

# The concept of social compensation in vygotsky: inquiring about human development and disability

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The following research proposal investigates the concept of compensation of Lev S. Vygotsky discussed in the texts organized under "The Fundamentals of Defectology". He questions matters of disability, organic and social conditions in his pursuit of a better understanding of the human development. The aim is to explore the compensation concept under historical-cultural perspectives and to understand its impact on the contemporary teaching practices. An option was made in favor of the analysis of empirical situations in a State Elementary School in São Paulo- Brazil. Under the context of inclusive education, attention is called to the tension between theory and the empirical reality, meaning a theory that is renewed and enriched in its relation to the empirical field. The analyzed situations condense the drama of educational relationships. They also illustrate that what intensifies the concept of compensation is the humanizing function of education, which becomes a condition of being human.

**Keywords:** compensation, disability, Lev S. Vygotsky, human development, education.

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## Introduction

The proposal at issue has as object of investigation Vygotsky's concept of compensation, as presented in the texts that compose the book "Fundamentals of Defectology" in which he chooses to focus more specifically on the issue of disability and the organic and social conditions in his quest for understanding the human development.

The concept of compensation developed by Vygotsky has been presented and used by contemporary researchers (Rivière 1985; Gindis, 1995; De Carlo, 2001; Góes, 2002; Borges & Kittel, 2002; Garcia & Beatón, 2004; Carvalho, 2004; Kozulin & Gindis, 2007; Cunha, et al., 2010; Siems, 2010; Akhutina, 2011; Korkman, 1999; Eilam, 2003; Glozman, 1999; Hanzin, et al., 2010), who have assumed and explored this notion in several ways from different analytical points of view.

It is possible to observe, in the area of neuropsychology especially based on the work of Luria, that compensation is understood from a clinical point of view, or it is directed to a clinical method, a neuropsychological rehabilitation program. Studies anchored more on a Vygotskian perspective tend to deal with compensation in the field of education and more specifically in the school context.

In our reading of these contemporary productions, we can see the different ways of naming and referring to the issue: "*compensation*", "*social compensation*", "*socio-psychological compensation*", "*super compensation*", "*physiological compensation*", "*compensation structure*", "*functional compensation*", "*overcompensation*". The many uses and nuances of the term will depend on what the adjective is intended to highlight, a fact which shows different comprehensions and theoretical and

practical concerns, as well as multiple universes of meaning (Bakhtin, 2003).

In our analytical attempts to understand these multiple meanings (Dainêz and Smolka, 2011) we could raise the following: compensation as correction of defect, normalization of deviance, reaction of developmental process, leveling of instable development, replacement of functions, transformations of functions, brain plasticity, neuropsychological rehabilitation, alternative cognitive paths, mental operation with signs, quality of instructional procedures, fulfilling of cultural practices, removing of social barriers or obstacles, rehabilitation, education, social creation.

The ways of understanding the origin of the phenomenon are diverse: compensation can be generated by the existence of organic impairment (Garcia & Beatón 2004, Borges & Kittel 2002, Cunha, Ayres, Moraes 2010, Fichtner, 2010); it can be provoked by in-adaptation of both, the child and the defect (Borges & Kittel, 2002); it can appear by means of a corrective work of cerebral functions and structure (Akhutina, 2011); the genesis of functional compensation is related to a high level of neuronal redundancy in early childhood due to cerebral dynamicity and functional adaptability (Korkman, 1999); it can be present as a mechanism in every living organism (Garcia & Beatón, 2004); it can be seen as promoted by and as a consequence of social interaction and educational opportunities (Gindis 1995, De Carlo, 2001; Góes, 2002; Carvalho, 2004); compensation occurs by means of sign and signification process (Veresov, 1999).

The outcomes of this mechanism are also treated in different ways: advancement, improvement, development, progression, regression, intensification of defect, or formation of further defects.

What does this diversity of interpretations produce? How does the concept of compensation theoretically unfold? How can this concept be applied? How to make use of the concept? What can be the practical contributions? How does knowledge produced in a certain cultural-historical context, that involve specific social, economical and political issues might orient contemporary practices? These questions are implicit and tangent to the different positions of the authors within the historical-cultural perspective.

These multiple ways of approaching the notion impels us to the challenge of conceptually refining and exploring the core of Vygotsky's conjecture in relation to contemporary educational practices. They lead us back to the writings of Vygotsky, in search of new insights, and contributions.

We opted for questioning the concept of compensation in analytical exercises based on empirical episodes recorded on video and in daily field book in 2010 and 2011 in a public elementary school in Sao Paulo State, Brazil, in the context of inclusive education. This means that the reality of situations experienced in daily school are chosen as a place of questioning theoretical understanding and conceptual elaboration.

The way we proceeded in the fieldwork was inspired in the school ethnographic approach (Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1989), which proposes the immersion of the researcher in the school routine.

Our theoretical and methodological position implies a constant inquiry with regards to the many tensions and interrelationships between theory and empirical field. How theory can be mobilized and what does it allow to be seen?

The historical-genetic method (Vygotsky, 1995, 1996) supports the investigation of: 1. the emergence of the *individual-in-development* new modes of activity; 2. The study of movement and the study *in* movement, oriented to the phenomenon in transformation; 3. The analysis anchored on the study of processes and the reconstruction and understanding of what has been already consolidated.

Bakhtin's work (2006) contributes to turn visible the researched "other", as subject who interacts and enunciates, is active, expressive, responsive. In considering the comprehensive process between active and responsive subjects, Bakhtin sustains our effort in attempting to see through the other's perspective a given situation in a shared experience.

**Searching for the compensation concept and its approaches in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:  
The impact on the Vygotsky's work**

The readings of Vygotsky's works with regards to development and disability, oriented, hence, our studies in two directions: to being acquainted with the production of contemporary authors, and, at the same time takes us to pursue theories, different emphasis and

impact of the notion of compensation at the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The mystical version, based on the gift theory, attributed to impaired people a special sensitivity, some kind of mystical forces of divine origin, in which the presence of a third eye, a third ear, some supreme force, would enable the disabled individual to see, to hear, to feel what was non-perceived by normal subjects. Knowledge of spiritual order assigned to the particular disabled person compensates certain loss, lack of vision, hearing, intelligence... In this perspective, the defect is accepted as a sign, karma resigned/trusted and needed to be fulfilled.

The current biological/sensory compensation considers that the loss of a perceptual function, a sense organ, is naturally matched with the functioning of other organs. With a bad or non-functioning of any perception organ, others take their place and fulfill the function that is not commonly fulfilled in normal people. Founded on the idea of a pre-disposition contained in the organic body, this conception is focused on sensory/organic plan, trying to identify the limitations and obstacles that disability imposes in the search for the cause that characterizes the defect itself.

In such circumstances, were being gestated and put into circulation, the compensation ideas in education. The first ideas of this perspective come in the nineteenth century from studies based on the work of a Swiss educator, J.H. Pestalozzi (1746–1827). Among these scholars were: F. Fröbel (founder of kindergartens in Germany in the middle of slumps during the Industrial Revolution), M. Montessori (with their homes for children in Italian slumps), McMillan (emphasis on the cognitive stimulation and not only in medical care for the disabled child were compensated), the Russian Helena Antipoff (with her education system to meet the children considered "exceptional"), among others.

With the Industrial Revolution, in order to equalize the educational children attainment, were created the compensatory programs to address the shortcomings of health, nutrition, education, and socio-cultural environment. According to Kramer (1982), in the historical movement, these programs were being viewed as an "antidote" to the deprivation as a form of possible cultural and social change.

Participating in such cultural-historical context, Vygotsky (1997, 1993) approaches these debates and writes his first two texts in the area of disabilities — "Principios de la educacion de los ninos fisicamente deficientes"/ "Principles of education for physically handicapped children", "Acerca de la psicologia y la pedagogia de la defectividad infantil"/ "The psychology and pedagogy of children's handicaps" — both elaborated in 1924, presented at the Second Congress on Social and Legal Protection of Minors in Russia (Prestes & Tunes, 2011), whose object of analysis proposed for intellectuals was the special school, its educational principles, and organizational aspects in education.

The author weaves important criticism on the organization and principles governing the education of these

children at that time. Arguing for a unique educational system that would allow integrating the special pedagogy with the general pedagogy, Vygotsky (1993, 1997) examines the problem of the orientation of educational influences in disabled children in relation to compensation issues. Vygotsky considers that the mystical ideas of compensation, the idea of organic compensation, and compensatory education were rooted in the scientific literature and public opinion at that time, heavily impacting teaching and pedagogical practice, preventing defectology to develop.

The author's disagreement in relation to both mystical and organic/sensory strands is produced by the fact that they privilege a naturalistic bias of human development and conceiving compensation as a biological automatic correction of the defect. What Vygotsky (1993, 1997) argues for in this clash of ideas is that between the defect and the compensation lies the social relations.

(...) a physical handicap in a human being can never affect the personality directly because the eye and ear of human being are not only physical organs but also social organs, because between the world and human being stands his social environment, which refracts and guides everything proceeding from man to the world and from the world to man (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 77).

Vygotsky's disagreement with the ideas of American education is linked to their conceiving compensation as a social supply.

What constitutes our radical divergence from the West with respect to this question? Only the fact that there it is a question of social welfare, whereas for us it is a question of social education. There it is a question of charity for invalids and social insurance against crime and begging. It is extremely difficult to get rid of the philanthropic, invalid-oriented point of view. (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 75).

He brings hence, the social dimension as means of orientation of human being in the world, stressing that defectology, as a problem of the study of impaired child, is a problem of social origin, not only organic problem.

It is important to say that in his criticism to educational projects in the Occident, Vygotsky (1993, 1997) does not mention or makes use of the term *compensatory education*. He talks about compensation as a method of educative work, using social not compensatory, to qualify education.

It is in this use of the term and its nuances that becomes highlighted the difference in the principle that is being searched and elaborated by Vygotsky with regards to human development. Although not deepening this discussion at this point, the author already conjectures that "the mind, particularly reason, is the function of social life" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 84).

In this sense, education is not treated as an aid, a supplement and/or a deficiency supply that implies thinking about the lack of something, but it is the production of an action that makes possible the creation of new opportunities for social, active and integral participation of the individual in social practices.

So, Vygotsky places the problem of compensation as an educational issue, but in a different way. *He stresses the issue of education as social practice*, and makes explicit the responsibility of society in the education of the child with disability.

In assuming and emphasizing the social dimension of education, Vygotsky, then, points to the correlation of social and biological conditions in child development and talks about pedagogical demands and implications. He argues for the possibility of social realization and development achieved from any biological and organic condition, and calls attention to the negative effect that can be produced in the relationship between defect and social environment in the child's life: "A physical defect somehow causes a social dislocation" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 76), and, from this on, it advocates the potential investment of the child. "We dwell on the 'nuggets' of illness and not on the 'mountains' of health. We notice only defects which are minuscule in comparison with the colossal areas of wealth which handicapped children possess" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 68).

Based on such assumptions, Vygotsky highlights and stresses the function of school as social institution, as special locus of integration of children in society.

### **Alfred Adler's contribution to Vygotsky's thinking**

Another tendency concerning the theory of compensation arises and becomes mainly represented in the work of the Austrian psychologist, physician and philosopher Alfred Adler (1870–1937), who elaborates the concept of compensation related to the notion of personality formation. Adler's work seems to deeply inspire Vygotsky.

Adler (1967–2003), who collaborated with Freud, from whom he later dissociates directing his studies to the dialectical materialism was a co-founder of the psychoanalytical school. In the tension between these two fields of knowledge, psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism, and also in dialogue with Pavlov's theory of the conditioned reflexes, and Darwin's evolutionary theory, Adler develops his theory of personality oriented towards the future. He argues that the social sphere is so important for psychology as the sphere of inwardness. He became known as the founder of the holistic system of individual psychology. The matter of personality formation is approached in the context of the social reality, whose projection depends on individual goals to be reached, a process that guides the agent's struggle to overcome obstacles.

According to Adler (1967, 2003), the mechanism by which the malaise decreases is the compensation, a tendency that is present in all individuals. A subjective factor is added to the compensation theory – the feeling of inferiority, whose origins lies in the difficulties that the individual faces in his social position, works as the driver of compensation. Therefore, the defect of an organ can only be defined by the situation in which the indi-

vidual is in relation with what is outside, while only the psyche can compensate the organic dysfunctions of man and adapt him to the collectivity.

After knowing about Adler's work, Vygotsky (1993, 1997) takes into account this more optimistic perspective of compensation and of considering the development of disabled individuals, which does not value so much the suffering in itself but it rather values the fight against it and its overcoming. The point is that compensation does not refer to a purely organic phenomenon; it refers to a phenomenon of psyche, and for Vygotsky, to speak about human psyche implies social history.

Vygotsky (1993, 1997) emphasizes the social basis of Adler's psychology — a positional theory — that derives from the social position of personality in relation to the dispositional perspectives of psychology, the organic predisposition, which allows to think the development as a prospective process, considering relevant the understanding of each psychological action not only linked to the past, but also to the future.

Thus Vygotsky (1993, 1997) elaborates the idea of final orientation of conduct and considers that the education must be oriented for the future goal, which resides in the social force of the child; "(...) the dynamics of personality are guided by daily social demands" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 55).

It may be noticed that the elaboration process of Vygotsky's compensation concept is constituted in an (in)tense movement, entangled in a web of understandings and efforts of further conceptualizations. His proximity with Adler also produces distance and ruptures. According to Van Der Veer & Valsiner (2001), Adler's ideas are suppressed as Vygotsky sees as a possibility of compensation the objective opportunities present in the collective, instead of the subjective feeling of inferiority.

What then will be highlighted in the conceptual elaboration of compensation in the cultural-historical perspective?

Although there were utopian aspects in his arguments, as pointed out by Van Der Veer & Valsiner (2001), Vygotsky brings a new way of conceiving the social instance. The idea is that the social dynamics surpasses the bad organic functioning and creates new conditions. Biological and social factors intertwine and merge, transforming

themselves into a single and unique condition.

Vygotsky (1993, 1997) poses as a matter to be pursued the constitution of the social dynamics of the personality, the idea of "social nature". Vygotsky shifts the emphasis that other theories attribute to the organic and to the personal aspects in the formation of the individual. Although Adler claims that the social aspect is important, the way he develops his concepts implies considering that the tonic is still centered in the individual. The inferiority is pointed out by Adler as an intrinsic characteristic of the human species and the compensation as a mechanism which is activated by subjective forces of the individual. This idea is abandoned by Vygotsky as he argues that the strength is in the social and cultural spheres, in a way that the explanato-

ry principle is evidenced in the social nature of the human development.

How does this concept contribute to our understanding of human development and education?

### **Cultural-historical perspectives on compensation and the contemporary educational relationships: a tension**

We will bring to discussion now two empirical situations experienced in the daily life of the inclusive education program at a Brazilian public school. The student at issue is Gustavo, a boy diagnosed with Down syndrome and hyperactivity. He communicates with gestures and isolated words, such as "no", "mine" and "stop", besides grunts and expressions of in-satisfaction. In 2010 Gustavo (10 years old) was in the 4th grade of a class with 35 students taught by teacher Marta. In 2011, then 11 years old, Gustavo started the 5th grade with the same group, now with 32 students under the responsibility of teacher Carla.

Excerpts from observation records, field notes and teachers' talk might help to give an idea of the student's participation in the classroom:

*"Gustavo passes through the desks dropping the school supplies of other students; he often escapes from his classroom, so that it must be locked with a key; he enters into other classrooms without permission; he throws himself on the floor, screams, hits his classmates and teachers; he got a suspension in 2010 and in 2011".* (Repeated actions extracted from records in different days).

*"Gustavo needs limits"; "It is no use being authoritative"; "We have to review the school rules with him"; "He is being 'the' problem student"; "He is impossible today"; "It is so hard to keep him in the classroom".* Excerpts from teachers' talk often repeated and registered in different days)

These actions and sayings shape images and social representations (which bear beliefs, values) and attitudes concerning the disabled student, which circulate among people and become institutionalized, affecting Gustavo both as person and student. Words and images produced within social and educational relationships, become condition of production of such relationships.

After a period of joint intervention and investigation with the teachers, having the notion of compensation as object of inquiry, new situations arose. How does the concept of compensation orient the way of researching and participating in the empirical work and how does it impact on teaching practices?

Situation 1: 2010/ 4th grade/ Classroom Teacher Marta

*The students decorate and hang balloons in the classroom. Gustavo comes, tears the decoration and explodes the balloons. Students quarrel with him. Some say "It is impossible to do something with Gustavo, he disturbs us". The teacher deals with it by saying. "Be patient with Gustavo. He is trying to understand what is happening.*

*For him we were playing of hanging balloons and exploding them. We should explain him that we are preparing a party". The students calm down and the teacher asks Gustavo to hang new balloons in the classroom. The student helps the teacher. (Recorded on 07.05.2010).*

The situation leads us to ask: How is the subject placed and how does he place

himself in the web of relationships? We notice a change in Gustavo's way of participating in the class when the teacher changes his position in the lesson's dynamic. The way she invites him to collaborate affects his actions, his participation in the social dynamic. The student leaves the place of those who disturb/destroy the party and starts to help to prepare the party. The teacher's invitation leads to a change of *meaning* in the child's actions. The reorientation of the child's actions allows for other possible, meaningful ways of his participating in classroom dynamics. According to Vygotsky (1997), the position a subject occupies in the social dynamics is constitutive of the psyche.

Thus, the change of position in the relationship generates new (effects of) senses, new images (he has of himself and he imagines people have about him). This change produces a re-dimensioning of his actions within the scope of human practice; conditions of transformation are created that enables him to join in the class.

**Situation 2:** 2011/ 5th grade/ Classroom Teacher Carla; Special Education Teacher Raquel

*Teacher Carla discusses the history of the numbers and the class watches two films about this subject. According to her, the strategy of using audiovisual resources takes Gustavo's interest in films into account. The teacher incites the class to write down all relevant information. Gustavo acts just like any other student, getting a piece of paper and a pencil. Sometimes he writes something, as if he were making notes about the film. (...) At some point the children ask the teacher to stop and replay the scenes about the Roman numerical system. Students start to write information down. The teacher asks Gustavo to do the same. He copies a Roman numeral and shows it to them. All the other students had already finished copying at that point and the teacher Carla says "While Gustavo is finishing I will give you one more challenge: how does eighty look like in Roman numerals?" The film continues. It is interesting to notice the teachers' effort in including technical resources in their pedagogical practices in order to gain the attention of the students and involve them in the activity. The teacher has the same activity for the whole class. (Recorded on 25.02.2011).*

When focusing the teachers-disabled student relationship, we see different initiatives that intend to include Gustavo in the activities, a practice oriented to turn the

student's development possible. How does the way of seeing this student and his potentials impact the educational relationship?

The teacher Carla is called by Gustavo and at the same time she invites him to write and makes notes, she values his efforts and orients his way of participating in

the class dynamic. It is a noticeable gesture of the teacher. As she waits for him to finish writing the numbers of the film on his notebook, she reveals by her look her awareness of the learning potential of the student. The teacher points out directions and guides the action of the subject through her teaching practice, a pedagogical movement that reverberates on and marks people who participate in its production.

We therefore emphasize the possibilities for change indicated in the gesture of calling the students to effectively participate in class, and we stress the meanings of this gesture in teaching practice. According to Vygotsky (1994), the environment is not only a context, but also a source for the development. Attention must be called to the change in image from the "impossible student" to a student with possibilities. We can see then how the immersion of the disabled student in the teaching practice might happen.

Gustavo does not fall silent under the context of inclusive education. On the contrary, his inclusion in regular classroom expresses the contradictions, by make explicit the huge difficulties and the differences and conflicts experienced in concrete conditions of schooling. By not fitting in the school system, by overturning the order, the rules, the student causes embarrassment, perplexity, hesitation, doubt. The classroom is a venue for several histories, paths, knowledge, for the encounter with diversity. Nevertheless, at the same time it is a point of disaccord, uneasiness with adversity (Smolka, 1989). The analysis evinces that the school environment, teaching practices and the educational relationship may arise as a space for the production of pathologies or a means as to overcome them; a place that can either create impediments or boost qualitative leaps in the human development.

### Some Considerations

The historical-cultural perspective enables the analysis of the social dimension while provoking and producing human development. Therefore, it is possible to move the focus from "the children's 'capacity' or the teachers 'competence' to the conditions in which they are produced, allowing expanding the space of joint development" (Smolka, 1989, p. 46, our translation).

By understanding development as movement, as an ongoing process and in projecting the future — *the coming to be* — it is possible to shift the emphasis from the answers given to organic needs to the opening of opportunities socially created. We become concerned, then with the *social conditions* that indicate direction and guide the path of development, pushing and/or compelling it. Through the concept of compensation, Vygotsky (1993, 1997) highlights the role of humanizing function of education, what turns into a condition for being human.

The question that remains is about the term "compensation". The etymology of the word compensation comes from the Latin language *compensatio*, compensation,

equal, equivalent, stock, exchange, profit, advantage; from *compensare*, to compensate, to balance, to put in parallel, to indemnify. Through the analysis of situations aimed at the development of subjects in the concrete conditions of life, we question whether this is because it matches, balances one thing with another, or even whether it concerns a phenomenon as linear, accurate, and logical. We question whether the use of the term *compensation* is pertinent as we become aware of the contradictions that pervade social practices and the concrete conditions of life.

Is it a way of compensating? Or is it a mode of constituting? How to relate both concepts: compensation and constitution? These are questions that this study poses as possibilities for future elaborations.

Thus, the purpose here was to discuss the problems of the concept of compensation in Vygotsky's work and its contemporary implications, putting into perspective the concrete social conditions of production that shape different ways of being, living, knowing, teaching, learning.

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# Понятие социальной компенсации у Выготского: исследуя психическое развитие человека и его нарушения

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В данной статье исследуется понятие компенсации, введенное Л.С. Выготским и представленное в его работах, вышедших под общим названием «Основы дефектологии». В стремлении как можно глубже понять развитие человека Выготский поднимает вопросы, касающиеся нарушений и отклонений развития, биологических и социальных его составляющих. Цель настоящей работы — проанализировать понятие компенсации в рамках культурно-исторической традиции и выявить его влияние на современные практики в системе образования. В статье также рассматривается несколько ситуаций из повседневной жизни одной государственной средней школы г. Сан-Паулу, Бразилия. В контексте инклюзивного образования особое внимание уделяется противоречию между теорией и действительностью, сигнализирующему о необходимости обновления теории и обогащения её во взаимосвязи с практикой. Рассмотренные ситуации сжато и точно иллюстрируют всю драматичность отношений в школе. Они также свидетельствуют о том, что понятие компенсации в значительной степени усиливается гуманизирующей функцией образования, которое предстает, таким образом, неотъемлемым условием того, что означает «быть человеком».

**Ключевые слова:** компенсация, нарушения развития, Выготский, человеческое развитие, образование.