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Education and emotions: coordinates for a Vygotskian theory of affects

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Abstract

Studies on emotions in education have increasingly gained importance in recent times, impacting educational practices. In accordance with this, we conducted a literature review of 25 texts by Chilean academics published between 2002 and 2017, addressing the relationship between emotions and education, in order to identify the predominant concepts of emotions in the educational field and a book for its high impact in the academic space and outside it. We can conclude that there is a predominant view of emotions that is sustained by the cognitivist paradigm and models of emotional intelligence and attachment. We mention the limitations of these concepts and propose an approach to a new definition of the emotions for the educational field based on certain guiding axes constructed from Vygotskian theory.

Keywords: Emotions; Educación; Vygotsky.

Educación y emociones: coordinadas para una teoría vygotskiana de los afectos

Resumen

Actualmente los estudios sobre emociones en educación han ido adquiriendo una importancia cada vez mayor impactando en las prácticas educativas. En función de ello, se realizó una revisión bibliográfica de 25 textos de académicos chilenos publicados entre los años 2002 y 2017 que abordaran la relación entre emociones y educación, con el fin de identificar las concepciones predominantes de emociones en el campo educativo y un libro por su alto impacto en el espacio académico y fuera de éste. Se concluye que predomina una visión de las emociones que se sostiene en el paradigma cognitivista y en los modelos de la inteligencia emocional y del apego. Se mencionan las limitaciones de dichas concepciones y se propone una aproximación a una nueva definición de los afectos para el campo educativo a partir de algunos ejes orientadores construidos desde la teoría vygotskiana.

Palabras clave: Emociones; Educación; Vygotsky.

Educação e emoções: coordenadas para uma teoria vygotskiana dos afetos

Resumo

Atualmente os estudos sobre emoções em educação foram adquirindo uma importância cada vez maior, impactando nas práticas educativas. Em função disso, realizou-se uma revisão bibliográfica de 25 textos de acadêmicos chilenos publicados entre os anos de 2002 e 2017 que abordaram a relação entre emoções e educação, com a finalidade de identificar as concepções predominantes de emoções no campo educativo e um livro por seu alto impacto no espaço acadêmico e fora deste. Concluiu-se que predomina uma visão das emoções que se argumenta no paradigma cognitivista e nos modelos da inteligência emocional e do apego. Mencionam-se as limitações de ditas concepções e propõem-se uma aproximação a uma nova definição dos afetos para o campo educativo a partir de alguns eixos orientadores construídos a partir da teoria vygotskiana.

Palavras-chave: Emoções; Educação; Vygotsky.

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Introduction

At present, it is possible to find a vast literature on emotions in education, so it can be said that research on this dimension of the school has been strengthened in the scientific-academic field (Bisquerra-Alcina, 2005; Cabello, Ruiz-Aranda, & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2009; Casassus, 2007; Extremera & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2003; Fernandez-Berrocal & Extremera, 2002; Marchant, Milicic, & Alamos, 2015; Milicic, Alcalay, Berger, & Alamos, 2013; Ibañez, 2002; Shapiro, 1997). Indeed, it is possible to find authors who have been consolidated in the study of emotions and who are usually cited in popular scientific articles, influencing to a large extent the lines of thought and studies at a global level, being some of them Mayer and Salovey (1993), Shapiro (1997), Vallés and Vallés (2000), Goleman (2010), among others.

This trend in research has gradually generated a consensus on the importance of emotions within educational processes, so that in recent decades there has been a boom in theories that attempt to think about the emotional dimension of learning and its importance in the formal education process (Ibañez, 2002; Miras, 1990; Shapiro, 1997; Vallés & Vallés, 2000).

In Chile, the effects that these studies have had on the country's educational practices are reflected, for example, in the modifications that the Educational Quality Measurement System (S.I.M.C.E.) has undergone, which is applied from time to time to all schools in order to evaluate learning outcomes at the national level (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2018). In 2014, a questionnaire was implemented that measures personal and social development indicators, including factors such as academic self-esteem, school motivation, and school coexistence, among others (Education Quality Agency, 2014). In this way, one can appreciate the importance that non-academic aspects have acquired in education, which focuses mainly on the relationship of students with themselves, with their peers and with teachers, which allows the entry of discussion of emotions in the educational field.

It is from this context that this article has a two-fold objective. On the one hand, to review 25 theoretical and empirical studies elaborated by Chilean researchers between 2002 and 2017 to identify which are or are the conceptions of emotions that predominate in the educational environment. On the other hand, and in consideration of the findings obtained in the revision, to contribute coordinated to think a new conception of emotions from the Vygotskian theory. In order to do so, a route is proposed that goes from the methodology used, the analysis carried out to the texts, the discussion and conclusions of the revision, and then culminates with the proposal of guiding axes that allow us to approach a Vygotskian theory of emotions that could later be used in the educational sphere.

Methodology

As noted above, the methodology consisted of a review of articles by Chilean researchers published in indexed

journals between 2002 and 2017, whose topics were associated with the relationship between education and emotions. The aim of this review was to identify the predominant conception of emotions in Chilean education. In addition, the book by authors who work on the phenomenon of emotions in education was considered because of its impact in this field.

As for the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of the texts, they were related to the selection of articles and books that had been elaborated by Chilean authors belonging to different institutions and coming from different disciplines. Both theoretical and empirical writings were considered. Likewise, only documents that had been elaborated in the last 15 years were contemplated, since this subject has little development in Chile, so a longer period should be considered to carry out an analysis that gives reliable results.

For the information collection and analysis process, a grid was created to systematize the data. It was made up of 2 categories which made it possible to compare the conception of emotions proposed by the various revised writings. These categories were: 1) Conception of emotions, 2) Paradigms and theoretical models that support the definitions of emotions. It should be noted that on several occasions the paradigms and conceptions of emotions of the authors were not explicit, so it was necessary to infer what their assumptions were from their reflection on emotions in the educational sphere.

Results analysis

Regarding the analysis of the texts, what can be observed is that they articulate a mixture of different rationalities that coexist in the same theoretical proposal, sometimes even being contradictory to each other.

From this theoretical framework, paradigms and models were identified that serve as a basis for sustaining the different conceptions of emotions that are often not mentioned explicitly but that could be inferred from the analysis and reflections that the authors carry out regarding the place of emotions in the educational sphere.

A summary of the results of the review is presented below. To this end, the two categories of information gathering mentioned above (approaches and conception of emotions) were condensed to present the prevailing conceptions of emotions in a contextualized manner, through the approaches that sustain them.

Predominant theories and concepts of emotions in education

In reviewing the articles and book, what is observed is that in the conceptions of emotions in education predominate 3 theories that are: the cognitive paradigm, the model of emotional intelligence and the model of attachment. It should be noted that these elaborations are not necessarily related to each other; they are also at different levels of complexity. In this way, it is possible to notice that the authors tend to

use theories that come from different theoretical fields when proposing concepts of emotions in education.

Once the above has been clarified, the articulation of the paradigms and theoretical models predominant in educational field with the conceptions of investigated emotions is presented. The assembly of both aspects, that is, the paradigms and models with the conceptions of emotions, was done first defining the basic theories and then articulating them with the conceptions of emotions that derive from them, being the first of them the cognitive approach that is presented below.

Cognitive Paradigm and Emotional Intelligence: Emotions as Skills

The cognitive paradigm, which emerged in the 20th century, is based on the assumption that human beings are individuals who are separated from their environment and that their interaction with it takes place through the processing of information, which consists of ordering and categorizing reality (Sisto, 2006). For this paradigm, the mind is understood as cognition, and this in turn as information processing in the same way as a computer does, that is, manipulating symbols based on rules that are universal (Sisto, 2006). In that sense, the subject can be understood as a data processor so a distinction is made between internal processes, which occur within the individual, and the environment, which corresponds to external sensory stimuli (Sisto, 2006). In this way, subject and environment would function independently and would interact based on the subject's perception of stimuli and their consequent processing.

One of the proposals of this perspective is the adaptation of the subjects to reality, understood as a better representation of reality through an adequate implementation of the processing rules, which implies a correct evaluation and assessment of the environment (Palmero, 2003). Indeed, the goal of cognition is to establish "... the design of internal machinery through the functioning of which organisms are able to behave in context" (Schnaitter, 1987, p.1).

Considering the above, it was observed that one of the predominant theoretical models in the understanding of emotions, and which is coherent with the postulates of cognitivism, is the model of emotional intelligence, which can be defined as the ability to evaluate one's own emotions and those of others to discriminate them "... and use that information to guide thought and action" (Mayer & Salovey, 1990, p.189). In this way, the proposal of emotional intelligence is limited to the conception of subject proposed by cognitivism where it is postulated that the subject processes information from the medium to adapt to reality.

The review identified that many of the authors understood the emotional environment from the model of emotional intelligence, as competence and/or ability that must be acquired to improve learning and personal well-being. In this way, emotions are introduced to the extent that they serve cognition and are thought of as an element that is broken down

into a series of skills that can serve both to achieve the goals of everyday life and those of education. An example of this is the following definition found in one of the articles: "Emotional and social competence is an ability to understand, direct and express the emotional aspects of our lives in such a way as to enable us to handle every day tasks" (Jadue, 2003, p.118). Another example that shows the above is the following: "... Emotional Education or "Emotional Literacy" is presented as a resource to enhance the positive perception that the student should have of himself...". (Aliste & Alfaro, 2007, p.82). It is also possible to identify the following definition: "... a genuine intelligence based on the adaptive use of emotions, so that the individual could solve problems and adapt effectively to the environment around him" (Veloso-Besio, Cuadra-Peralta, Antezana-Saguez, Avendaño-Robledo, & Fuentes-Soto, 2013, p. 356). As a consequence, the "emotional" is understood as an environment that can be developed and that involves the adaptation of the subject to an environment.

Attachment theory in education: an alliance mental health-education

Another of the theoretical models that was put into play in the conception of emotions is that which comes from the theory of attachment. Attachment theory has its origin in the field of developmental psychology and was developed by John Bowlby. This theoretical model seeks to provide an explanatory framework on how early linkages affect mental health and impact children's behavior (Moneta, 2014). Later, this theory was taken up by other authors such as Mary Ainsworth who validated and complemented the theory with new findings (Bretherton, 1992). According to the foregoing, it should be noted that although this theory arises from Bowlby's observations with institutionalized children (Moneta, 2014), the fact is that it provides certain normative guidelines regarding how the significant figure of the child, which is usually the mother, should be have in order to reduce the risk of generating a dysfunctional psychic apparatus.

In the bibliographical review carried out, it was found that a large part of the authors referred to this theory to understand the teacher-student relationship and to make proposals in the emotional sphere of education. Thus, the authors propose that since the teacher is a significant figure for students, he or she plays an attachment role (Milicic et al., 2013; Berger, Milicic, Alcalay, & Torreti, 2014; Toro & Berger, 2012; Guzman-Gonzalez, Carrasco, Figueroa, Trabbuco, & Vilca, 2016; Céspedes & Silva, 2013; Mena, Rogmanoli & Valdez, 2009; Santelices & Pérez, 2012). An example of the above is when it is stated that "Attachment is dynamic (enriched, remodeled and subject to the experience of the person) and lasts a lifetime, so when children expand their world outside the home they find other attachment figures, such as the teacher" (Toro & Berger, 2012, p. 19). In this way, in an important part of the revised texts, it is proposed that emotions in education should be approached from the model of attachment where the teacher would be inserted in

the dyad mother/father and child to educate students emotionally and facilitate their learning.

Within this framework, new demands are proposed to teachers in their relationship with students, where in addition to ensuring that students learn, they must “repair” negative experiences of primary attachment (Berger et al., 2014; Céspedes & Silva, 2013) that is to say those experiences they had with their families. From these assumptions about the place of emotions, it is possible to observe how the objectives of mental health¹ are transferred to school, turning the educational space into a therapeutic one in which the teacher would act as a psychologist and the student as a patient who requires emotional intervention. Another way of understanding it is that a parentalization of the teaching place takes place, turning the teacher into a mother or father who would come to replace the function that the family must perform.

Along these lines, the tendency of some authors to attempt an alliance between education and mental health is striking. One quote that graphs this trend is the following: “In this way, the social-emotional dimension has not only received attention from its relationship with academic performance, but also as an intervention objective related to mental health indicators” (Berger et al., 2014, p.628). Another example along the same lines is the following: “In this perspective, the development of social-emotional competencies in the school context is a means for the achievement of people’s social-emotional well-being” (Marchant, Milicic, & Alamos, 2013, p.169) and another that goes in the same direction is the one that posits that “... to the extent that teachers and officials are perceived as emotionally intelligent, they will feel more satisfied with their lives and vice versa” (Veloso-Besio et al., 2013, p.362). Thus, emotions in school –understanding the former as skills that can be developed- seem to be aimed at ensuring people’s subjective well-being. Consequently, it is possible to affirm that one of the conditions for making emotions visible and intervening in the educational sphere is based on the education-health alliance, in this case, mental health, the attachment model being one of the ways of introducing mental health into education.

Discussion and Conclusions

From the findings found, it is possible to affirm that the revised texts that were elaborated by Chilean researchers that link emotions with education, show some constants referring to the following:

1. There is a tendency to understand emotions from the cognitive paradigm, which implies conceiving subjects as separate from their environment but in interaction with it through the model of information processing.

¹ For the purposes of this review, mental health shall be defined as postulated by the World Health Organization, i.e., as “... a state of well-being in which the individual is aware of his own capacities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to the community” (2018).

This implies that emotions would be understood as part of the process of decoding external information to adapt to the environment and would have a universal character.

2. There is a predominance of the emotional intelligence model, of cognitive origin, when explaining emotions, understanding them as a skill that can and must be developed by education to improve the learning process of students and their well-being. In this sense, emotions are understood as part of intelligence, in an adaptive sense.
3. Mental health objectives are incorporated into the school to legitimize the insertion of emotions in the field of education. As a consequence of this union, the alliance between education and mental health would be promoted, being one of the tasks of education, and especially teachers, to promote the mental well-being of students.
4. The reconfiguration of the roles of the teacher and the student in the school is proposed. The conception of emotions in education would promote greater emotional involvement of teachers with students by incorporating attachment theory as the axis from which to explain the relationship between the two actors. Thus, the teacher would be given a therapeutic and parental role, while the students would be conceived as emotionally vulnerable subjects or susceptible to becoming vulnerable people with inadequate emotional management.

Taking into consideration what has already been mentioned and based on the analysis of the texts, it is possible to mention that in Chile diverse authors have made an effort to make visible the subject of emotions in the educational field, which is undoubtedly a contribution to theoretical and academic discussion. However, it can be seen that there is a predominant view of emotions that imposes certain limitations when thinking about the emotional dimension of the school. We propose that some problems embodied in the vision that currently exists in the educational field in Chile responds to the difficulties that the cognitive approach generates when thinking of other factors that could be influencing the way affections circulate in schools, for example, the culture from which students come or their social class, to name just a few.

In this sense, the cognitive approach and the model of emotional intelligence would not allow us to reflect on the way in which the social context affects the way in which emotions are displayed in the classroom, because they are theories that, when postulated as universal, presume that the context from which students and teachers come would not influence their way of expressing and understanding emotions. Besides, the conception of subject that postulates cognitivism does not allow the generation of explanations that include other levels of complexity, such as, for example,

those that assume that subjects not only inhabit a context but are constructed by it. It was also possible to observe that many of the authors tend to adopt a prescriptive stance on how the teacher should deal with emotions with students, rather than understanding, that is, trying to understand why teachers act affectively the way they do.

On the other hand, it seems relevant to reflect on the implications of sustaining the alliance between education and mental health when thinking about emotions in the educational field.

From a critical perspective, the incorporation of attachment theory as a way of understanding the teacher-student relationship, and in that promoting an education-health alliance, could pose a series of difficulties for teachers in exercising their educational role. This is because this theoretical model promotes greater emotional involvement of teachers with the learners, which could lead to the creation of spaces of intimacy that may confuse the relationship, especially the professional relationship that pedagogy entails. Also, the application of this psychological theory to education can contribute to overloading teachers since it would delegate to them a task that is specific to families or mental health professionals, such as taking charge of the emotional and affective dimension of children.

This is not to say that affections should be put aside at school, but rather, as Abramowski (2010) points out, to recognize the tensions to which teachers are subjected as they face a paradox: "On the one hand, they have to deal with the emotional stereotype - still in force - that incites to 'love students'. But on the other hand, teachers are suspected of loving too much" (p.82). Thus, applying mental health objectives to education through attachment theory without considering the tensions that go through teachers' relationships with students, the logics that govern the school, and the historical development that education has had, could produce more problems than benefits.

Based on the limitations detected in the conception of emotions that predominates in the research and theories of affectivity in education in Chile, we propose the construction of a new definition of emotions that incorporates the social as a constituent element of affective relationships. In this sense, what is postulated is not a conception based on a subject that interacts with its environment and distinguishes itself from it as the cognitive paradigm does, but rather an understanding of subjects as intertwined with the context, being constructed by it at the same time as they construct it. This involves incorporating culture and history into the definition and analysis of emotions at school. To this end, it is proposed to rescue the Vygotskian theory to rethink the affective dimension in education from a historical-cultural framework.

Coordinates to think of a Vygotskian theory of affects

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky constructed a theory of learning and development that has had a great impact on

educational thinking. In general terms, it is possible to point out that its theory rescues historical-cultural frameworks when thinking about the educational development of human beings (Veraksa, Shiyani, Shiyani, Pramling, & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2016).

The historical dimension is understood from the point of view of the development in time of human capacities "... through productive activity to produce those things that human beings use and consume" (Langford, 2005, p. 32). This means that as needs arise, people develop the skills to respond to them. For example, in the past, people used visual abilities to estimate the correct size of a given object. As society became more technified, the methods of counting and measuring allowed that instead of having to visually intuit the size of an object, it could be produced of the correct size. As a result, people no longer had, in certain cases, to infer the size of an object, but could obtain it the size they wanted directly, which involves the creation and historical transformation of skills (Langford, 2005).

In terms of culture, Vygotsky argued that the process of learning is strongly influenced by culture since learning takes place from the outside inwards, that is, children gradually acquire culture through the contact they acquire with others in the cultural practices in which they participate (Veraksa et al., 2016). Thus, for Vygotskian theory, it is in the interaction with others that learning and development take place.

Considering the foregoing, one may ask from what coordinates it would be plausible to think of a theory of Vygotskian emotions. This question was half answered by the author in his text "Theory of emotions: historical-psychological study" (Vygotsky, 2004) where he critiques Descartes' dualistic conception of body and mind. However, Vygotsky does not explicitly propose a theory of emotions but provides a framework from which to think about them.

Regards the above, and of the assumptions that sustain the Vygotskian theory, what is proposed here are guiding axes from which a theory of emotions could be constructed from such a perspective. Some of the approaches that could sustain a conception of emotions from Vygotsky's theory are the following:

I) Emotions have a biological dimension that is always in dialogue with their historical-cultural dimension. This means that for the author, although there is a biological basis, emotions are constructed mainly in each culture and historical moment.

II) Emotions are not substances that are configured individually but are the product of social relations between human beings. Hence its connection to culture and history.

III) Emotions are not differentiated between primary and secondary; their difference would be given by the level of interrelation with different elements given by culture.

IV) There is a dialogical relationship between emotions and reason. Feelings unfold in tune with people's understanding of the world. In this way, there would be no division between emotion and reason, as two components that function separately.

Consequently, for Vygotsky emotions are relational phenomenon at that are historically and culturally situated. This is in line with his approach since he understands human beings as constituted by cultural contexts and practices. Thus, in order to understand how affections unfold in certain types of relationship, it would be necessary to reflect on the cultural framework that underpins them, so that it would not be enough just to observe the relationship between people, but it would be necessary to understand how the network of meanings that mediatize this relationship and the expression and valorization of emotions is articulated.

These guiding axes, which can be derived from Vygotskian theory, would allow us to think of a new conception of emotions for the educational field that would problematize the assumptions of the cognitivist paradigm and the models of emotional intelligence and attachment in education. Similarly, new dimensions could emerge from affections that are not addressed by the theories mentioned above, such as the way emotions circulate in school and the way they are meant by students and teachers, which would imply an understanding of what happens in school rather than a prescriptive attitude about how they should feel.

Thus, it is argued that Vygotskian theory has the potential to offer a new conception of emotions to the field of education and to offer other ways of dealing with school affections that differ from the prevailing theories that have dominated the debate on emotions. However, these coordinates on affections in Vygotsky must be discussed with other theories that allow the Vygotskian conceptions to be updated and give a new twist to what has been studied so far. In this sense, the development of this new line and its practical application to the educational field is urgently needed.

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