in the context of education.

When we pay attention to the way imaginative processes are conceived according to Vygotsky (2014), we come across the four ways in which imagination and reality are linked, as well as its characterization as a superior psychological function that is at the basis of other functions, operating in a systemic and interdependent manner. A fundamental characteristic is the fact that imagination does not perform miracles, that is, it is grounded in the subjects' experiences, so that its elements come from the reality that those subjects experience; considered a superior psychological function, imagination is dependent on the development and interdependence of other psychological functions to reach more complex levels of functioning, being characterized, in essence, as sociogenic, considering experience and relationship with reality (Vygotsky, 2014). Thus, we cannot think of imagination as a strictly internal activity, independent of the conditions in which man finds himself, since it is constituted through human productions and their conditions and within intersubjective relationships.

Given these considerations, we defined the investigation issue: would it be possible to consider imagination as solely associated with the promotion of development, that is, given that the social subject is constituted in the relationships in which he/she participates and imagination is understood as a result of his or her experiences, would there not be experiences that are not conducive to development and to the creative process? To answer this question, we had to seek to understand how imagination, based on different foundations, has been conceived in the academic research world within the area of psychology and focused on the scope of education.

Method

This is an Integrative Literature Review that was operationalized to access evidence about the phenomenon studied and to offer a synthesis about it (Hopia et al., 2016). To define the question that guided the review process, the strategy called Population, Concept and Context (PCC) (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2015) was used. This question was defined as follows: how have studies in Psychology and Education understood students' imagination in the school context?

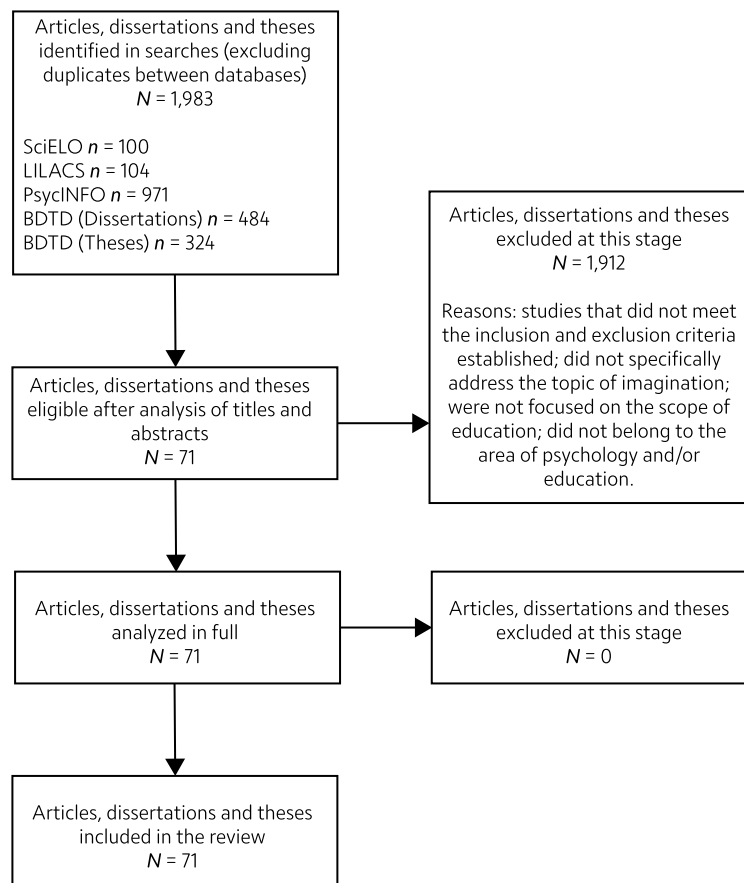
The databases consulted, included: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO); Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS); and PsycINFO, from the American Psychological Association. In order to retrieve dissertations and theses, the *Biblioteca Digital Brasileira*

de Teses e Dissertações (BDTD, Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations) was searched. The descriptors used in the searches were located in the *Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde- Psicologia* (BVS-Psi, Virtual Library of Psychology) and in the PsycINFO Thesaurus. The terms used in the cross-referencing were: imagination, cognitive processes, schools and school psychology. The Boolean operators AND and OR were used as a search strategy in each database, with the terms in Portuguese being used in the BDTD database. It is worth noting that each database has characteristics that required adaptations in the search process, but the central idea previously reported was preserved (terms; search engines and filters, for example).

The following inclusion criteria were applied to select the products to be reviewed: research from the last 10 years (2010-2020); productions from the areas of psychology and/or education; texts in which imagination was limited to the field of schools or involving students; and productions in Portuguese, English and Spanish. Research characterized as editorials, letters to the editor, manuals, books and book chapters were discarded. The searches took place in June 2021. The material was initially selected by reading titles and abstracts. In the next stage, the selected material was analyzed in full. The Rayyan platform was used to organize and select studies to be reviewed. Figure 1 shows the flow chart that summarizes the searches and selections of studies in the sources consulted.

Figure 1

Flowchart summarizing the searches and selections of material in the reference sources



The data were assessed descriptively, as required by the guidelines for conducting integrative reviews. In this connection, the studies were grouped taking into account the title,

the investigated audience, the research design, the objective, the theoretical framework, the conception of imagination, the year of publication and the area in which the study was carried out. Subsequently, based on the conceptions found, two major thematic categories were formulated, called: 1) Imagination that favors the capacity for action; and 2) Imagination that inhibits the capacity for action.

Results and Discussion

The sample corpus consisted of 71 selected materials, 46 articles, 18 dissertations and seven theses. Out of the articles, 31 were located in the SciELO database, six came from the LILACS database and nine came from the PsycINFO database. The search yielded 47 works in the area of education (25 articles, 16 dissertations and six theses), 23 in the area of psychology (20 articles, two dissertations and one thesis) and only one article in the area of psychopedagogy; thus there was a predominance of the education area. In the survey we came across the prevalence of empirical studies in relation to theoretical ones, with 45 empirical works (23 articles, 15 dissertations and seven theses) and 26 theoretical works (23 articles and three dissertations). It is interesting to note that 25 articles, 16 dissertations and five theses focused on the childhood period, while 11 articles and only one dissertation focused on the adolescence period. Out of the 46 studies that focused on childhood, 29 were from the area of education, while 17 originated in the area of psychology, thus demonstrating a prevalence of the first area in relation to the second; as to the 12 works that focused on adolescence, eight of them were from the area of psychology while four were from the area of education, thus occurring a prevalence of the psychology approach, where we can conjecture that both areas, when dealing with the topic in question, focus on childhood and that adolescence is little explored.

Imagination that Favors the Capacity for Action

The assessment of the results led us to observe different conceptions in the way of focusing, analyzing, discussing and articulating imagination, which led us to propose two major thematic categories: imagination that favors the capacity for action; and imagination that inhibits the capacity for action. Subcategories belonging to the first major category include: the polysemic dimension of imagination; the philosophical aspect of imagination and imagination and human development.

The Polysemic Dimension of Imagination

This subcategory is a cluster of materials in which what is understood as imagination is not explicitly observed; therefore, it does not present a deeper understanding of the term and refers it to several meanings. This subcategory comprises twenty-two studies (Carbonieri et al., 2020; Coppete, 2012; Cunha, 2016; Duarte, 2016; Ferrandiz et al., 2017; Ferreira, 2010; Franco & Balça, 2018; Girardello, 2011; Lehane, 2016; Maia et al., 2011; Milani, 2017; Mottweiler & Taylor, 2014; Olivos et al., 2013; Ostetto & Kolb-Bernardes, 2015; Petrenko, 2019; Richter & Vaz, 2010; J. A. S. Silva, 2015; M. F. Souza, 2018; Stathi et al., 2014; Vezzali et al., 2011; Viana et al., 2017; Zavala, 2014). We can locate the meanings about imagination as an articulation between: imagination and play; imagination and creativity; imagination and art; and, finally, imagination and learning and education.

The works associated with the theme of play bring an understanding of imagination as being of fundamental importance for the performance of social roles through playing, as a place

of creativity; it arises associated with the manifestation of life (Viana et al., 2017), constituting itself as a power that reveals new horizons of action (Carbonieri et al., 2020). When dealing with the relationship with creativity, we find: the instigation of imagination/creation in contact with the literature (M. F. Souza, 2018); in the participation of the development of imaginary friends (Mottweiler & Taylor, 2014); in the structuring of psychometric tests that evaluate creativity (Ferrandiz et al., 2017; Olivos et al., 2013), lacking rigidity and characterized by being creative and liberating (Richter & Vaz, 2010). In the context of art, we have, for example, the study by Petrenko (2019), in which we find the concept of musical imagination, associated with child development and with processes that involve the subject's personality. J. A. S. Silva's study (2015) presents imagination as being awakened by art and inhibited by adult reasoning; Girardello (2011) presents it as an instance of freedom, being favored by art.

In relation to the theme of learning and education, we find imagination associated: with creativity allowing and/or facilitating the glimpse of diverse spaces-times; with the concept of imagined contact, which involves enabling the mental simulation of an experience (Stathi et al., 2014; Vezzali et al., 2011); with the importance of creating reading spaces, which allow moments of fantasy and imagination expansion (Maia et al., 2011); with the power to exist and be inserted within a discussion regarding the need to value the body and imagination, undervalued by the Western scientific rationality (Ferreira, 2010).

In a general overview, we observe that imagination emerges: 1) as a creative activity, promoting freedom, fantasy which is articulated with human development; 2) as a dimension that is developed, awakened, favored; 3) in the context of practices that take it as something fundamental, such as art and play; 4) as inhibited by rigid ways of being, 5) being devalued by a rational logic. It is in this sense that we say that imagination favors the capacity for action, to the extent that it is articulated with the promotion of freedom and human development.

The Philosophical Aspect of Imagination

We find in this subcategory those studies where imagination is developed according to philosophical assumptions, sometimes presenting the theoretical framework itself and sometimes a specific concept around imagination. This subcategory comprises eleven studies (Araújo et al., 2020; Arneback, 2014; Cantú & Patiño, 2013; Casa Nova, 2015; Durán et al., 2013; Ferreira, 2017; Fronckowiak, 2011; Kiragu & Warrington, 2013; Trindade & Umeda, 2015; Wald, 2010; Waite & Rees, 2013).

We find in three studies the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard as a theoretical reference on imagination, in which we have the imaginative action, a location for creativity, freedom and openness, actually with infinite possibilities (Araújo et al., 2020; Casa Nova, 2015; Fronckowiak, 2011). Similarly, three other studies (Cantú & Patiño, 2013; Durán et al., 2013; Wald, 2010) are based on Castoriadis' philosophy, where the articulation with creativity is present and as an instance that enables the existence of faculties in general. Three other studies (Arneback, 2014; Kiragu & Warrington, 2013; Trindade & Umeda, 2015), are also based on the philosophy of John Dewey, with the concept of moral imagination, which includes the ability to project oneself into the condition of another and allowing a glimpse of possibilities for action. Finally, two other studies (Ferreira, 2017; Waite & Rees, 2013) are based on the thinking of Rudolf Steiner, where imagination emerges as a place of freedom, self-awareness and autonomy.

Hence, we learn from these studies, the understanding of imagination as being largely permeated by power, as an openness to the new, creativity, development of autonomy and empathy, articulating with democracy, going, in essence, towards the favoring of action.

Imagination and Human Development

This subcategory groups studies that have as a common feature the conception of imagination intrinsically linked to human development, and is composed of thirty-three studies (Almeida et al., 2020; Alves & Hostins, 2019; Barbosa & Souza, 2015; Bezerra, 2015; Fé, 2012; Fernandes, 2018; Ferreira & Scatolin, 2013; Fracetto, 2020; França, 2017; Gobbo, 2018; Golshan, 2020; Jardim, 2010; Kudriavtsev & Fattakhova, 2015; Lima, 2018; Maheirie et al., 2015; Marcello, 2016; Marques, 2018; Martineli & Almeida, 2017; Mendonça, 2018; Montezi & Souza, 2013; Oliveira & Stoltz, 2010; P. G. Oliveira, 2014; L. G. Oliveira, 2018; Paixão & Borges, 2018; Paixão, 2020; Peres et al., 2018; Romanelli, 2011; Sampaio et al., 2017; Schlindwein et al., 2019; P. L. Silva, 2019; Silva, M. C. 2019; Sita, 2017; V. L. T. Souza et al., 2018).

Considering the research that focused on childhood, the period most focused on by studies, we have the study by Almeida, Krüger-Fernandes and Borges (2020), bringing a relationship between the role of make-believe and child development, linked to creativity and imagination. The study by Paixão (2020) also brings imagination into this perspective, highlighting its aspect of expanding experience, going beyond empirical immediacy. P. L. Silva (2019), focused on the analysis of the game of rules and its possibilities for child development, highlights the link between imagination and creativity; thus, the study by M. C. Silva (2019) brings an articulation between imagination, role-playing and human formation. Imagination appears, together with play, as an instrument of high level of development (P. L. Silva, 2019), conceived as a place of resistance, being at the service of human emancipation; as well as allowing the flow of creations and ways of signifying reality (P. G. Oliveira, 2014). We observe in the study by L. G. Oliveira (2018) the relationship between imagination and creativity, similar to the research by Romanelli (2011) by bringing the aspect of elevation thinking provided by imagination, which allows a certain autonomy in the face of reality. The study by Montezi and Souza (2013), similarly to the research by Fé (2012) and Gobbo (2018), brings reflections on the importance of imagination and creativity in relation to the teaching-learning processes.

In summary, we find once again in such materials the theme of creativity, which expands human experiences and allows the creation of a new, qualitatively superior tomorrow, thus relating to freedom, which is intertwined with play in order to promote development; we did not find studies that considered imagination as an inhibitor of development.

Imagination that Inhibits the Capacity for Action

From a dialectical perspective, we ought to look at imagination as an activity that is not necessarily linked to power, freedom, or creativity. This category groups few studies in which imagination does not necessarily appear to be associated with powerful aspects; the group contains five studies (Branco, 2014; García, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Molina et al., 2011; A. R. Silva, 2018).

In A. R. Silva's study (2018), we find a critique of the ideological aspects present in creativity, subverting it into reproduction and adaptation, but not including it in the ideological process itself thus preserving it, in its essence, as an instrument for transforming reality. In Giroux's study (2014), we find reflections on neoliberalism as a machine for de-imagination, but not imagination itself as a constituent of neoliberal thinking. In Molina, Lopes and Achilles' study (2011), we find a direct relationship between imagination and alienation, highlighting that imagination does not necessarily have a favorable aspect of action, emerging as an instance that supports, in articulation with the social dynamics of the school in which the political orientations, beliefs and practices of teachers are present.

We can thus observe the few studies that present aspects that are not necessarily powerful regarding imagination, that is, that are not only associated with creativity, freedom, power and human development. At the same time in which we can observe that such remarks are made against a background in which imagination appears protected as a dimension that favors action and then begins to be co-opted and distorted. We highlight the study by Molina et al., (2011), in which imagination appears associated to the construction of beliefs, which are based on the macrosocial context, presupposing the mediation of social relations and not only as a separate instance, which in turn guides actions, positions and principles; in short, they are beliefs and positions that occur with imagination and through imagination, and are, therefore, the only studies in which imagination does not appear only as an instance of power, freedom and human development, but rather at the basis of the most diverse beliefs and positions.

Conclusion

As a result of our integrative literature review, we obtained a sample corpus composed of 71 studies, comprising 46 articles, 18 dissertations and seven theses. Considering again our research question, we came across the following understandings about imagination in literature: as an instance of creativity, power, freedom, emancipation and intrinsically linked to human development; imagination that is awakened, developed and favored through contact with art and play; imagination, finally, that is inhibited by rigid ways of thinking and by rational logic. Only five studies presented imagination as not necessarily being related to powerful aspects of freedom and human development yet being understood as such in its essence. If we understand that imagination is present in the bases of actions, emotions and thoughts, why would it be associated only with such aspects of power, development, creativity and freedom? Only one study has advanced in this direction, thus indicating that the study of imagination beyond its understanding that favors action is a fertile field.

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Contributors

Study design, analysis and interpretation of data, discussion of results, review and approval of the final version: T. G. ANDRADE. Study design, analysis and interpretation of data, discussion of results, review and approval of the final version: V. L. T. SOUZA. Analysis and interpretation of data, discussion of results, review and approval of the final version: W. A. OLIVEIRA.