Facing Poverty and Marginalization

Fifty Years of Critical Research in Brazil

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5. "Special" and "Normal" in Students' Voices: Meaning Production at a State-Funded School in Campinas

Cultural Development as Appropriation of Social Practices

Throughout the twentieth century many attempts took place to explore, conceptualize, and evaluate *development*. In such different fields of knowledge as biology, psychology, history, sociology, and economy, one can find diverse ways of conceiving, referring to, and studying this heterogeneous notion and phenomenon. At the same time, reactions to the term, criticism of its idea, and questioning, displacements, and deconstruction of this very notion have also marked the debates on development (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984; Burman, 1994; Danzinger, 1990).

Indeed, the word *development* mobilizes historically produced images, meanings, and senses, which are inscribed in our everyday practices and mark our common modes of seeing and interpreting people's actions, behaviors, gestures, and words. In the word *development*, we find some deeply interwoven and implicated meaning that resonated in our current uses of the term: *to reveal, to take out of the wrapping, to let the inside appear; to unfold; growth, maturation; increment, accumulation; improvement, perfection; orientation to, finality, teleology; temporal order, linearity; progress, progression; period, stage; normal, normality; evolution; movement, change; genesis, emergence; revolution, involution; transformation; discontinuity, heterogeneity ...*

In such a frame of reference, any conceptual elaboration implies a (trans-) formation and a dialectical movement that brings the *old* in the *new*. To be aware of this movement does not minimize, but situates, the historical relevance of conceptualization work. A concept carries in itself a history of the use of the word, as Vygotsky comments (1934/1987, p. 241). Development is a word that appears with extraordinary frequency throughout Vygotsky's works. In the *Genesis of Higher Mental Functions*, he warns:

> [...] we must elucidate the very concept of development as we have done in the chapters on the analysis and structure of higher mental processes. The fact is that because of the crisis in psychology, all concepts have become meaningless and vague. They change depending on the investigators' point of view. In different systems of psychology based on different methodological principles, all the fundamental categories of research, including that of genesis, acquire different meanings. (Vygotsky, 1929/1981, p. 147)

It is interesting to note that in his search for a conceptual clarification, Vygotsky's uses and meanings of the term *development* did vary in relation to a specific focus or object at issue, and they did change in the course of his theoretical elaborations: *"the human being develops", "the child develops", "higher mental functions develop", "language develops", "concepts develop", "word meaning develops", "personality develops", "emotions develop"...*[1]

When discussing issues related to the status of the sign and the role of meaning in consciousness elaboration, Vygotsky acknowledged: "The most important for us is the development of meanings" (1933–34/1997, p. 134); "The sense of the words is changed by the motive" (1933–34/1997, p. 136); "The word in a context becomes both restricted and enriched; the word absorbs the sense of the contexts" (1933–34/1997, p. 135). Throughout his theoretical elaborations, Vygotsky also gave special emphasis to the *cultural development* of the child, and continually called attention to the *history* of human cultural development. In his ways of approaching human development he consistently and insistently pointed to the *history of development:*

1   These expressions are taken and shortened from various Vygotsky's works; put together here, they point to the many facets of development (cf. Schneuwly, 2002).

history of the development of the pointing gesture, of the development of human activity, of the development of higher mental functions, of the development of language, of the development of signs, of the development of consciousness (Vygotsky, 1929/1981). In this frame of reference, the individual's *cultural development* is seen as a personal history intrinsically woven into cultural practices and human history.

Vygotsky inquired: "How does the collective create higher mental functions in the child?" (1929/1981, p. 165). This inquiry is pushed forward by asking: How does "culture, as a product of social life and human social activity" constitute human development (Vygotsky, 1929/1981, p. 164)? And how do we assume the consequences and implications of the principle that "human beings produce their very conditions of existence and produce themselves in these conditions"? Here, it seems, we find and forge some other possible meanings of *development*: a) resulting from human interaction and cultural production; b) related to a historical, constitutive feature. As the notions of *human activity, interaction,* and *production* become inscribed in the conception of development, it becomes transformed: human development starts to be conceived as a cultural-historical product(ion).

If collective human activity constitutes human beings, human development is then anchored on the *participation in* and *appropriation of* culture. Education, as the human being's work upon human beings, becomes crucial. The notion of *appropriation* was taken as object of investigation in our previous works (Góes, 1992; Laplane, 2000; Nogueira, 1991; Pino, 1992; Smolka, 1992, 1997, 2000). In the analyses of teaching and knowledge appropriation we have noticed many conflicting meanings related to the (im)possibilities of "appropriativeness": How do children take over, attribute belonging to, make proper, turn pertinent knowledge and practices? How do they develop capacities and means – modes and instruments – for acting? Some modes of participation/appropriation might acquire analytical visibility, while others remain impossible to be traced.

The impossibility of empirically tracing and the difficulty in interpreting, finding, and reading indicators of *appropriation* lead us to reflect upon the theoretical status and strength of Vygotsky's statements concerning

the internalization of social practices. In his attempts to understand what makes possible the *conversion* of social relations into individual mental functions, Pino (2000) emphasizes that

> [W]hat is internalized from social relations are not material relations but the meanings they have for people, meanings that emerge in these very relations. To say that what is internalized is the meaning of such relations is equivalent to saying that what is internalized is the meaning the *other* in the relation has for the *I*. [...] In other words, it is through the *other* that the *I* constitutes him/herself as a social being [...]. (Pino, 2000, pp. 66–67, our translation from Portuguese)

Methodological Issues: Signs, Words, Discourse

During the last decades, the researchers from the *Thought and Language Research Group* (GPPL/UNICAMP) have been conducting several research projects in schools and non-formal educational contexts. In these research projects, we have been highlighting *discourse* and *education* as fundamental social practices in the constitution of human thinking. We have inquired about the conditions and dynamics of such practices, attempting to understand: (1) how they become stabilized, instituted, and transformed while affecting the involved subjects; and (2) the modes of participation and constitution of human subjects in the collective process of history, memory, and knowledge production.

As we work in the formal education system, we experience a multitude of issues, problems, tensions, and doubts at the core of our daily school activity. The classroom micro-sphere certainly reflects the contradictions that pervade our contemporary practices. Globalization, information technologies, and instant communication, as well as deep changes in the conditions and relations of production, in work relations and employment, in the social modes of living, and the most varied forms of access to cultural goods and production, human resources and possibilities, certainly do affect and transform human experience – perception, conception – of space, time, and values.

Diversity, complexity, mobility, fluidity, precariousness, inequality, inclusion are some of the terms that have been characterizing our practices (cf. Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Castells, 1997). Within and at the margins of such global *ambience*, we find that the notion of development, the semiotic dimension, the status of language, the notion of discourse, and ways of teaching, learning, and researching, all demand constant (re-)elaboration. Emphasizing the historical dimension of human development, Vygotsky brought out what he called the *instrumental, double stimulation,* or *experimental-genetic* method. One of his major concerns had to do with the ways of teaching, the ways of studying teaching relations, as well as the results or effects of such relations. In the last period of his life, he stated that "[s]emiotic analysis is the only adequate method for the study of the systemic and semantic structure of consciousness," also affirming that "the word is a microcosm of human the structure consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1933–34/1997, p. 137; 1934/1987, p. 285). His *method* thus escapes from rigidity but not from rigor, pointing to an instigating flexibility, which approximates his efforts to the efforts of many other contemporary authors in different fields. Inspired by Vygotsky's notions and assuming that object and method are built in the process (of investigation), we have been trying to deeply examine the theoretical and empirical implications of such statements.

In order to develop our methodological and analytical procedures, we have constantly questioned and reexamined Vygotskian proposals in dialogue with other contemporary authors. This way of positioning encourages and compels us into academic dialogue with sociologists, linguists, historians, discourse analysts, among others, in an interdisciplinary movement.

We have been relating Vygotsky's inspiring contributions to approaches of ethnographic studies, which also point to the possibilities of taking this kind of methodological research as the locus of inquiry (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, 2001; Rockwell, 1999; Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1986; Geertz, 1973). According to this, we have been assuming the possibility of imagining and designing *experimental* (in Vygotskian terms) teaching situations as a locus of learning as well as of investigation. In this process, we have also searched to deepen our understanding of the notions of discourse and social practice. How does discourse relate to the material conditions which have engendered it (cf. Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984)?

Discussing human development within historical cultural conditions, we argue that a key to understanding the constitution of human subjects in/through social/societal relations is in the way of conceiving the production of signs and meanings in the material conditions of existence. We consider that Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's elaborations at the intersection of different issues and areas of investigation produce a conceptual core which makes viable new modes of understanding *signification* as human activity, of *discourse* as social practice.

Thus, assuming that the verbal form of language is a historical product(ion) of human activity, which became the most powerful *means* (instrument/constitutive mode) in the organization of mental functioning and social practices, we highlight and relate *school practices* and *discourse practices* as the objects and loci of our empirical research. We take them as *instituted and constituting practices* resultant from social relations, produced in/through the always transforming material conditions of existence.

Exploring School Practices: Our Empirical Field

Since 2005, our research team has carried out research and intervention projects in a Brazilian public i.e. state-funded elementary school located in a suburban area in the northern part of Campinas, the second major city in the State of São Paulo. The researchers (university professors, graduate and undergraduate students) have a long relationship with this school and participate weekly in school activities. The school district adjoins two other municipal areas: the well-to-do Paulinia and the impoverished Sumaré. It is currently a neighborhood surrounded by industries, warehouses, and small areas of agricultural cultivation. It is an area of intense migratory movement.

The population in the region can be mainly divided into two categories: one composed of small local merchants, officers, and secretaries with a more comfortable economic situation; and another of less favored employees, laborers, farm workers, and servants, among others. A significant number of families live on social benefits, and many others survive

through informal activity. The scarcity of public facilities is a feature of the neighborhood: there are only two nursery schools, the closest health center is six kilometers away, and public transportation is precarious. In 2005, while this empirical work was done, the school was attended by 700 elementary education students, from 1st through 8th grades, plus adult education, in four four-hour shifts (7.00 to 11.00; 11.00 to 15.00; 15.00 to 19.00; 19.00 to 23.00).

At that time, a team of teachers of this school decided to introduce an alternative pedagogical project for a group of fifteen 6th grade (13 to 16-year-old) students who had been exhibiting, according to the teachers' evaluation, learning and behavior problems. Invited by the teachers to support and to join the project, the researchers[2] participated in the interactions of students and teachers in the classroom and within the broader school context.

This *alternative teaching project* was called into being after teachers had identified the following problems: 1) the large deficit presented by these students regarding knowledge in diverse subject areas; 2) the students' advanced age for the regular school process; and 3) their probable low self-esteem, fruit of many years of school experience without much success. The project had as specific objectives: 1) to deepen the knowledge of the students' reality; 2) to reconstruct their self-esteem; 3) to renew their interest and respect for school; 4) to provide means for the development of reading and writing abilities. In order to reach these objectives, the teachers proposed interdisciplinary work with a reduced number of students.[3]

We will bring to discussion here two empirical situations from this same group of students within the public school setting that, considered in

2   The following researchers participated in the field work: Lavínia Lopes Salomão Magiolino and Daniela Dias dos Anjos, graduate students; Aline Caprera, Thelma Anacleto Belo dos Santos, and Ricardo Noronha, undergraduate students; Ana Lucia Horta Nogueira, university professor; Ana Luiza B. Smolka, head of research group. The research group was larger than this project group. Other scholars took part in the analysis and discussions of empirical material.

3   Extracted from the text of the teachers' project proposal, translated from Portuguese by the author.

relation to one another, allow for interesting points of debate. In proceeding through an analysis of these two situations we attempt to explore *means and modes of appropriation* of practices related to cultural development.

Situation 1: "Special" within the Institutional Setting

The principal[4] (PR) of the school is talking with the students while they are waiting for the geography teacher. The students are quite restless, demanding to go outside. The PR argues that they are only messing around. The conversation continues to a point when somebody mentions that this is a special (education) class. The PR contests this and refers to a previous meeting with parents, when the project was presented and explained to them. The students argue back, saying that this class is different, that *this kind of project is indeed special*. The PR argues that all classes have projects.

ST1:	[starts screaming]: So, why can't we go out as the other classes do? 'Cause we are special!
PR:	The others cannot go either …
ST1:	Then why don't we have lessons with Ma and Li [teachers]? [The PR tries to argue that the teachers choose their schedule.]
ST1:	Chose!! Chose!! [with indignation] Nobody chose this class!! And look! Look at this number of (so few) students!!! Is this a classroom!?
ST1:	Look, look at this task we have to do!!! [He shows the task in the notebooks]
ST1:	Isn't that special!? Everything is so easy!! Just English [ESL] we learn!!! We have lessons from the 5th grade!
ST2:	Yeah! In 6th grade we have lessons from the 5th, in 7th, from the 6th … at the end we know nothing!

If the team of teachers was attentive and careful in their proposal, if they jointly considered and analysed the students' situation; if they chose to

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4   We are using abbreviated designations in our transcriptions: ST – student; TE – teacher; PR – principal.

design and implement the project; how can we understand the students' comments? How is this *feeling*, this *effect* of "special education" produced in spite of the teachers' pondering and emphatic negations[5] of such meaning? How does this meaning impose itself, contrary to the teachers' intentions and objectives? An analysis of the students' utterances highlights some of their arguments:

1. The restricted number of students in the class: *Look at this number of (so few) students!!! Is this a classroom!?*
2. The kinds of tasks, demands, lessons: *Look, look at the work we have to do!!! [He shows the works in the notebooks] We have lessons from the 5th grade!!*
3. The features of the proposed activities which seem to confirm the incapacity the teachers attribute to the students, in spite of their being older: *Everything is so easy!! Isn't that special!??*
4. The images they have of other teachers whom they consider more rigorous: *Then why don't we have lessons with Ma and Li?*
5. The lack of teaching, the lack of knowledge: *In 6th grade we have lessons from the 5th, in 7th, from the 6th … at the end we know nothing!*

The students' arguments indicate an *interplay of images* that operates in sense production: images the students have of a regular classroom, images they have of their group at the moment; images of what is being taught; images they have of themselves; images they have of the teachers; images the teachers have of the students and what they are able to learn; images the teachers have of the object of knowledge; and so on.

The teachers' written proposal makes explicit some of these images:

During the lessons in the last school year … these students … showed their interest in being at school to be playing, dating, fighting, dancing, etc. … presented learning difficulties … their interest in playing and group interaction … turn(ed) classes quite uninteresting and stressful …[6]

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5   In other situations we followed some of the teachers' arguments reiterating that the students were indeed "quite special," although they emphasized a positive meaning.

6   Extracted from the teachers' project, translated from Portuguese by the authors.

Large deficits, advanced age, low self-esteem, learning difficulties, history of failure, divergent interests, inadequate behavior, sources of stress compose the most *common* images of the referred students who compose the group. Indeed, uncountable moments of teasing, provoking, mocking, ironical comments, seduction, rap singing, dancing, fighting were *proper* to the students' ways of interacting.

But different meanings and interpretations of such behaviors configured their *(im-)pertinence* or *(in-)appropriatedness* at the school setting. For most of the teachers, they did not seem to fit the school genre. At the same time, by establishing as criteria for inclusion in the group the fact that the students were older or "over-aged," this aspect (developmental indicator) did not seem to reflect on the teachers' practices: they did not change the proposed tasks (e.g.: coloring the star, drawing heroes, and the like), which were considered by the students to be childish activities that also did not fit the *appropriate* school genre for their age. The teachers' conscious choices and arguments for the group composition reiterated, indeed constituted, the very *special* condition of these students.

These images and (pre-) conceptions became constitutive of students' and teachers' modes of inter-acting. Students' and teachers' images, conceptions. and expectations coincided in a *space of differences* (Bourdieu, 1994) marked by distinct positions, experiences, and points-of-view. They became inscribed in school practices, integrated into a *habitus*, and produced effects independently of the subjects' conscious intentions. Images and discourse, images *in* discourse, operate in the production of what Bourdieu et. al. (1997) call the *specific efficacy of schooling*, where *forms of hidden exclusion* take place.

Modes of appropriation – appropriation of culture, appropriation of knowledge, appropriation of meanings, appropriation of words – can be seen as a function of these relations and positions. Features of proper or improper behavior, adequate or inadequate contents, emerge as *the results* of such positions and relations. They might become pertinent or not within and in relation to a specific sphere or *genre of activity* (Clot, 2006). An individual might *"turn proper"* or *"make his own"* social resources in a non-suitable way for others, in a not-necessarily-conventionalized way

(Smolka, 2000). Yet, what is or becomes *ap-propriated* (proper i.e. pertinent, adequate, suitable) by and for human subjects in interaction with each other is related to the *signification* – multiple and diverse meanings – produced in the complex institutional relations.

Amidst so many (non-) coincidences in the school context, the word *special* is used in quite heterogeneous senses. Indeed, it condenses different meanings and feelings related to reciprocal (in-) adequate behaviors and expectations. It appears as an *arena of struggle* (Voloshinov & Bakhtin, 1973). Its meanings for the involved human subjects are produced in the dynamics of teaching relations in a history of school practices.

Situation II: The "Normal" Conditions of Living

In the second month of classes, one of the ways the geography teacher chose to introduce a specific topic was to invite the students to observe and describe the environment around the school, looking through the classroom window. She was a substitute teacher for the year and not previously acquainted with the group of teachers, students, or surrounding neighborhood. She asked the students to describe the neighborhood, to identify commercial and industrial activities, to comment on work relations, life conditions, and quality of life. From these talks and issues, the students entered into an argument with the teacher and started insistently asking her to watch the film *City of God* at school.[7]

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7   The film is based on a novel written by Paulo Lins, a young photographer and journalist who lived in the "planned" neighborhood called Cidade de Deus, to which the inhabitants of a whole slum in Rio de Janeiro were moved in the 1960s. The film (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund) shows the features and changes in life quality through the years.

Having joined the teaching project in spite of not being able to participate in its planning, the geography teacher took the students' demand to the teachers' team. After 6 months, almost at the end of the school year, the film was finally shown to the students at school, with cuts of sexual and violent scenes. The students noticed the cuts and many left the classroom, refusing to watch the film or to participate in the following discussions. At the moment of discussion, the geography teacher, the teachers' adviser, 5 students, and 2 researchers were present in the classroom. This group had two video cameras, one operated by the students, another by the researchers. Three pieces of the transcribed 45-minute talk will be the object of our considerations here:

Fragment 1:
1   TE: We are talking about a very serious issue here, but what is worrying me is this question: why did you want ... you looked for this film ... to tell me something ...
2   ST3: Yeah, teacher, it is for everybody to see the truth.
3   ST4: Yeah, the truth!
4   ST5: Yeah!
5   ST3: The truth, brother!
6   ST5: Yeah! 'Cause there are teachers who tell us like this: 'Write about your life' ... and then ... do not even believe ...
7   ST4: Teachers who think ... when we fight we rebel because of the school. It is not because of the school ... we do not stand around the neighborhood, the world out there ... The school, the world around ... everything is the same ... the film is showing what we go through outside, how it is outside ...
8   ST3: Yeah, teacher, this film, it is almost the same thing ...
9   ST5: It is all the same thing ...

Fragment 2:
1   TE: Why did you want to watch City of God?
2   ST3: 'Cause it is real life, this film! It does exist. It shows what exists ... slang ...
3   TE: But just for that you wanted to bring this film to school?
4   ST3: No, cause it is real life!

5   TE: And the school is not real life?
       (...)
6   ST3: ... here who kills dies, isn't that so, Jon? So ...
7   TE: What do you mean, who kills dies!?
       (...)
8   ST3: Yeah, brother, if [you] do not go to jail, [you] die!
9   TE: Tell me a little bit more of this story.
10   ST5: ... the guys selling arms, drugs ...
11   ST3: Yeah, brother. Gosh, brother! The guy dying with 30 bullets. How come ...
12   ST5: Innocent people ...
13   ST4: ... owes 10 reais, 5 reais, the next day is dead.

Fragment 3:
1   ST3: Both sides steal ... no way out ... Even the rich ...
2   TEA: And how is it to live in a society like this? How?
3   ST3: Normal.
4   TE: Normal?
       (silence)
5   TE: Normal, Van? Normal, Pam?
6   ST3: Ah! Teacher, in this neighborhood here, you don't need to expect anything. Everything has happened already ...
7   TE: In this neighborhood?
8   ST3: Everything has happened already ...
9   TE: Jon, is it normal?
10   ST4: (moves his head, affirming)
11   TE: Everybody steals? Rich, poor ... is that so?
12   ST4: (moves head affirming)
13   ST3: ... I think the rich people started to steal and then the poor people saw it was ok and they started to do it also ...
14   TE: Girls ... Pam ...?
15   ST5 Normal.

(translated from Portuguese by the authors)

We could use here a plethora of concepts, constructs, and analytical instruments from many different fields of knowledge. Indeed, we have been making a number of attempts in our "looking/interpreting exercises," in our approaches to the empirical material. What do the students refer to when

they talk about *real* life, or *normal* life? How does school participate in the students' living experiences? What are the possible contours of "real" or "normal" in contemporary practices? Thus we focus on discourse, attempting to give visibility to concrete conditions of learning and development.

The teacher opens the discussion by asking the students *why* they wanted to watch the film at school. If almost all students had already watched it, and if the teachers had too, one issue becomes: why watch the film *together at school*? To look through the window was one of the teacher's strategic resources to orient the students' modes of looking at their own reality. She wanted to re-dimension the students' experiences and points-of-view. Her way of seeing was oriented by her knowledge – didactic, scientific – marked by social commitment. The teacher calls attention to the environment and highlights forms of human activity, relations and practices. The street, the traffic in various directions, people walking; buses, cars, trucks; population in movement: this concerns geography! And she proceeds, conceptualizing transport, urbanization, industry, and commerce.

The students in turn show an understanding of the teacher's talk, but they contest and argue with her, speaking from another point of view, a different social position. The students' way of looking is oriented by their living experience and their knowledge of certain practices they experiences daily. For the students, to talk about urbanization, transport, and commerce is to talk about the concrete conditions of life, about what affects them each and every day, and that means to talk about drug traffic, bargaining and intimidation, power relations and restriction of spaces, murders, death ... It is to talk about common practices, of what is commonly practiced in the closer community.

We could say that the film was suggested as the students' resource to orient the teacher's way of looking. It was a mode of making legitimate their ways of speaking, their ways of living; a strategy to show a real, normal, daily world. For the students, it was important that the teacher could see what they are used to see, how they are used to live; the teacher could feel what they are used to feel.

The students resort to the filmic narrative as a way of making legitimate the discredited narrative of their own lives:

– Yeah! 'Cause there are teachers who tell us like this: 'Write about your life' ... and then ... do not even believe ... (Fragment 1, turn 6)
– The film is showing what we go through outside, how it is outside ... (Fragment 1, turn 7)
– It is all the same thing ... (Fragment 1, turn 9)
– It is real life, this film! (Fragment 2, turn 2).

The students' statements mobilize fundamental questions related to the ways of living and speaking about their lives. After all, what concerns *real* life? And *normal* ways of living? How do we speak about life? The film appears as a possibility – a resource, a strategy, an occasion, a condition, a mode – of talking about life. As human production, the filmic narrative reflects, refracts, pervades, and affects human subjectivity and reality. Nonetheless, it is based on a written narrative, a novel produced from lived, related, disseminated experiences from many subjects in interaction with each other. The weaving of talks and narratives points to some concrete conditions of life that configure common, habitual, normal, natural contemporary living. Different social positions highlighted in the discourse – rich people, poor people – coincide in the practice of a common action: stealing. Concrete, material conditions turn into *normal* conditions. Features of normality, naturalness, seem to become installed without being questioned.

The students could have related their experience to the abundant daily news. But here, the *means* make a difference. The filmic narrative, as a work of art, acquires a specific, mobilizing, and effective function. The students find in the film a narrative (which appears consistent with their *experience*) of living. They share with the protagonists the same conditions, same plot. The one who lives and the one who narrates become (con-)fused. They make the narrative of the other *their own*. The narrative of the *other* coincides with what *I* wanted to narrate of my own life. (My) life becomes a novel, turns into a film. Ways of narrating and ways of representing life through words are woven through the *image-in-action*. One's words affect, resonate in the other's consciousness (Bakhtin, 1984). The experience of the "I" in isolation can be shared and collectively re-dimensioned by the consciously elaborated experience of "we". This re-dimensioning changes the meanings, the status of lived experience, the strength of arguments.

In the movement of *appropriating* (turning proper, making their own) the content of geography presented by the teacher, the students find a *proper* way of telling about the neighborhood, anchored on partially *alien* words and images. The film becomes a possible *locus of the objectification of images and practices*. The weaving of narratives seems to confirm a *normal*, a *natural* way of contemporary urban living, as featured in the students' discourse and made visible in the film.

School as a social institution has the specific objective of working the historically produced knowledge in/through teaching relations. The film as a cultural production, as a work of art without didactic aims, is a way of poetically dealing with concrete conditions of life. School and film: two spheres of human activity and production become intertwined, affecting and constituting the students' life and development. The school and the *world out there* compose the reality of life. But the film is showing a real, a normal (aspect of) life outside, about which the school keeps silent. So, *normal* at school does not coincide with *normal* in life. The school does not integrate – does not face, analyse, discuss, incorporate – the complex reality of life. And this is also transformed into *normal* conditions of teaching: *déjà dit, déjà vu*.

But in the above situation, the teacher's insistence in asking each student about the consensually admitted *normal* way of living becomes relevant. In the students' voice, *normal* seems to have an acknowledged meaning: "*that's ok, that's the way it is*." The teacher's persistent questions point to her discomfort and strangeness, possibly suggesting that "it could be different." The intonation here marks positions, distance, and distinctions in the (dis)encounter of voices and experiences.

The tension between "that's the way it is" and "it could be different" acquires visibility in it analysis, as it points to the dynamic heterogeneity of the sign/word and to intrinsic contradictions of the conditions of existence. This tension leads us to inquire about the materiality of signs, the history of meanings, the historicity of signification. This also compels us to reconsider, among other questions, the dialectical means/modes/conditions of development related to the constitution of personality/subjectivity.

Overview and Open Questions

In explaining how the environment shapes child development, Vygotsky (1935/1994) proposes an indivisible unit, *perezhivanie*, which implies the individual child in his/her relationships with/in the environment. The notion of *perezhivanie*, integrates emotion (affect, feelings), representation (images), and signification (interpretation, consciousness) in a lived experience. A *same* environment is experienced, *signified* differently by each singular subject. Each subject is affected in a unique manner by the environment.

Vygotsky also called attention to the special role of verbal language in this dynamic interrelationship: "[...] the meaning of children's words is what determines the new relationship which can exist between environment and various developmental processes" (1935/1994, p. 346).

Verbal language is indeed the locus, means, mode, and possibility of the elaboration of consciousness, of the constitution of personality/subjectivity. And here we consider not only what human beings do with signs and words, but what signs and most especially words as human cultural and historical productions do with human beings. If we admit that the sign does not just constitute higher functions, but "the sign changes the interfunctional relationships" (Vygotsky, 1933–34/1997, p. 131), this does not happen in a vacuum.

The analysis of the students' arguing makes visible some aspects of their affective-conceptual elaborations in their comprehension of school and life conditions. Affects and concepts operate in a complicated interrelated system (Vygotsky, 1929/1981). The analysis points to the *drama* lived at the core of interpersonal relationships, where meanings become appropriated – or not (Vygotsky, 1929/1989). We turn our eyes, then, to this *dramatic constitution of human psyche*. Relating empirical situations I and II, we might explore the conditions and the contradictions in such constitutive processes.

Although we configure the social institutional context of school as the locus of our empirical research, the specific contours of a situation lived in

this context certainly extend beyond the school boundaries: the cultural historical dimension integrates the concrete material conditions of teaching, learning, and developing. How do material living conditions affect and constitute collective/individual functioning? How does the school mark the students? How does the specific knowledge of such subject-matter have an impact on them?

When the students appropriate – i.e. turn proper, make their own, attempt to understand – geographical concepts and knowledge such as neighborhood, urban space, industry, commerce, etc., they bring to the fore the reality of their lives, which becomes confronted and at the same time intertwined with school knowledge. Within these multiple positions, a new elaboration of concepts, affects, knowledge, and consciousness becomes possible.

How does the film participate in such a process? The students' suggestion indicates the potential of a work of art for knowledge appropriation and consciousness elaboration. The students recognized themselves in the images of the film. They experience a drama of fiction in the reality of their own bodies. The work of art, as a technical-semiotic instrument, as a social technique of sentiment, can be a shared locus of emotional experience. Experiencing contradictory emotions provoked by the work of art mobilizes images, sensations, and feeling that culminate in a *short circuit,* a *cathartic process* (Vygotsky, 1925/1971). This implies an elaborated psychic activity producing *intelligent emotions*. Thinking and emotions are intrinsically intertwined.

But the film at school is not necessarily considered a work of art. It appears as an altered product, with cuts, with a didactic purpose. This way of presenting the film at school provokes different feelings in the students – rage, indignation, revolt. The students who remain for the discussion end up having a space for further and joint elaboration. This moment of discussion is possible due to a history of relationships between the teacher and the students. Although school activities hardly explore the work of art's aesthetic potential, reducing it to moral and pedagogic uses, contradictorily, an opportunity becomes opened for the development of collective awareness, for collective elaboration of concepts and affects, for situating and recognizing distinct social positions.

The film affects students and teacher differently, produces different effects and meanings. Their ways of signifying do not coincide, just as their living conditions and their social positions do not. Social positions make a difference, and they are constitutive of human subjects in interaction with each other. Not only the film but the discussion about the film point to this reality.

When we think about the students' attitudes and interests, which are so often interpreted as far removed from school objectives, we may understand, through this prism, that the whole issue cannot be reduced to a matter of their (lack of) *interest*. Problems cannot simply be characterized as "learning difficulties", or "lack of motivation", as they usually are. In a deeper sense, they concern the issue of different and conflicting expectations, of lack of alternatives in facing the concrete conditions of life; of distant and divergent positions concerning the meanings of knowledge, the meanings of life. This is the *drama* experienced by human subjects in relation to each other at school (cf. Vygotsky, 1929/1989).

We are thus faced with the heterogeneous conditions of the dynamic processes of cultural development, the dramatic constitution of personality, and the equally dramatic features of the relations among teachers and students. In considering the difficult educational reality in Brazilian public schools, as it was shown in this case, we can see how *special* and *normal* become inter-constitutive in the web of social relations: the *normal* way of living appointed by the students is an intrinsic part of the concrete material conditions of their lives and development that define their *special* place at school.

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