

# The student with Autism Spectrum and the imaginary process

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the educational process of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder, focusing on his Physical Education classes. It aims to understand and interpret the imaginary process of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder during his Physical Education classes. The research is theoretically and methodologically based on the cultural-historical perspective of human development. It relies on biographical studies by bringing narrative to the production of the empirical work. The data construction was carried out in a municipal public school of a medium-sized city in the interior of the state of São Paulo, during the 2019 school year. The results point out that the use of imagination and creativity activities in students with Autism Spectrum Disorder present significant processes for these students. Furthermore, the findings indicate that decisions about pedagogical proposals cannot be made a priori, but rather built by listening to these students.

**Keywords:** Special Education; Physical Education; Autistic.

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## I. Introduction

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 trying to understand the meanings they give to their school experiences, specifically in their Physical Education classes was what motivated me to carry out this research. To do so, I aim to understand and interpret the imaginary process of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder during his 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, for it to become effective for the target students of Special Education, as the laws ponder, I understand it is necessary to create an articulation between school, curriculum and its attributions.

The teaching process of students with disabilities in Physical Education classes has taken place in a very conflicting and controversial way. Studies point to some obstacles and justifications, such as: inclusive policies developed, but not implemented; homogeneous curricula that do not meet the students' singularities; lack of support from the responsible bodies; lack of structure in schools, among others (CARVALHO; ARAÚJO, 2018; FIORINI; MANZINI, 2018; CASTRO; TELLES, 2018; REIS; GLAT, 2022).

However, these researchers emphasize 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 by contemporary authors, based on the cultural-historical perspective, direct and point to some possibilities of facing these challenges.

Such studies discuss that, if there is a proposal of deliberate intervention from the teacher, there may be the participation and learning of students with disabilities in Physical Education classes. The researches

emphasize that the teacher's role is preponderant in the organization of pedagogical practices, making available activities and strategies that consider the singularities of these students. In addition, the authors highlight that when the pedagogical practices are focused on the students' potentiality, with meaningful and intentional activities, the students feel more motivated to participate in the classes (BARBUIO, 2016; BARBUIO; CAMARGO; FREITAS, 2019; RODRIGUES, 2022).

I understand that Physical Education, as part of the school curriculum, walks towards an approach that works from the perspective of inserting all students in the teaching-learning process. A literature review (BARBUIO, 2021) found a certain scarcity of researches that focus on the view of the public-target student of Special Education about Physical Education classes. Thus, in this study, I focus on listening to this student. To do so, I have as investigative questions: what does the student with disabilities think about his Physical Education classes? Which meanings this student attributes to his experiences in Physical Education classes?

Based on these questions, I approach the teaching of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the school context, focusing on his Physical Education classes. The research is based on the cultural-historical perspective of human development, especially on Lev Semionovitch Vygotsky's elaborations about the social constitution of human development and his propositions about the conditions of possibilities of development of people with disabilities (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2021).

The study is also based on the biographical method (DELORMOMBERGER, 2012; FERRAROTTI, 2010; PASSEGGI, 2010), as a focus for narratives, understanding them as a symbolic instance of language (BARBUIO, 2021), since it allows students to reflect on the learning process and, at the same time, mobilizes mediated psychic functions, such as emotions, memory, and concept formation. Moreover, attentive listening to the student's narrative may allow raising indicators about conditions and possibilities of learning, which will contribute to the development of pedagogical practices that culminate with the schooling of these students.

The study is organized in three sections. In this introductory section, I present the theme, aspirations, and the objective of the study. In the first part, I discuss the cultural-historical perspective, the theoretical foundation that guides the investigation, emphasizing the concepts of imagination and creativity. In the second part, I contextualize the research; the place where it was carried out, as well as the participant and the modes of data production. In the third part, I present the development of the empirical work; the student narrative and its respective discussions. I finish with some notes and considerations about the senses and meanings that the student attributes to his experiences in Physical Education classes.

## **II. Theoretical Foundation**

This section discusses an overview about the concepts of imagination and creativity in the cultural-historical perspective (VIGOTSKI, 1996, 2001, 2009), the intention is to understand how the author exercises the concepts, his main references to the theme, articulations with other concepts, his interlocutors and his dimensions.

In his texts, there is a central concern with the human, the author understood that human activity was to create meanings, not only to words, but to give meaning to one's own existence, consequently, meaning becomes key in the Vygotskian theory (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 2000).

If the dimension of meaning and significance (sign) is a driver in his theoretical perspective, we will understand, then, that the thread that weaves the theory is creativity and imagination. In this direction, it is possible to understand in his production, that without the existence of these concepts there would not be the projection of sense and meaning.

Thus, we can understand that creative and imaginary activity constitute, in the conception of Vygotskian theory, central categories of psychology and pedagogy. To the extent that they are present in the constitution of culture and society, so that the sociocultural media create psychic and material instruments.

For Vygotsky (2009), the human being, through imagination, forms a relationship of dependence and independence with reality. It is from reality that the subject extracts the contents that will compose his imagination. For the author, "it would be a miracle if imagination invented out of nothing or had other sources for its creations than previous experience." (VIGOTSKI, 2009. p. 20).

With this the author exposes that imagination is the crucial point at the junction of the social and the individual. Just as the imagination depends on reality, it also has the potential to depart from it, thus constituting a form of condition of this same reality.

This relationship of dependence is evident when the author talks about the activity of the toy for the child; it is what drives and provides the basis for the child's actions in order to internalize and create rules. The rules are both social and material, the imagination, in this case, will be the guiding thread of the child's actions towards reality (VIGOTSKI, 2009. p. 20).

The author exposes four modes of relationship of imagination to reality: the relationship of proportional imagination to the experience of the human being; the relationship of the final product of

imagination, but reported by the experience of another; imagination relates to reality through emotional attachment; its essence consists that the construction of fantasy can be something completely new, not existing in man's experience, nor similar to any other real object (VIGOTSKI, 2009. p. 20).

The first question, considers impossible the creation of something new without the pre-existence of something already real. In this way, the creative processes would come from previous experiences. Then, the child reworks and modifies them, creating new forms. This relationship between elements of reality for the construction of the imaginative process is elucidated by the author as the first link between imagination and reality (VIGOTSKI, 2009).

The second relationship is in the potentiality of broadening one's experiences through the appropriation of experiences experienced by other people, transforming them into one's own. In this scenario, the subject expands his imaginary dimension by means of others' descriptions that he has not personally experienced. For example, a child or adolescent can imagine himself as a superhero based only on movies, cartoons or video games (VIGOTSKI, 2009).

The third mode relates to the emotional sphere. The individual is capable of feeling dread or fear when hearing a strange noise in his residence and projects scenes of what may have been the cause of the noise. Depending on the psychic and emotional state, the subject can create ideas, images that are dominating him at that instant (VIGOTSKI, 2009).

The fourth form of relationship between imagination and reality is in the argument that fantasy can produce something new, not existing in human experience, nor similar to anything real. That is, the imaginary process will be something completely new and can materialize, composing reality, transforming it (VIGOTSKI, 2009).

The imaginative and creative manifestations outlined by the cultural-historical perspective is not observable as something predominant, there are also ideals of imaginative and creative manifestations as something linear related to the sum of previous experiences, and can also be understood as a result of the individual genius of each subject.

It is observed that the concept of imagination and creation is something complex to define, since when we refer to imaginary actions it is common to refer to unreal, improbable manifestations; in fact, these manifestations are inserted in these process molds, but they do not eliminate the real, the probable, as it is possible to verify in the activities of staging fiction characters.

The observations brought about the process of imagination and creation make us think about the school environment, the pedagogical practices, the teachers' elaborations regarding the students' creative process in the classroom. Thus, I understand the school as a sociocultural environment, conducive to mediation, to social relations, to the contact with the other, to semiotic mediation, and to the valorization of diversity and subjectivity of its individuals, whose constitution has its source in the collectivity, in the social and cultural environment.

### **III. Background of the study**

This study is theoretically and methodologically based on the cultural-historical perspective of human development (VIGOTSKI, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2021), and also relies on the biographical method (DELORMOMBERGER, 2012; FERRAROTTI, 2010; PASSEGGI, 2010) as a resource for data construction.

Situated within the qualitative research, autobiographical research in Education has sought to overcome the dilemma imposed on it: to accommodate the existing standards of so-called scientific knowledge or, contribute to the construction of new ways of conceiving the human person and the means of research on it and with it.

The biographical method 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 in his innermost, to know about his life story, considering him agent and patient of his social and cultural interactions in the social environment in which he is inserted (PASSEGGI, 2010).

In the educational field, according to Sarmento (2018), the studies anchored by the autobiographical method developed based on the child's voice and thinking, is an emerging area. In her reflections, the author points to some questions about the biographical method with children: how the processes of construction of the narratives take place, how to deal with the ethical issues, as well as the ways of interpreting these biographical narratives.

Still according to the author, children develop autobiographical narratives naturally, in their everyday life, without the need to create specific situations or provoke them, they just create them, either in natural situations, such as playing, talking, or even in educational environments or in situations with determined purposes, such as a previously agreed research.

Inspired by the ideas of narrative research with children and, being aware that it is an emerging investigative field, this research aims to understand and interpret the imaginary process of a student with Autism

Spectrum Disorder during his Physical Education classes. And for that, I assume as main methodological instrument the narrative interview.

According to Ferrarotti (2010), I understand that through the narrative interview the subject becomes the author of his own story, performs a reflection process about his acts, practices, experiences. In view of this, for this study, I created a script with some themes so that we could start the narrative: family, school, Physical Education class. After introducing these themes, I asked the student to narrate, and, depending on the answers, I asked additional questions.

The interview with Sonic was held at school, in a classroom, located on the third and last floor, made available by the school. The interview took place during physical education class time, on a date previously arranged with the student and the principal. The records were made by audio recording using a smartphone cell phone.

To carry out this 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. Initially, before entering the research field, I performed some ethical procedures; the approval of the research by the ethics committee; the Informed Consent Form, signed by the student's parents/guardians and the Informed Consent Form, signed by the student.

The research participant is a student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, 13 years old at the time of the study. He was in eighth grade, entered elementary school within age/grade expectations, and had been attending the school in which the research was conducted for 3 years. He lived in a neighborhood close to the school, and his parents drove him by car.

The young man presented involuntary body movements, moments of seizures, getting a little irritated and nervous. He didn't talk or interact with his classmates, and they also didn't look for him to talk to him or insert him in the social group, he always remained active, going around the school environment, but in an isolated way.

Regarding his learning, his medical records state: he reads well, writes well, has good text interpretation, and does the four mathematical operations. The boy had some indiscipline problems at school; he used to get angry, kick and knock over tables, chairs, and some objects. I witnessed these moments sometimes, what I could notice is that these facts occurred when the student was contradicted, when he was told to be quiet, to stop running or to do certain tasks against his will.

The intention of choosing this student is justified because he is in an intermediate level of his school life and already carries with him a longer school career, thus, he has had more experiences of educational activities and practices at school and, more specifically, in the classes of Physical Education.

For discussion and analysis, the interview was transcribed in its entirety. According to Delory-Momberger (2012), by submitting to reconstruct the objective structures of meaning and senses of the narrated texts, one aims to build an interpretative view of the biographical materials. In the following section, Sonic's narratives about his Physical Education classes.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Researcher: And the physical education classes, how are your classes?

Sonic: I like PE, I like to do the lessons... I catch the ball, run, run fast like Sonic...

Researcher: Which Sonic? The one from the cartoon?

Sonic: Yeah, from the cartoon, the game and the movie... Did you know that the Sonic movie is coming out, I am going to watch it, I am very nervous to watch it because it is a Sonic movie and I love Sonic...

Researcher: Um, I will look for it to watch it too! Tell me more about your PE class...

Sonic: I like it, I like to run, run, run just like Sonic...

Researcher: Tell me more about your PE class...

Sonic: Look, I am upset because this week I was suspended from PE class

Researcher: What happened?

Sonic: I had a fight with the teacher because she gave me the green vest but I didn't want the green vest, I wanted the blue vest because blue is Sonic's color...

Researcher: Tell me one more thing, you said that you are happy when you do PE classes, how does it feel?

Sonic: I am happy when I run, run, run, run like Sonic... and I am sad when the teacher doesn't let me run like Sonic...

In his initial revelations about Physical Education classes, Sonic narrates: I like Physical Education, I like to take classes... I catch the ball, run, run, run fast like Sonic... The narrative fragments show that the student likes the classes, does them, knows about a fictional cartoon character/video game character, Sonic, and prefers the sport of running, combined with soccer, when he mentions he likes to run with the ball.

In informal conversations and during his narratives, I noticed that the student was very euphoric and excited whenever he talked about the fictional character Sonic. This movement of the student made me curious

to know the meaning/significance that this character had for him. What made me start to have some questions: does the student get inspiration from the character to run? Do they imagine themselves as him?

The character in question is known for being very fast and always running. Trying to unveil the meanings that the student attributes to the character, I resort to Vygotsky (1996, 2001, 2009) for an explanation about the imaginative processes. According to Vygotsky (2009), acting independently from a real situation or creating an imaginary circumstance can be considered a way to develop a creative activity.

For the author, "imagination is an entirely necessary condition for almost every human mental activity" (VIGOTSKI, 2009, p. 25), having its importance for development because it enables the expansion of human experience, providing what is not seen and lived, but elaborated by descriptions, images. The creative activity merges elements of previous experiences, internalized by the subject, reworking the way to present something new, new situations or behaviors. For the author, "the person is not restricted to the circle and narrow limits of his own experience, but can venture beyond them, assimilating, with the help of imagination, the historical or social experience of others." (VIGOTSKI, 2009, p. 25).

For Vygotsky (1996), in adolescence there is a propulsion of the psychic structure from the formation of concepts. In this way, childhood fantasy becomes creative fantasy in adolescence, and this redefinition goes through the formation of concepts, which acts as a transforming action of the subject in the world, making itself present in the signification of reality. Given the above, I interpret that the student is inspired by the character Sonic and makes the character's races a meaningful activity for him, "the images of fantasy serve as an internal expression of our feelings." (VIGOTSKI, 2009, p. 26). Thus, I understand that the student, through the character's fantasy, assigns meanings to his experiences and emotions.

In the sequence, he reveals: I fought with the teacher, because she gave me the green vest, but I didn't want the green vest, I wanted the blue vest, because blue is the color of Sonic. As the student himself says, the color blue is more significant than green for him, since it is the color of the clothing of his favorite character - Sonic. I allow myself some reflections: was there really a need for a discussion with the student about the color of a vest? Going further, why not take the opportunity and explore the use of the color of the vest of the fictional character, so beloved by the student, and combine it with activities developed in Physical Education classes? Perhaps, this movement would be more meaningful and motivating for the student.

Veresov (2016, 2017); Fleer (2016) when discussing social relationships, understands them as a social collision, dramatic event, a drama experienced between two subjects, a process emotionally established as interpsychic social drama (social plane), which subsequently becomes intrapsychic (psychic plane). The author defines *pereživânie* (experience) as a concept that determines the very essence of this process, that is, the personal/singular way of experiencing a dramatic event.

To think about working possibilities, I return to Vygotsky's (1996, 2001, 2009) idea of imagination. For the author, the adolescent's imagination is different from the child's, because it breaks with objects, it becomes a richer imagination, abstract, linked to conceptual thinking. According to him, to work the concept of imagination in the adolescence phase is to move towards the formation of new concepts. For the author, "this process is extremely important in all human mental development; it is the basis of abstract thought, of the formation of concepts (VIGOTSKI, 2009, p. 36).

Also for the author, in this period of adolescence, abstraction is linked to the imaginary process, in order to transform the adolescent's fantasy into concepts, a period marked by the transition from imaginative to creative fantasy. As Vygotsky (1996, p. 207, our translation) expresses, imagination and creativity are based on the "freedom of thought, of action, of knowledge that has reached only those who have mastered the formation of concepts." Taking this idea to Sonic's reality, I think it is valid to carry out a work that aims at the use of imagination, allied to school activities, thus aiming at the formation of new concepts in the student.

In the educational context, Pinto and Góes (2006) point out that imagination is a psychic activity that enhances learning. Therefore, I emphasize the importance of activities based on the use of imagination for the student. By using the imagination, the learner shows us that he is not just entering a fantasy world, but is elevating his ways of thinking, in other words, learning and developing.

At the end of the analysis of Sonic's experiences in Physical Education classes, the student states: I am happy when I run, run, run, run like Sonic... And I am sad when the teacher doesn't let me run like Sonic... The learner, through narrative, names his feelings, gives meaning to his emotions. In this way, the narrative, as a symbolic function of language, mobilizes other psychic functions, allowing the complexification of ways of thinking.

In view of the principle of interfunctionality (intertwining of mediated psychic functions), for Vygotsky (2001), imagination/fantasy is closely linked to feeling/emotion. For the author "feeling and fantasy are not two processes isolated from each other, but in fact represent the same process, and we are entitled to consider fantasy as the central expression of emotional reaction." (VIGOTSKI, 2001, p. 258). The creation is guided by feelings and representations that provide emotional reactions in a unique way, these feelings and

emotions are coupled driving the creative process, generating the production of images and fantasies, conducted by a dialectical process.

Vygotsky (2001) configures this process by exemplifying the story of a man who enters his residence at night and mistakes a hanging jacket for the figure of a terrifying man. The misunderstanding promotes a false experience, not consistent with reality. However, this sensation provides an altered psychic state in the subject, a real fear, as if the jacket really was a terrifying man.

We can understand that this false perception presented by the author establishes a coupling of real emotions, from the integration of feelings and fantasies that emanate bodily sensations. Therefore, if we make an analogy between the example presented by Vygotsky and the fictional character pointed out by the student, we can make a parallel from which emerges all this emotion and happiness. Even if the character creates a false experience, as the one cited by the author, it makes real sensations in the student, such as the will to run, the adrenaline, the emotion and the happiness.

The student's fixation on the fictional character made me realize some more reflections: is it better to be Sonic than a student with ASD? The student puts himself into a cartoon character, but wouldn't that be considered a childish attitude, given his age group? Authors such as Bagarollo and Panhoca (2010),

Martins and Góes (2013), Chiote (2013) and Silva et al. (2015) investigate the use of imaginary activities in the schooling of children and adolescents with ASD through make-believe games, use of fictional characters, stories and cultural games. For the authors, employing imaginary activities with students with ASD, regardless of their age group, has proven to be a productive path to follow; creation has offered them a (re)organization of their thoughts, actions, and behaviors. The activities act in the field of meaning, of the symbolic universe, contributing to the development of these students.

However, the authors problematize the issue of infantilization of adolescents with ASD when they are inserted in activities considered out of their age group, that is, proposals seen as children's. For them, the issue of infantilization in adolescents with ASD is not natural, organic, but social, resulting from the activities offered socially and culturally to this student. The researchers also problematize that the lack of adequate socio-cultural tasks has a negative impact on the identity formation of adolescents. Furthermore, they point out that students with ASD have experiences that are meaningful to them, regardless of age group.

Going back to the question about being better embedded in a cartoon character than being a student with ASD, I turn to Vygotsky (1996). The author discusses the development of interests in the adolescent. For him, the development of interests in the adolescent period is totally linked to sociocultural factors. The author explains that interests are provoked by forces not only internal, biological, but also external, linked to the sociocultural conditions of the adolescent, "biologist scientists forget very often that the adolescent is not only a biological, natural, but also a historical, social being." (VIGOTSKI, 1996, p. 36).

In view of the above, I allow myself to make a relationship between the development by interests pointed out by the author in the transitional age and Sonic's preference in a character. As Vygotsky states, the development of interests in the transitional age comes from external stimuli, external motivations; therefore, if Sonic's classes do not provide new interests in the youngster, do not produce any meaning and sense for him, I think that the boy prefers to be Sonic than to be a student with ASD in an environment without meaning and sense.

## **V. Conclusion**

I started this study with the purpose of understanding and interpreting what a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder said, thought and felt about his schooling process, specifically, about his Physical Education classes. For this text, I aimed to understand and interpret the imaginary process of a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder during his Physical Education classes.

With the intention of systematizing the findings, I understand as necessary to synthesize the indications found in Sonic's narratives, in order to facilitate the understanding of the facts. His narratives raise different meanings about his school experiences in Physical Education classes, and it is pertinent to know them in order to understand aspects of the educational process of these students.

Sonic reveals the meanings that his Physical Education classes have for him in a very enthusiastic way. The student says he likes Physical Education, likes to take the classes, likes to run during the classes, and shows his fascination for the character Sonic. However, he has some conflicts with his teacher; I observe, throughout the context narrated by the student, that the occurrences start from episodes that could have been avoided or solved before they reach the final facts, and that his participation during the classes could be better used if the artifices explained by the student himself were used.

Physical Education is a mandatory part of the regular elementary school curriculum. However, I believe that this idea should go beyond just guaranteeing the right to have the subject in the school environment. It is necessary to eliminate the obstacles encountered in the teaching-learning process of students with disabilities during Physical Education classes, seeking learning paths in sociocultural practices.

The results found in this study point to the need for an educational change, which contemplates a real and effective teaching for students with disabilities, a policy model, a school, a pedagogical practice based on listening to these students, giving them the protagonism. So that decisions about pedagogical proposals are not taken a priori, but are built on listening to these students.

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