

# Contributions of Psychology to school education: perpetuation or transformation of social inequalities?

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## Abstract

This article discusses the role of the school in the constitution of subjects. It addresses the school's contributions to the subjects' development or inhibition, depending on student interactions. It places the school in the broader context of society, considering the multiple factors that constitute it as an institution that simultaneously conserves and transforms values, knowledge, and other cultural practices and impairs development processes of children, adolescents, and adults. On the one hand, it reflects on the school as a producer of inequality and, on the other one, as a promoter of aid in overcoming the conditions of existence. In this article, we emphasize the role of the school as a promoter of developmental possibilities.

**Keywords:** Cultural psychology; Educational inequality; School psychology.

This reflective article is the result of studies, research, and discussions developed by a research group within the scope of the Graduate Program in Psychology and addresses the school and its role in the development of children and adolescents from the perspective of School/Educational Psychology, inserting itself as a privileged institution in the circulation of goods produced by culture. It attempts to problematize the complexity of the school space as a scenario that enables comings and goings between the subjects who interact and constitute themselves within it.

School relations are understood as an interactive process, whose meanings and senses are constantly reinterpreted in the construction of the concrete reality of the school. This perspective assumes education as a dynamic and negotiated process, which constitutes the actions of the different school actors, in the production of the values, beliefs and principles that guide the school routine. As a legal institution for all Brazilian citizens, the school, especially the public school (in which most children and young people in the country study) faces daily challenges related to tensions produced by a multiplicity of factors that appear as demands on their actions, among which, the diversity of stories, knowledge, principles, and values that hold teachers, managers, students, and the community, as well as the material conditions in which school education develops, produced by public policies that alternate periodically, maintaining the characteristics of the current administration, and not state policies.

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## The Brazilian public school: a promoter of development or a producer of inequality?

Based on the assumptions of Historical-Cultural Psychology, we have defended the school's potential in promoting the development of Higher Psychological Functions that favor complex thinking, capable of expanding the subject's meanings of the world, through this, dominating more elaborate ways of thinking and forms of language that intermingle in the production of meanings, mobilized by imaginative processes that result in power of action. It is in this sense that the school can constitute itself as an agent to overcome inequalities, sometimes defined only by income differences between individuals.

For Arretche (2015), inequality is related to the condition of access to a society's goods and services, corresponding to the individual's right to a dignified life in order to be able to expand his or her freedom. These rights, then, would not be reducible to income, that is, all citizens, in an egalitarian society, would have access to essential services. Therefore, considering the inequality present at school implies addressing its multi-determinations (Souza, 2019).

In this article, we want to highlight the role of the school, not in the training of individuals for the labor market (as foreseen in the new educational policies, notably in the National Common Basic Curriculum)<sup>2</sup>, a dimension that places it at the service of capital, but the opposite – placing it as a promoter of the consciousness of the subjects that inhabit the school space, about themselves and about the world, about the conditions of their current lives, that is, the domain of knowledge, the history of this knowledge and its appropriation is what will promote visualizing the possibilities for the future.

### The school as a promoter of the development of the subjects

From an early age, the appropriation of human culture by children is characterized as a continuous and progressive process, which promotes the development of their psychological functions towards an ever-greater complexity, by acquiring a mediated character (Friedrich, 2012). Thus, attention, for example, at first regulated by the environment, in which the other introduces worldly things to the child, is regulated by the own child who, at progressive levels, starts to direct and maintain this attention for the appropriation of new understandings, expanding their meanings. In other words, when constituting itself as mediated, attention assumes the character of mediator, starting to act in the development of other functions.

Language competes, in this process, a mediating function par excellence, since it constitutes itself as a psychological instrument in the subject's access to culture, through the interactions undertaken. According to Friedrich (2012), the psychological instrument would have two qualities that, in a dialectical manner, constitute it: it is mediatized, because it focuses, simultaneously, on the regulation of the social and the individual who performs the action and, because of that, it is mediatizing. Therefore, it is interesting for psychology to analyze the uses of psychological instruments, given their social origin and because, consequently, they carry within them qualities of these interactions that will constitute the subject's psychic life (Friedrich, 2012). The importance attributed to the school as a promoter of access to knowledge and ways of thinking and relationships lies in this idea, which will constitute the subject as psychological instruments at the service of development – in what concerns us – students in the period of adolescence.

Taking the example of the written word and aligning it with the theme of the studies that inspire this article, a sentence spray-painted on the wall, as a psychological instrument, bears not only the meanings it



<sup>2</sup> The *Base Nacional Curricular Comum* (BNCC, National Common Basic Curriculum) is a normative document for the educational system, approved in 2017 with guidelines to be implemented by 2020, it is still the subject of discussion and demand for approval of some of the items and proposals.

wants to communicate, but also the social relationships appropriated by young people (Takara, 2016). In this sense, we corroborate Friedrich (2012, p. 62, our translation)<sup>3</sup> when she affirms that “[...] it is the social nature of psychological instruments that becomes one of the privileged objects of psychology, as it is sought to understand which are the objects that acquire this function, when and how”. In other words, the action of an instrument on itself or on the other person constitutes mediatizing activity as a means mobilized to achieve the desired result. It is worth asking: to what extent do the knowledge taught or the situations experienced at school constitute mediatizing activities, which necessarily change the course of development?

From the theoretical perspective adopted here, it is understood that the greater the access to new knowledge, related to things in the empirical or theoretical world or even to the norms and values of culture, the better the performance of psychological functions, which at each new acquisition produce new relationships, expanding the subject’s ways of seeing and thinking about the world. In other words, the greater the possibilities of meaning and, therefore, of development. However, if this access is not available to young people, their possibilities for future actions are restricted. A worrying example of this issue is the results of official educational assessments of students in Brazil, realizing that most of them do not master basic language or mathematical knowledge.

Considering the central role of language in mediating the development of higher psychological functions, via meanings of what is lived and thought, the situation of the school in terms of fulfilling its socio-political role in relation to current and future generations seems to be dramatic.

It is at school, whose private function is the transmission of knowledge socially elaborated by culture, that the development of children and young people can reach much higher levels about their psychic functioning. This is because, at that moment, the subject encounters formal knowledge, with concepts, explanatory principles, new ways of representing and explaining reality that, in turn, require new ways of understanding and thinking from the subject. This demand from the environment promotes new relationships or links between psychological functions that give the psychological system greater quality in terms of the possibilities of action and thinking. And, according to Vigotski (1930/2006), it is at the end of childhood and beginning of adolescence that a psychological function develops, precisely as a result of the relationships between the other functions mentioned, of great importance for the learning of school knowledge and for the development of the subject: thinking by concept.

This function allows the subject to think in an abstract way, without any reference from the empirical world, a thought that is required for learning the contents of Mathematics, physics, chemistry, language, in short. It is also thought by concept, of a complex and abstract nature, that enables the development of critical thinking as the capacity to perceive and conceive the world as an expanded reality and to see the conditions of today’s facts, identifying their historicity, that is, their origins and causes. Knowledge, once appropriated, becomes the means for the subject’s acting and thinking, and can be thought of as psychological instruments in their mediatizing character, insofar as these subjects start to act, internally, at the same time, towards the subject per se and towards the environment, consolidating new ways of thinking and acting and opening to new appropriations. So, knowledge allows subjects to free themselves from the empirical world, as they carry the means to act and think about reality (Souza, 2016a; 2019).

This process of development of the psychological system is equivalent to awareness as a capacity to understand oneself in relation to the world, as well as the other one and their relationships. However, in order to be effective, it requires mastery of codes of culture in their most elaborate forms, such as spoken and written language, mathematical formulas and the modes of reasoning that involves knowledge of

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<sup>3</sup> In the original text: “[...] é a natureza social dos instrumentos psicológicos que se torna um dos objetos privilegiados da psicologia, pois se busca compreender quais são os objetos que adquirem essa função, em qual época e de que modo” (Friedrich, 2012, p. 62).

physics, arts, politics, economics, in short, which, for Vigotski (1935/2010), would represent the ideal development, understood as within the reach of all individuals, since it is the appropriation of the conquests of human culture.

It happens that the school has not invested in the implementation of pedagogical practices that favor the development of higher psychological functions, such as voluntary or self-regulated attention, language as a mode of expression and communication, mediated memory, imagination and thinking by concept, possible through reflection built on questions and not ready-made answers; through access to new linguistic expressions, new textual typologies and not in copies of texts on the blackboard or activities that involve following closed procedures and reaching unique answers. The school, mostly, continues to develop a teaching method that focuses on memorization and reproduction, maintaining the concept that, once literate, the child or young person will naturally continue to learn the school contents regardless of their complexity (Souza, 2016b).

The fact is that this way of teaching alienates the subject from reaching new ways of thinking and acting, preventing him or her from accessing other levels of psychological functioning and from becoming autonomous in order to learn and master new knowledge. This concern is rooted in the concern we have with students attending Middle School (in Brazil: *Ensino Fundamental II*), whose curriculum is organized around the teaching of complex contents, which require thinking by concept for their appropriation (Souza, 2016a).

Still on the role of the school, it is worth highlighting the way in which Vigotski (1925/2007) understands the relationship between learning and development. For the author, although they are dialectical processes in which both are intertwined in the production of new possibilities of action and thought, learning would be a step forward, since it is a means of access to culture, whose appropriation puts development in motion – this development, while taking place, generates new learning possibilities that, when effective, result in development. Our belief the school as a promoter of the development of the subject is based on this conception.

## The school as a producer of inequality

There are several assessments that measure the performance of Brazilian Basic Education students and attest to the performance differences between students from private and public schools. One of them is the Programme for International Student Assessment, from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which assessed a sample of 10,691 students in 2019, 1,381 from private schools and 9,310 from public schools. The results rank Brazil, with one of the lowest scores in the world among the assessed countries, in the 70<sup>th</sup> position in the ranking. However, the assessment also shows the difference in performance between students from private and public schools. In areas such as reading and science, for example, private-school students rank 11<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, respectively. The assessments of public-school students in the same areas, on the other hand, rank them 62<sup>nd</sup>.

Another important indicator of the quality of Basic Education in Brazil is the *Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (IDEB, Basic Education Development Index), which uses a scale from 0 to 10. Developed by the *Instituto Nacional de Pesquisa Educacional Anísio Teixeira* (INEP, Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Research), a branch of the Ministry of Education, the IDEB synthesizes, in a single indicator, two dimensions to measure the quality of education: the flow, which represents the student's approval rate, and the learning, which corresponds to the students' results in an assessment of the *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica* (SAEB, Basic Education Assessment System) assessed by the Prova Brasil (which assesses public education) and the *Avaliação Nacional da Educação Básica* (National Basic Education Assessment) – SAEB's sample assessment that includes private schools.

In 2019, IDEB's results show the gap between the performance of students from private and public schools, as shown in the following data (this statement can be seen in numbers at each level of education): Early years (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade of Elementary School): public schools: learning (6.02) – flow (0.94) – IDEB (5.7), private schools: learning (7.18) – flow (0.99) – IDEB (7.4); Final Years (6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade of Middle School): public schools: learning (5.1) – flow (0.89) – IDEB (4.6), private schools: learning (6.61) – flow (0.97) – IDEB (6.4); High School: public schools: learning (4.54) – flow (0.86) – IDEB (3.9), private schools: learning (6.61) – flow (0.97) – IDEB (6.0).

It is interesting to note that the higher the school grade, the higher the difference in performance, as learning decreases, and the flow that indicates failure increases. That is, while in the early years of learning, public-school students scored 6.02 and the flow was 0.94 (indicating 6 failures per 100 students), in the final years of Basic Education – High School, learning was 4.84 and the flow was 0.86 (14 failures). How can learning decrease after years of education? This is a paradox to be faced and overcome.

These data also indicate that, at all levels, High School (as the final years of Basic Education), having the function of preparing students to continue their studies in higher education or to enter the labor market, is the educational level that most needs investments and public policies capable of overcoming these unequal conditions, given that the IDEB scores of private schools is practically twice as high when compared to the scores of public schools.

It is important to point out, however, that (as stated in the preceding pages) this condition of the Brazilian educational system reflects the historical inequalities in the country and the urgency of tackling education as a place of struggle and overcoming inequalities is what we want to defend in this paper.

Libâneo (2012, p. 13, our translation)<sup>4</sup>, reflecting on the role of the school in the transformation of social reality, defends the existence of a “[...] perverse dualism of the Brazilian public school”. According to his observations, there would be a school of knowledge, aimed at serving the rich, and a school of social acceptance, aimed at the poor.

Based on this premise, it is possible to think that the possibility to access spaces, to stay in classrooms, to have contact with peers, to obtain certain materials, to access school meals, and to learn basic reading and writing skills would be reserved to less favored people. But the most important legacy of humanity would not be accessible to them: schooled knowledge with its complex characteristic capable of promoting the development of higher psychological functions, as pointed out in the preceding item (Souza, 2019).

This perverse dualism that has contributed to the production of inequality in Brazil has its roots, according to the author, in the neoliberal policy that has taken place in the country and served as a contribution to the installation of movements for education that reinforce and sustain the low quality of the education offered to most Brazilians.

In the documentary “*Nunca me sonharam*” (They never dreamed of me), by Rhoden (2017), whose opening presents Art. 2005 of the Federal Constitution, which places education as a right of all people and a duty of the State and the Family, and aims at the full development of the individual for the exercise of citizenship and work, a young editor, from the poor, working class says that “the idea of meritocracy is great, but it is a very good excuse for not having to solve some problems, because there is a race to get to the top of the building, but rich people start from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, in an elevator, and the poor people start from the underground parking, taking the stairs”. Although both have gone through Basic Education, part of which – elementary education – is a model for overcoming inequality in Brazil regarding the number of children and young people served.

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<sup>4</sup> In the original text: “[...] *dualismo perverso da escola pública brasileira*” (Libâneo, 2012, p. 13).

Whether we focus on this segment of education or move on to High School, even though the latter has embarrassing numbers on the frequency and permanence of students, what stands out is the difference in performance: as pointed out in the introduction, a small a portion of public-school graduates dominates basic knowledge of Portuguese and Mathematics<sup>5</sup>, fundamental knowledge for the development of the psyche and consequent mastery of more elaborated and complex knowledge by the subjects.

What is the reason for such a difference, if the curriculum in Brazil is the same for the entire educational system, for public or private schools? What could underlie the low performance of public-school students? Why does the overcoming of inequality promoted by the universalization of Elementary Education and the expansion of the number of places in high school and higher education not result in better living conditions in society for a larger portion of the population?

Arretche (2015) draws attention to the treatment that researchers and public policy managers have given to the issue of inequality – sometimes as a condition that, once overcome, is naturalized and never referred to again. The author argues that it is necessary to take it in the plural form, and observe its movement, and then proposes to consider the “trajectories of inequalities”, since this is not manifested as something unique, but represents and reflects a set of situations that characterize it, precisely the reason to talk about trajectory.

[...] the term ‘inequality’ is too abstract. In the social world, there are multiple inequalities: between rich and poor, between women and men, between categories of races, which, in turn, manifest themselves in terms of income, access to services, and political participation. [...] Understanding inequality requires examining its multiple dimensions (Arretche, 2015, p. 6, our translation)<sup>6</sup>.

This explanation allows a first approach to the understanding of the question raised above: the inequality of “access to Elementary School” has been overcome, with the creation of school places for all students, but not that of “access to quality education”. And then the trajectory changes: it is necessary to understand the inequalities produced in the provision of quality education in schools and create ways to overcome them through public policies.

Adding Libâneo’s explanation (2012) to this issue seems plausible to continue the reflection: even though every child is in elementary school, there are differences in the way rich people’s schools and poor people’s schools operate. The author, based on an examination of educational policies in the last 20 years in Brazil, analyzing its roots or principles, summarizes what has characterized Basic Education in the country as a “perverse dualism”, given its efficiency in producing and maintaining social inequalities. It refers to the links of such a policy to the reform of English education in the 1980s, on a neoliberal basis, and highlights that this policy would have a close relationship with a series of international agreements, in the wake of the “Education for All” movement<sup>7</sup>, which constitute a package by the World Bank for the alleged improvement of the quality of education (Souza, 2019).

We understand, corroborating the ideas of Libâneo (2012), that educational policies created from the interests of international bodies – mediated by the World Bank about what would be or should be

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<sup>5</sup> According to data from SAEB, conducted by INEP, an agency of the Ministry of Education responsible for the assessment that involves more than 70,000 schools in Brazil and assesses Basic Education in Portuguese and Mathematics, student performance is below expectations for all assessed levels (Ministério da Educação, 2021, online).

<sup>6</sup> In the original text: [...] *o termo ‘desigualdade’ é excessivamente abstrato. No mundo social, existem múltiplas desigualdades: entre ricos e pobres, entre mulheres e homens, entre categorias de raças, as quais, por sua vez, se manifestam na renda, no acesso a serviços, na participação política. [...] Entender a desigualdade requer examinar suas múltiplas dimensões* (Arretche, 2015, p. 6).

<sup>7</sup> According to the author, this movement had, as its milestone, the “World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, under the auspices of the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)” (Libâneo, 2012, p. 12).

the requirements for quality of education in Brazil, without considering the complexity that characterizes the students of public schools, and based on neoliberal bases, become a fertile soil for the diversity and antagonisms of positions on the objectives and purposes of school education in Brazil. That is, the less the clarity, the greater the alienation and tendency to naturalize what is actually historical and cultural (Souza, 2019).

It is worthy to emphasize, which in our point of view greatly impacts the meanings about and with the school, the infinity of functions that school would have according to what circulates in the educational environment. These meanings derive from countless proposals, generally antagonistic or contradictory, that vary from a public outcry to returning to what would be a “traditional” pedagogy, with a central focus on teaching content arranged in closed organizations and without opening the insertion of variations arising from the context to a focus on assistance and acceptance to populations that attend public school as a way to face inequality (Libâneo, 2012).

It seems to us that the question to be asked in an article that proposes to discuss education from the perspective of Cultural Psychology is regarding the impact of these policies, centered on polarized views about what education should be, on the development of children and adolescents, with adjustable variables to the least or most favored.

Cited by Libâneo (2012), the Portuguese educator and researcher Antônio Nóvoa, already in 2009, drew attention to the danger that an education with different “paces” may involve, developed in schools aimed at different audiences and objectives: for the poor it would assume social acceptance as its main function, with an emphasis on citizen formation and participation; and for the rich, with a focus on learning, in the domain of different languages and technologies.

Nóvoa’s concern can be thought of from the dialectical perspective that characterizes the phenomena in the type of analysis that concerns us: the speech of the young editor in the introduction of this item, that in the race to the top of the building, the rich start on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and take the elevator, and the poor start in the underground parking, taking the stairs, added to the investment cuts and the results of Basic Education assessments, seem to indicate that education in Brazil has not only managed to produce inequality, but has perpetuated it and, even today, the future is reckless, a meaning that leads us to identify a neoliberal project that aims to benefit a few individuals.

## **The gimmicks of inequality: the difficulty in dealing with differences and the different**

The last School Census, published in 2018, shows that there were 48.6 million students enrolled in Basic Education in Brazil. Of this total, only 18.3% are in the private school system, that is, the vast majority of Brazilian children and young people, from 0 to 17 years old (81.7%) attend the public school system (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisa Educacional Anísio Teixeira, 2018).

An examination of the issue allows the identification of contradictions in layers: the school made to accept, under the motto of acceptance, excludes precisely because of its “rejection to differences” (Cunha & Dazzani, 2016). It was designed to accept a type of child and young person who conforms to the rules and norms and submits to what the State, which should guarantee their rights, offers – which is, in general, what its public does not need or want. How to serve the nearly 40 million students guaranteeing their rights of access to cultural goods, which are essential to the development of complex Psychological Functions, such as thinking by concept, for example? The way of thinking necessary for the appropriation of complex knowledge, required to master technological languages, concepts of physics, chemistry, and Mathematics? This knowledge, in turn, are mediatizers of the subject’s development process, which does not cease, but,

in contrast, allows him or her to access new knowledge, develop new relationships and thoughts. And, thus, being able to glimpse life conditions different from those this individual currently experiences (Souza, 2016a; 2019).

## A brief account of the experience at school

The following report, taken from a field diary, reports to a public Middle School in a large city in the countryside of the state of São Paulo. It is part of an intervention carried out by a psychologist-doctoral student who studies emotions in the school environment.

I joined the 6<sup>th</sup> grade class to introduce myself by telling my story in third person. While counting, the students looked at each other, smiled, whispered, were attentive. At the end, a request: now tell me your story, I want to meet you! What I heard was an avalanche of suffering, pain, sadness in the form of experiences, of those that I still thought were only children. There were those who did not want to tell their story, my interest in meeting them made them cry, they tried to hide behind their backpacks and behind silence. But, out of this oral silence, writing emerged, another way of communicating, of expressing a desire for a space to be heard. The cries, reactions of anger, fear, different feelings, however, persisted. During half a semester, when I arrived at school, students were already waiting for me in the hall, crying. Upon entering the room, before greeting me, I heard requests to “make a circle and talk” and there were still those who came to me after my interventions to talk, many declining to enjoy the school break (Jesus, 2020, p. 6, our translation)<sup>8</sup>.

What is the reason for the frequent and recurrent crying manifestations in that group of students? Reporting to other situations experienced by the members of the research group, we did not find anything similar. Instigated to understand the phenomenon and seeking to contribute to overcoming that condition of suffering experienced by students, we started a storytelling project and, throughout the activities, other manifestations were observed, such as “[...] discussions in aggressive tones triggered by ordinary reasons, fights, sometimes with physical aggressions and verbal offenses, refusals to talk or look at the psychologist, almost all episodes accompanied by crying” (Jesus, 2020, p. 12 our translation)<sup>9</sup>. “Even though the phenomenon at that time proved to be obscure, some contradictions that supported its concrete existence began to unveil” (Jesus, 2020, p. 12 our translation)<sup>10</sup>, which enabled us to question: why were emotions prevalent at school, becoming the focus of concern for educators? How to act, as school psychologists, in order to enhance the students’ resources for the understanding of their own emotions?

Our group dialogue and reflection attempts proved to be fruitless, and we observed that they just wanted to be able to express what they were feeling and felt accepted in our meetings.

Concomitantly, teachers and the school’s management team reported the difficulty in dealing with situations, in getting students to appropriate the knowledge taught, since the prevalence of emotions hindered students’

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<sup>8</sup> In the original text: *Entrei na turma do 6º ano para me apresentar contando minha história em terceira pessoa. Enquanto contava, os alunos se entreolhavam, sorriam, cochichavam, estavam atentos. Ao terminar, um pedido: agora me contem a história de vocês, quero conhecê-los! O que escutei foi uma avalanche de sofrimento, de dor, de tristeza em forma de experiências, daqueles que eu considerava ainda crianças. Aqueles que não quiseram contar a sua história, o meu interesse em conhecê-los mobilizou choros, tentativas de se esconder atrás da mochila e do silêncio. Mas, desse silêncio na fala oral surgiu a escrita, um outro jeito de se comunicar, de manifestar querer um espaço para ser ouvido. Os choros, reações de raiva, de medo, de diferentes sentimentos, entretanto, perduraram. No decorrer de meio semestre, ao chegar na escola, já havia alunos me esperando no corredor, chorando. Ao entrar na sala, antes de me cumprimentarem, já ouvia pedidos para “fazer uma roda e conversar” e havia ainda, aqueles que me procuravam após as minhas intervenções para conversar, muitos deixando de aproveitar o intervalo* (Jesus, 2020, p. 6).

<sup>9</sup> In the original text: “[...] discussões em tons agressivos desencadeadas por motivos banais, brigas, por vezes, com agressões físicas e ofensas verbais, recusas em conversar ou olhar para a psicóloga, quase todos os episódios acompanhados de choro” (Jesus, 2020, p. 12).

<sup>10</sup> In the original text: “Ainda que o fenômeno naquele momento se mostrasse obscuro, iniciava-se o desvelamento de algumas contradições que sustentavam sua existência concreta” (Jesus, 2020, p. 12).



concentration and attention. Faced with these moments, the teachers' decisions and actions were aimed at controlling emotions, such as telling students to stop crying and/or refer them to the principal's office (Jesus, 2020, p. 13 our translation)<sup>11</sup>.

The teachers then started to relate the students' crying to our work, suggesting that the actions we developed made the students' cry.

These events revealed to us not only the conflicts that existed in the relationships, but, above all, that new conflicts were produced when emotions predominated, especially in the relationships between teachers and students. This is because it is not known how to deal with emotions, or, better said, in the teachers' meanings, the school is not a place of emotions, even if it means being a place of acceptance.

According to Sawaia (2009), all suffering is social, and the "ethical-political" quality attributed to suffering implies understanding it as linked to servitude, passivity, and as a way of positioning oneself politically, since this suffering is crossed by the social class. The 'ethical-political' brings in its conception the fact that the individual is subject to the power of the other, which defines his or her place and possibility of mobility in society. What is the place of these young people who cannot even understand what they feel and why they feel it? What implications does this situation have for their development? How to live with the sadness to which they are subjected? How to learn in this condition?

For Vigotski (1934/2009), all action is motivated, based on the affective-volitional, and emotions are an essential part of the learning activity. He understands affectivity as inseparable from higher psychological functions, which can be defined as the human capacity to affect and be affected, and corresponding to emotions and feelings, with emotion being a more immediate and momentary affection, awakened by something specific, while the feeling would be emotion elaborated, meaningful, more lasting and that does not bind to specificities. In this sense, emotions/feelings can be understood as a higher psychological function, since they are mediated by culture. According to Sawaia (2000, p. 14, our translation)<sup>12</sup>, "[...] emotions are also mediated functions, they are superior human feelings, because even the organism itself reacts to meanings in a way that the brain synapses are mediated socially".

However, its manifestation, seen as a "problem" that hinders learning and coexistence at school, that transforms sensitive, spontaneous, effusive, introspective singularities, into "crybabies", "uncontrolled", "aggressive", "depressive", "weird" ones, competes in the production of stigmas that, contrary to recognizing differences and taking them into their potential in interactions that promote development, mark the subjects and generate more conflicts, making the school a place that excludes differences. This is the contradiction manifested by the school of acceptance that does not accept, precisely because it does not recognize this function per se, since it has traditionally been postulated as a place of teaching and learning.

There are many questions that would need to be addressed for an analysis of the reasons that would form the basis of the public-school functioning. Issues that go beyond educational policies and the history of education in Brazil. As Libâneo (2012, p. 14, our translation)<sup>13</sup> points out, "[...] the educational field itself, in the institutional, intellectual and associative spheres, is far from obtaining a minimum consensus on the objectives and functions of the public school in today's society".

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<sup>11</sup> In the original text: *Concomitantemente, professores e equipe gestora da escola relatavam a dificuldade em lidar com as situações, em conseguir que os alunos se apropriassem do conhecimento ensinado, uma vez que a prevalência das emoções emperrava a concentração e a atenção dos estudantes. Frente a estes momentos, as decisões e ações dos docentes visavam ao controle das emoções, como dizer aos alunos que parassem de chorar e/ou encaminhando-os à gestão* (Jesus, 2020, p. 13).

<sup>12</sup> In the original text: "[...] as emoções também são funções mediadas, são sentimentos humanos superiores, pois até o próprio organismo reage a significados de forma que as sinapses cerebrais são mediadas socialmente" (Sawaia, 2000, p. 14).

<sup>13</sup> In the original text: "[...] o próprio campo educacional, nos âmbitos institucional, intelectual e associativo, está longe de obter um consenso mínimo sobre os objetivos e as funções da escola pública na sociedade atual" (Libâneo, 2012, p. 14).

However, what was sought with these reflections was to problematize the effects of education offered in public schools in promoting the development of children and adolescents who have, at school, one of the very few chances to access and appropriate cultural resources, especially formal and complex knowledge, whose teaching is within the scope of the school's duties. And, before moving on to the last item of this article, it should be noted that, as stated by Arretche (2015), in underdeveloped countries, such as Brazil, inequality is never overcome, but instead it changes trajectory, the struggle to be undertaken is for the establishment of State policies that are capable of permanently mapping and acting in the fight against inequality, and not of government policies which, from time to time, change their focus and choose the questions that best suit specific, sometimes questionable, objectives.

## Final Considerations

By the time I finish this reflection, we have completed a year of social isolation and the closing of schools as a result of COVID-19, a pandemic that devastated the world in 2020, forcing us to stay in our homes as a way to prevent the spread of the virus. At this time, many and several initiatives were developed by schools in order to continue to favor student learning and to avoid wasting the school year. Private schools acted quickly, invested in equipment and teacher training, and students, in turn, equipped with sufficient technology to access the classes offered by schools, managed to continue studying, although not in an ideal way or in the desired way. Public schools, on the other hand, had many and countless difficulties, starting with the delay in establishing new ways of teaching and accessing students. There was a huge effort by administrators and educators, but after more than half an academic year, about 50% of the students were not following the activities, the vast majority for not having technological equipment to watch the classes. Therefore, the difference in performance that was already great, now widens and shows social inequality as a great barrier for the development of children and young people. And the consequences of being out of school do not stop there, the drop in the number of enrollments in High School in 2021 indicates the exceedingly high dropout rate of young people from school, putting at risk the possibilities of overcoming the unequal conditions they experience. The challenge that schools have faced is to bring these young people back to school.

What defines or characterizes the complexity of the issues developed in this text is the fact that the school is configured as a space in which singular subjects interact, with different values, beliefs, needs, interests, life histories, and objectives, giving educational scenarios and contexts the character of heterogeneity and diversity. However, complex is not synonymous with problematic or undesirable, but with development potential, mediated by diversity.

In line with the authors who support the reflection proposed in this article, I understand the environment as a condition for development, considering it as a source, from whose interactions the subject appropriates culture. It happens that the subject appropriates culture and develops it in several directions, being able to continue towards an increasingly complex development, conquering possibilities of authorship and freedom, or to orient him or herself in directions that prevent him or her from accessing higher levels of thought, maintaining him or herself in conditions of submission and suffering, at the mercy of the precarious material conditions that cause suffering, without being able to visualize possible paths or ways out. And the school is a favorable medium to transform these conditions, insofar as it invests in the reflection about what one feels, experiences, perceives oneself in relation to one's experiences, and imagined by children and adolescents who attend public school.

If the conditions that characterize the Brazilian public school today reveal huge problems, education, if focused on offering the symbols of culture, can and should promote new horizons for children and young

people, offering experiences that enable different trajectories for each subject, made possible by the universe of possible meanings, which should characterize the world of culture when referring to as the possibilities that are permanently open to human beings. Humans, who are and always will be diverse.

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