

# Mixed is bad, it's too messy, I can't do it! The participation of a student with Down Syndrome in Physical Education classes

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## **Abstract:**

This text focuses on the schooling process of a student with Down Syndrome, considering the context of Inclusive Education. The aim of the study is to understand the meanings that a student with Down Syndrome attributes to physical education classes. The study is based on the historical-cultural perspective of human development. The data were constructed in a municipal public school in a medium-sized city in the state of São Paulo, recorded through narrative interviews. The results indicate that the meanings that the student makes about her Physical Education classes are contradictory; now shows satisfaction in participating, now shows discontent. Moreover, the findings point to the need for an educational change opportunity not only to be in the social environment, but to act in it, as a protagonist, as a subject capable of learning and developing.

**Keywords:** Special Education. Inclusive Education. School Inclusion.

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## **I. Introduction**

The present article is an excerpt of a larger research, developed in the context of a Postgraduate Program in Education, at the doctoral level. The general objective of this research was to understand the meanings that students with disabilities and with Autism Spectrum Disorder attribute to the way they experience their schooling processes.

The theme of Physical Education in the context of Inclusive Education has been a mobilizing axis of my studies. Looking at students with disabilities and searching for ways and possibilities of working with them was what motivated me to do this research. Therefore, this text aims to understand the meanings that a student with Down Syndrome attributes to Physical Education classes.

Currently, Physical Education is a compulsory curriculum component of Basic Education and is integrated into the Common National Curriculum Base (BNCC). The document regulates the Common Basic Curriculum for all Basic Education in Brazil. In it, Physical Education is inserted in the Language area, together with the curricular components Portuguese Language, Modern Foreign Language, and Art (BRASIL, 2017). Physical Education is conceived and understood as language, with the fundamental purpose of contributing to the constitution of human subjectivity. The justification for including Physical Education in the area and understanding it as a language is done by understanding that, through body practices, it is possible to have a greater sociocultural understanding and provide its use as practices (BRASIL, 2017).

As observed, Physical Education has its legitimacy ensured for the basic levels in public education on a national scale. However, the process of teaching and learning of students with disabilities in Physical Education classes has taken place in a very conflicting and controversial way; inclusive public policies elaborated, but not effective; homogeneous curricula that do not meet the singularities of students; lack of support from the responsible agencies; lack of structure of schools (CARVALHO; ARAÚJO, 2018; FIORINI; MANZINI, 2018; CASTRO; TELLES, 2018).

On the other hand, these studies highlight that Physical Education has a strong and important role as a curricular component for the schooling of students with disabilities, contributing and overcoming stigmas about these students. They also point out that the limitations of the disability cannot outweigh the potentialities and point out the several benefits that Physical Education classes provide for these students, such as the contributions to the improvement of the physical, cognitive, and social aspects.

As mentioned above, there are many challenges to the educational process of these students in Physical Education classes. Thus, my thought is that Physical Education, in the context of school diversity, must highlight the potential of students with disabilities, aiming to shift the focus from organic deficit to the possibilities offered by the sociocultural environment.

Studies of contemporary authors, grounded in the historical-cultural perspective (BARBUIO; CAMARGO; FREITAS, 2019), direct and point to some possibilities of facing these challenges. Such studies, discuss that, if there is a deliberate intervention proposal from the teacher, there can be the participation and learning of students with disabilities in Physical Education classes. In addition, the authors point out that when pedagogical practices are focused on the students' potentiality, with meaningful and intentional activities, the students feel more motivated to participate in the classes.

According to the National Policy of Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (BRASIL, 2008), all stages of education must follow the principles of Inclusive Education. The Policy assumes as a proposal that the school should create means, promote and provide conditions to meet diversity. Its assumptions are that it is not the students who must adapt to the school conditions, but the school that must offer opportunities consistent with the demands.

Although advances can be observed in documents and legal regulations for the schooling of students with disabilities; specifically, the issue of guaranteed enrollment. Ensuring the enrollment and permanence of students in school does not ensure that means, possibilities, real teaching opportunities are made available for the learning process and development of these students (KASSAR; REBELO; OLIVEIRA, 2019; SILVA; MACHADO; SILVA, 2019).

In the Brazilian context, this has been a major challenge. Since the promulgation of the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (BRASIL, 2008), the scientific production on the theme has intensified, comprising different views; that of the manager, the teacher, the parents (GLAT; ESTEF, 2020; NUNES; MANZINI, 2020). However, little attention has been paid to the voices of students with disabilities (BARBUIO, 2021).

I understand that Physical Education, as part of the school curriculum, walks towards an approach that works in the perspective of inserting all students in the -learning process. Thus, in this study, some questions guide me: what does a student with Down Syndrome think about her Physical Education classes? What are the meanings the student attributes to the classes? What emotions emanate from her relationships with her teachers and peers?

I understand that the answers to these questions may help me to expose the thought that the attentive listening to the students' narratives may allow raising indicators about conditions and possibilities of development and learning, which will contribute with the elaboration of pedagogical practices that culminate with the schooling of these students. Once the students narrate their experiences, they will be able to reflect on them and give meaning to what they have experienced.

The study is based on the cultural-historical perspective of human development (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 2000), especially on Lev Semionovitch Vygotski's elaborations about the possibilities of development for people with disabilities. Furthermore, I rely on the biographical method (PASSEGGI, 2018; SARMENTO, 2018), with a focus on narratives, understanding them as a symbolic instance of language (BARBUIO, 2021).

The structure that composes this study is organized as follows. In this introductory section, I expose the theme, the objective to be reached, the questions that guide them, as well as the theoretical and methodological bases. Next, I discuss the cultural-historical perspective, which guides the investigation, with emphasis on Vygotsky's discussions about people with disabilities. Next, I present the theoretical and methodological procedures, as well as the path taken to develop the research. Finally, some reflections constructed throughout the study are pointed out.

## **II. Theoretical Foundation**

In this text, I am supported and interested in the assumptions of the cultural-historical perspective (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 2000), the way human development occurs and the paths to learning and development for the disabled person. The author's argumentative line is anchored in the historical-dialectical materialism; thus, his propositions are supported by the understanding of the genesis of human psychic processes.

Vygotsky (1991, 1995) points to a cultural development; however, he mentions that to oppose a biological process does not mean that he denies or ignores the biological structure of the human being. For the author, the processes of human development are not defined only by the biological aspect, he highlights the importance of building a view in which it is possible to understand man as belonging to an environment that is not only natural, but also cultural.

The social and the cultural are two basic aspects of all human development, which is characterized by the transformation from a biological being to a sociocultural subject. The functions of nature are not terminated in human formation, but resized as the individual establishes social relations mediated by socially created cultural signs, which are meant and internalized by him.

Based on the principle of the social nature of human development, the author exposes his ideas about the constitution of people with disabilities, focusing and discussing possibilities of development and education for these subjects. His studies on defectology have as a central principle that the development of the person with disability is guided by the same general laws of all people.

According to Vygotsky (1997), the biological condition is not the main factor for the development of the person with disability to happen or not. In first order, the impediment comes from the social group, in other words, it depends on how society and the environment receive this person. For the author, a social context with unfavorable conditions may cause primary disability to become secondary.

Primary disability is considered as biological, organic, what the subject has already biologically consolidated, such as brain lesions, organic malformation, that is, characteristics already presented by the individual. The secondary disability, the author understands as psychosocial consequences of disability, which encompass the cultural context to which the subject belongs, the way this social environment is structured and how it interferes in this subject (VIGOTSKI, 1997).

For Vygotsky (1997), the consequences of disability, given by the organic conditions, may be changed, transformed by the relationship between man and the environment, with the other. In this way, the organic limitation of a person with disability does not determine his development, what does are his social relations, which, sometimes, are configured in such a way as not to consider the person with disability as a participant in social, collective life.

Therefore, it is highlighted how the environment interferes in the development of people with disabilities. If the individual with disability is inserted in an environment that receives little or no social and cultural influence, this will certainly cause a delay in his/her development (VIGOTSKI, 1997). Thus, the learning and development of people with disabilities are essentially linked to the social.

The author criticized the school models and pedagogical methods practiced in the schools of his time. He disagreed with the idea that there should be two school models, one aimed at children with disabilities and the other for children considered "normal". The author points out and defends the idea of an educational system that aims at integrating the pedagogical principles of Special Education with those of general Pedagogy.

The criticisms pointed out by him were that the school had a clinical look to the disabled child, a look focused only on the deficit the child presented. The pedagogical practices carried out were focused on working the elementary psychic functions. They were based on mechanized techniques, repetitive and training activities, aiming at a concrete thinking, which ended up generating a limit in the development and learning of these students (VIGOTSKI, 1997).

On the other hand, the author seeks to emphasize, in his studies, the goal of creating possibilities of development and learning for the disabled student. The author states that, if there are impossibilities of some functions, there are also possibilities, offered by the sociocultural conditions.

He argues in favor of a pedagogical practice in which the student develops activities which are not yet consolidated and which he cannot develop without the help of an adult or peers. Activities that are developed through social interaction, with the help of the other, in order to enable the students a constant development of their mediated psychic functions.

An education directed to the student and not to his disability itself; that is, guided to the potentialities the student presents, and not to his deficit. For the author, the school task, regarding the education for the deficient student, is to introduce him/her in social practices, creating compensatory processes, which occur through intersubjective relations mediated semiotically (VIGOTSKI, 1997).

Supported by the cultural-historical perspective, I understand that the school must start from the principle that students with disabilities are not part of a peculiar kind of individuals, but are individuals with some peculiarities. For Vygotsky (1997, p. 12, our translation), "the child whose development is hindered by the defect is not simply a child less developed than his "normal" peers, but rather developed in another way", requiring only other means, other specific and appropriate ways for his development.

### **III. Theoretical and methodological aspects**

This study, besides being based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the cultural-historical perspective (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 2000), is also based on biographical studies (PASSEGGI, 2018; SARMENTO, 2018) and uses narratives as a source of data. The option to use narratives came from the intention to know and understand the meanings that a student with Down Syndrome attributes to Physical Education classes.

The biographical method is part of a research strand that, if used as a source for data production in qualitative research has enormous relevance to the educational field, because through this procedure it is possible to know the narrator, his life story, considering him as an agent of his social and cultural interactions (PASSEGGI, 2018; SARMENTO, 2018).

This research perspective allows the investigated, in the relationship with the other, to organize his thought and attribute meaning to the experiences experienced. In this relationship between the individual and the social, existing only through the other and the reciprocal activity, research with narratives consists of understanding the individual, facing the historical and social world in which he is inserted and what are the senses and meanings he attributes to his trajectories.

The research was developed in a municipal school in a medium-sized city in the interior of the state of São Paulo. The institution offers: Elementary School I and II, in the morning and afternoon periods; and Youth and Adult Education (YAE) in the evening period. The school has a good structure, with 30 classrooms, a multipurpose resource room for Specialized Educational Attendance, a computer lab, an art room, a patio and a covered sports court, a cafeteria, and a bathroom suitable for students with reduced mobility.

An investigative process based on the cultural-historical perspective, as presented by Vygotsky, starts from the assumption that the answer will not be in the product of the investigation, but will be revealed throughout the process (VIGOTSKI, 1995). Thus, in search of answers to my questions, I proposed to listen to a student with Down Syndrome, in order to know and understand her meanings about Physical Education classes.

The research participant is Roberta, enrolled in Elementary I, specifically, eighth grade, in 2019. The student was 14 years old and was diagnosed with Down Syndrome. The name used in this research is fictitious and was chosen by the participant herself. The intention of choosing her is justified because she is at an intermediate level of her school life and already carries with her a longer school trajectory.

According to Barbuio (2021), it is not possible to think of narrative data production with these students without thinking about the social relationship that will be established and how this relationship will take place. Moreover, the author emphasizes that the relationship should be based on listening to the students, in a way that respects them, values them, and places them as protagonists of/in the school environment, driving them to produce and elaborate senses and meanings of their school experiences.

To carry out the research, I was very concerned about the participant's ethics, trying at all times to create a relaxed environment and to have a serene look and a sensitive listening during the construction of the data. Before entering the research field, some procedures were performed; the approval of the project by the ethics committee; the presentation of the Free and Informed Consent Form, signed by the students' parents/guardians and the Free and Informed Consent Form, signed by the students.

For data construction, narrative interviews were conducted with the participant. Bolívar, Domingo and Fernández (2001) call interviews constructed from a biographical-narrative methodology as biographical interviews. According to the authors, this type of interview is very similar to a normal conversation between two subjects, what differs is that the interviewer's voice remains in the background. The interviewer, in this situation, is in charge of encouraging the interviewee to narrate his/her stories, experiences or specific moments that contribute to the research.

To this end, we created a script with some trigger themes, aiming to start Roberta's narratives: 1) Tell me about yourself, about your life story. 2) And the school, tell me about how it is at school, your relationship with your classmates and teachers. 3) For you, the school is an inclusive environment, do you feel participatory, tell me about it. 4) Tell me about the sense or meaning you have about school. 5) Do you think something could be different at school, tell me about it. The interviews took place on a date and time previously arranged with the directors and students. For the audio recordings, a smartphone was used. All recordings were transcribed in full.

In the literature, there are some studies about the narrative interview, with steps to be followed, texts similar to tutorials, with predetermined structures and models (JOVCHELOVITCH and BAUER, 2002), which may lead the researcher to believe that there is a ready, exact, correct formula for the production of data. Many times, this leads the researcher to exert a very formal posture, manners, body expressions, words of difficult understanding, which, as a consequence, generate distrust in the students and a distancing between them and the researcher (BARBUIO, 2021).

According to Barbuio (2021), for the development in the production of narrative data with students with disabilities to occur successfully, it is necessary to put aside the formal, instrumentalized, mechanized treatment, and start relating to these students in a lighter, spontaneous, relaxed manner, with jokes, jokes, informal topics. Therefore, the questions mentioned above as dialogue triggers between the researcher and the students were transcribed using the official spelling of the Portuguese language; however, this does not mean that the researcher used them in the way described.

The narratives produced by the participant were made up of small fragments, small sentences and sayings. Therefore, supported by the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the cultural-historical perspective (VIGOTSKI, 1995) and the reflections on the method of the Indicative Paradigm (GINZBURG, 1989), I seek to make an interpretive and explanatory analysis of the data, looking at the notes, the clues that reveal the meanings that Roberta has about her experiences in Physical Education classes.

In this way, I resume their narratives, paying attention to perform a careful analysis, looking for clues in their discourse, in order to transform those few and isolated words into a cohesive and coherent narrative, respecting the narrated story and the narrator's singularity. For the presentation and discussion of the data, I selected the most significant fragments to answer the proposed objective. In the following section, I expose the participant's narratives. The situations are named with phrases extracted from her narratives.

#### **IV. Narratives of a student with Down Syndrome about her Physical Education classes**

Roberta was 14 years old at the time of the study, diagnosed with Down's Syndrome. She was in the eighth grade, entering elementary school within age/grade expectations. The girl was shy, reserved, but very affectionate, affectionate, and polite; she had a good relationship with her classmates and teachers. In relation to her learning, in her records, it is noted: she reads with difficulty; writes with difficulty; has difficulty interpreting text; does addition and subtraction; does not do division and multiplication.

Roberta - "Mixed is bad, it's too messy, I can't do it.

Researcher: You talked about doing it together in PE class, tell me about it.

Roberta: Yes... There is no mixed up mess... With everything together, there is mixed up mess...

Researcher: Um... How do you mean mixed up mess?

Roberta: Yes, it gets messy mixed up

Researcher: I don't understand, what way is that?

Roberta: Because I can't, mixed up is bad, it's too messy, I can't

Researcher: Wait, you are saying that doing everybody together you don't like, you can't do it, is that it?

Roberta: Yes, everybody together gets mixed up, I can't

Researcher: And then?

Roberta: So, what?

Researcher: And then, what do you do in class?

Roberta: I sit on the stairs...

I question Roberta about her motivations for doing activities in partnership, and the student explains: "Yeah... There's no mixed mess... With everything together, there's mixed mess..." I ask her to explain further, she narrates, "Because I can't, mixed is bad, it gets too messy, I can't..." Roberta states that she finds it difficult, that she cannot perform the activities because of the messiness.

I think she means that, by doing the activities with fewer people, the activities become more organized during the classes. When asked if she related the messiness to activities with many participants, she states, "Yeah, everyone together gets mixed up, I can't..." The Physical Education class has, by nature, a more collective characteristic, with larger groups; different from what generally occurs in the classroom, with individual activities or performed in small groups.

Carvalho and Araújo (2018), in a study carried out in Physical Education classes in regular school, point out that students with disabilities found it difficult to perform collective sports activities. They also observed that the students showed some difficulty in performing competitive sports with pre-established rules. They emphasize that the competitive sports were only effective for these students when performed with a character focused on the experience, the construction of knowledge and sociocultural practices.

Along the same line of thought, Teixeira, Bergmann, and Copetti (2019) made observations with four students with Down Syndrome during their Physical Education classes. The findings indicate that the students showed little or almost no interest in team sports, such as futsal, basketball, and volleyball. They also emphasize that the students start the activities, but, during the course of the activities, they stop participating, claiming to find difficulties due to competitiveness, and withdraw from the class, trying to stay away from their classmates.

When questioned about what she does when she finds difficulties during class, Roberta narrates: "I sit on the stairs..." Vygotsky (1997) states that the incomplete development of mediated psychic functions in the child with disability does not have as a direct consequence its pathological factors, but rather comes from limitations of social order. He also points out that the worsening of the deficit occurs due to the absence of social relations, according to the author, "the social consequences of the defect accentuate, feed and consolidate the defect itself." (VIGOTSKI, 1997, p. 93, our translation).

For Vygotsky (1997), coexistence, being in the collectivity, the collaboration of the other, are primordial factors for the development of the child with disability. The author warns for a teaching based on the potentialities, and not in the student's limitations, highlights the important role of the teacher in this task, offering appropriate and favorable ways for his or her development and learning. He points out: "for the pedagogue, it is important to know the peculiarity of the path through which he must lead the child. (VIGOTSKI, 1997, p. 17, our translation).

Roberta justifies why she uses the expression "doing together" in her previous narratives. The student relates it to a way of not finding difficulties to perform the activities, since, in this way, the actions tend to be more organized. She states that she cannot do some activities, which, as a consequence, makes her leave the class. Therefore, I emphasize the importance of thinking of methodological strategies and proposals of meaningful activities for the student, in order to promote a potentiating environment for participation and learning.

## V. Conclusion

I started this study with the purpose of understanding what a student with Down Syndrome said, thought, and felt about her school experiences in regular school. For this, I turned my attention to her narratives, based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the cultural-historical perspective and on biographical studies.

The study aimed to understand the meanings that a student with Down Syndrome attributes to Physical Education classes. With the intention of systematizing the findings, I understand as necessary to synthesize the indications found in the narratives, in order to facilitate the understanding of the student's school process.

Roberta, a student with Down Syndrome, when talking about her Physical Education classes, narrates some problems: she reports finding it difficult when the activities are done in groups with a large number of students, which makes her feel discouraged, unable to participate, which, consequently, promotes her withdrawal from the classes.

The discussions in this research point to the need for an educational change that contemplates a real and effective teaching for these students, a policy model, a school, and a pedagogical practice that promotes opportunities for them not only to be in the social environment, but to act in it, as protagonists, as subjects capable of learning and developing themselves.

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