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Preface

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Is it meaningful to speak about teaching in a cultural-historical perspective? (The title of this volume seems to imply a positive answer.) And if the aim is to develop a cultural-historical perspective to education, is it sufficient simply to enter into a dialogue with ideas found in Vygotsky's texts? These challenging questions are addressed in the following discussion, where a part of the response to these questions is built on Vygotsky's important discussion about the relation between practice and scientific research.

The purpose of this discussion is to promote critical reflection about issues involved in developing a cultural-historical perspective in relation to education. I believe this theoretical perspective has important ideas to contribute to the development of educational practice, and a critical reflection about the use of this tradition is important, given the longstanding, large and growing interest in this tradition in Brazil. The main interest in my analysis is to support the further development of this tradition.

The question about a cultural-historical perspective on teaching involves many dimensions – such as questions about the content of the curriculum, questions about processes of learning, the relationship between teaching and learning, and the evaluation of psychological capabilities in relation to educational goals. These particular issues reflect general problems that any comprehensive theoretical perspective on teaching must confront; none of them are specific or unique to a cultural-historical perspective. And several of them involve aspects that go beyond what existing cultural-historical theory may be able to address. For example, both curricular and evaluation questions involve value choices about what is important for pupils to learn. In other words, it seems unlikely that cultural-historical theory alone will be adequate for developing a comprehensive educational approach, even though it may provide important and central aspects in such an approach. What often marks a cultural-historical perspective from other well-known or more common theoretical perspectives in education is how one engages with the different dimensions in teaching practice, especially concerning issues of learning, how teaching actions can support learning, and what preparations are needed for organising those actions.

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This preface raises three paradoxical issues that are especially characteristic of a cultural-historical perspective, and at the same time have not been developed adequately in the contemporary research practice that draws on this tradition. The first issue considers the relationship between research investigations of teaching and educational practice. The second issue concerns the generality or adequacy of Vygotsky's ideas in relation to educational practice. The third issue considers the role and implications of a cultural-historical psychological theory in relation to teaching. For present purposes, the aim is to highlight these three issues, and provide some reflections that serve to outline some of the challenges that must be confronted in developing a theory of teaching in a cultural-historical perspective.

As noted in Pederiva's initial presentation, the chapters in this volume can be understood as engaging in a discussion with Vygotsky's ideas as part of a general interest to develop a research tradition that works in the spirit of Vygotsky's ideas, and not simply as a matter of discussing his ideas in relation to one's own educational point of view. There is no expectation that a single chapter can address the diverse range of questions and problems found within an educational practice. At the same time, in the spirit of developing a living scientific tradition in a cultural-historical perspective, it may be necessary to have a more explicit and common understanding of the ways in which cultural-historical theory can be related to educational practice.

The issue of the relation between research and practice has been an object of reflection for thousands of years (e.g. starting with Aristotle's discussions). And a persistent problem has been to identify which aspect is dominating or determining, which is made difficult by the fact that they are interacting simultaneously. This simultaneous interaction is sometimes expressed with animal metaphors like 'which is the horse and which is the cart', or 'does the dog wag its tail or does the tail wag the dog' as a way to highlight the tension or paradoxical relation between an intentional course of action and the possibility of losing that intentionality through inadequate conceptualisation of the relationship between research and practice. This relational aspect is highlighted here because it was a central part of Vygotsky's analysis of the crisis in psychology.

In 1926, Vygotsky (1997) wrote an analysis about the crisis in psychology. It may sound dramatic to speak about a *crisis*, but Vygotsky's use of this designation simply reflected contemporary

discussions, especially in Germany, where several works were published by well-known psychologists at that time (e.g., Bühler, 1926; Koffka, 1926; Hildebrandt, 1991). The idea of crisis was probably found more broadly at that time beyond psychology alone, reflecting a concern about the adequacy of social sciences more generally (e.g., Husserl, 1923). In this context, the term *crisis* was used to refer to a legitimation problem for justifying the adequacy of a disciplinary approach. Vygotsky's discussion engaged with this ongoing discussion. Many of the particular details of that historical situation and Vygotsky's analytic resolution are not directly relevant for the present discussion (see Chaiklin, 2011, for a more specific discussion), but at least one aspect remains significant. In Vygotsky's diagnosis, societal practices (such as education, work) are identified as the source of the crisis, both because they have developed their own solutions to societal problems (without drawing on scientific psychology) and because of the insufficiency of existing psychological theory to address the problems and needs found in these practices. Vygotsky argues for the need to reconceptualise the role of psychology in relation to practice, where "[p]ractice sets the tasks and serves as the supreme judge of theory, as its truth criterion" (pp. 305-6). In other words, psychology gets a different place in the structure of science in relation to practice, where the success of theory must to be adequate in relation to the problems of practice. It would be unfortunately ironic if contemporary researchers were satisfied with simply applying Vygotsky's ideas in a way that reproduces the crisis that Vygotsky was analysing (where science sets the terms for practice).

The second issue discussed here is the generality of Vygotsky's ideas in relation to educational practices. Many of the chapters in the present volume present an interpretation of or reflection about the meaning or significance of Vygotsky's ideas in relation to specific educational questions or practices. The main point in the present discussion is to raise questions about how to relate Vygotsky's work to educational questions. It is a common technique among educational researchers to select a well-known theorist and then discuss the implications of the theorist's ideas in relation to a practice of special interest to the researcher. This approach is used not only in relation to Vygotsky, but also in relation to other figures who have been important in educational practices (e.g., Johann Herbart, John-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Michel Foucault, Jean Piaget). At first glance, this seems like a good way to develop an academic discipline (e.g., close reading of a widely-recognised theorist, and reflecting about the significance of these ideas in relation to the practice for which the author has special interest, and opening up new perspectives

and ideas for consideration. I have no complaint about that. However, what is the horizon or objective toward which such studies are aiming? Notice that this strategy does not require the analyst to accept the general theoretical perspective of the analysed theorist (in this case, Vygotsky). That is, one could continue to hold conceptions about how to organise teaching that do not engage with the general theoretical perspective about the development of psychological capabilities that Vygotsky was pursuing.

Is the objective to use Vygotsky's concepts to understand specific practical problems, or to work with the general conceptual perspective within which Vygotsky's ideas are part of a more general approach? There is a potentially paradoxical situation, where one might be able to see further, because of a consideration of Vygotsky's analytical perspective, but where the achieved insight also serves to draw attention away from the more general problems of practice that must be considered to draw benefit from this insight (see discussion of the first issue). The point of emphasis is that one should not be satisfied with simply identifying relevant ideas from Vygotsky in relation to practical problems. This is not so minimize the value of making such analysis, but we should also recognize that this is only a first step toward to a more general task that lies in front of us in relation to the practical problems that must be considered in educational practice. Many of these problems have not been addressed in Vygotsky's published works. This is not meant to be a critique of Vygotsky, but only a neutral factual statement, with the important consequence that despite the importance and significance of Vygotsky's ideas, we should not limit our attention and interest only to what Vygotsky has been able to develop.

Vygotsky's focus was primarily on understanding characteristics of the development of psychological functions, reflecting a theoretical position that sought to find law-like relationships in psychological development. Despite his early recognition of the importance of practice in relation to the development of psychological science, his own scientific work only recognised and illustrated this significance, without developing a systematic way to analyse substantive content for particular educational practices. For example, he recognised that his work on conceptual development only focused on single concepts and not systems of concepts, which would be necessary in a schooling context. In other words, he did not elaborate a particular pedagogical strategy. It is necessary to add many dimensions.

One of these dimensions is reflected in the final issue discussed here, the role and implications of a cultural-historical psychological theory in relation to teaching. An important principle in cultural-historical theory is the ontological model developed in Vygotsky's works, where psychological processes are understood in terms of gaining control of external practices that are historically developed, rather than an unfolding or maturation of internal capabilities, to understand human learning and development as developing control of human practices.

One of the challenges arises from the material demands in an educational practice (e.g., the need for substantive content, and for tasks and interactions in relation to that content) but at the same time, there appears to be nothing natural or necessary about the objectives of educational practices, unless one considers the societal traditions of action to which these educational practices are directed. This complex of problems can be illustrated with the issue of aesthetic education, which is addressed particularly in this volume. Do we believe that there is a natural form of aesthetic (i.e., that is biologically coded that inclines persons to prefer particular visual patterns of colours, shapes, or auditory patterns of sounds (tones and rhythms)? While it is possible to find these viewpoints expressed in recorded documents for at least two thousand years now, it is my impression that attempts to investigate those beliefs empirically tend to confirm an opposing idea found within the cultural-historical perspective, that aesthetic preferences reflect cultural traditions and that individuals acquire these preferences through participation in meaningful practices, rather than a capability that is present from birth or unfolds from a simple maturation process. Two immediate consequences of this perspective are (a) a need to understand theoretically the characteristics or qualities of the cultural practice that are important to pursue, and (b) the psychological capabilities that enable these aesthetic experiences, along with processes that support their development. And in an educational context, these two consequences immediately generate a third consequence of the need to understand how to organise educational tasks that are conducive to supporting the development of these capabilities.

Several lines of researchers worked further in the spirit of Vygotsky, some focusing more on the formation of mental action (such as Gal'perin and Talyzina) and others focusing more on the subject-matter content and conceptual development in relation to this content (such as El'konin, and Davydov) that provide additional conceptual resources for addressing problems of practice. From this perspective, it is meaningful to speak about a cultural-historical perspective on teaching,

especially when it draws on theoretical conceptions about processes of learning and the mastery of conceptual relations grounded in Davydov's analysis of theoretical thinking, which provides resources for the engaging with many of the kinds of aims that are valued in teaching practices. From that point of view, we can acknowledge the psychological framework that Vygotsky has helped to provide for conceptualizing educational processes, while recognizing the need to transcend his own accomplishments if we are going to establish a living teaching tradition that continues to strengthen our theoretical understanding of teaching practice.

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