Eating at the table: social inclusion of a deaf person by their family through commensality

Comer à mesa: a inclusão social da pessoa surda, pela família, através da comensalidade

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Abstract

In this article, we draw on the concept of depathologization of deafness, proposed by Skliar, and follow the path of participant observation, according to Minayo, in order to understand the psychosocial relationships between deaf people, their family and the world around them represented here by the school environment. We believe that understanding the social and family relationships that involve deafness is a fundamental condition for providing deaf children with a language that can mediate speech, thought and society. The concept of commensality, according to Boutaud, is presented as a mediator in the construction of deaf children's notion of belonging to a family and to society. The observations were based on our teaching practice in schools dedicated to the Education of the Deaf, and didactically-pedagogically oriented to Bilingualism. We address the concept of *langue* by Saussure, on the studies of language developed by Bakthin, and on the formation of thought as seen by Vygotsky. The results point to the participation of parents in the upbringing process, especially when this participation occurs within the scope of commensality. The interaction between effective and constant diners can improve a child's school performance in school, as it strengthens their empowerment. On the other hand, the absence of relationships at the table, in the same process, can affect the cognitive performance and jeopardize the social inclusion of the deaf youngster.

Keywords: Deafness. Language. Commensality. Social Exclusion. Education.

Resumo

Neste artigo, partimos do conceito de despatologização da surdez, proposto por Skliar, e trilhamos o caminho da observação participante, segundo Minayo, para compreender as relações psicossociais entre a pessoa surda, a família e o mundo que a cerca, representado aqui pelo universo escolar. Acreditamos que compreender as relações sociais e familiares que envolvem a surdez é condição fundamental para o provimento, à criança surda, de uma língua que lhe sirva de mediadora entre a linguagem, o pensamento e a sociedade. O conceito de comensalidade, segundo Boutaud, é apresentado como mediador na construção da noção de pertencimento da criança surda à família e à sociedade. As observações se deram a partir de nossa prática docente em espaços escolares dedicados à Educação de Surdos, com orientação didático-pedagógica do Bilinguismo. Apoiamo-nos no conceito de língua de Saussure, nos estudos da linguagem, desenvolvidos por Bakthin, e na formação do pensamento, visto por Vigotsky. Os resultados encontrados apontam para a participação dos pais no processo de formação, sobretudo quando essa participação se dá no âmbito da comensalidade. A interação entre comensais efetiva e constante pode melhorar o desempenho escolar da criança na escola, pois fortalece o processo de empoderamento. Por outro lado, a ausência das relações à mesa, nesse mesmo processo, pode afetar o desempenho cognitivo e precarizar a inclusão social do jovem surdo.

Palavras-chave: Surdez. Linguagem. Comensalidade. Exclusão Social. Educação.

Introduction

Very often, deaf people, as a result of communication complexity, isolate themselves from the members of their nuclear family. This is perhaps the hardest form of exclusion: if the deaf cannot develop the feeling of belonging to this nucleus, in which any individual should feel welcomed and included, how will they possibly feel included in other social spaces, whose geographic and symbolic elements are usually devoid of more meaningful socio-affective bonds?

We are aware that the non-development of a language prevents the structuring of what we understand by human speech, whose practice is fundamental to construct identities and cultural groups. For the reflections we will present in this article, we will find support in the concepts of

inner speech and development of higher thought as discussed by Vygotsky.[1] We will also refer to the contribution of Bakhtin[2] as we think of human speech at the level of the utterance, as a philosophical and anthropological entity, which differs from the concept of language. The latter, relative to the linguistic sign, is one of the components of human speech, but it should not be taken metonymically. For this study, two languages are taken into consideration: LIBRAS (Brazilian sign language) and Brazilian Portuguese in its written form.

This is an essay based on our experience for over five years in teaching in signing schools (aimed at the education of the Deaf). Our goal is to understand, in the Weberian sense of the term,[3] the relation between communicative and academic performance of students in signing schools, whose linguistic-pedagogical orientation is bilingualism - which, in the case of deaf people, is seen as their legitimacy to acquire two languages during the process of language acquisition and schooling: sign language as their first language, and written Brazilian Portuguese as their second language - and the communicational socio-affective aspect developed with the members of their nuclear family.

It is worth mentioning that this is a research effort that includes the concept of interdisciplinarity; it has to be understood as the outcome of preliminary perceptions of the field. It is the result of approaching the field of deafness, from a scientific-methodological perspective, and it is part of our doctoral studies.

Our interest is to understand the nature and occurrence of social relations of deaf children in their childhood within the family environment, when admitted to school, the limitations faced by these children in the learning process and the establishment of social bonds with hearing people. We consider the table and commensality together with family members as the central axis of our arguments. A trivial family scene (e.g., silence when making and responding to requests for more food or more salt, or when arguing whether or not one likes a particular dish or a way of eating) is highly complex. Many people are unaware of the need for linguistic structures, which are not always developed for the purposes of imagining, thinking, and creating solutions to these small problems that arise in family meals, which is the first social space for the practice of commensality. Commensality - an anthropological element which we assume to mediate the encounter between linguistic and socio-cultural aspects - is seen by Leonardo Boff[4] as follows [our translation]:

> [...] one of the more ancient references of human familiarity, because it is where the relations that sustain a family continuously occur and reoccur. More than a piece of furniture, the table refers to an existential experience and a rite. It is the privileged place of the family, of communion and brotherhood. Food is shared while one communicates the joy of being filled with an undisguised sense of well-being, the direct communion which is reflected by the informal comments about daily facts, the uncensored opinions about local, national and international events.

We believe, therefore, that the participation of the family during commensality can be an important time to assist in the process of education and development of socio-affective relationships at school and within the family.

The methodology used in the present study was participant observation, without direct interference - which would involve the active participation of students. Therefore, our observation did not entail any interaction, such as interviews or conversations relative to the research. It was an unilateral action, which is described by Minayo as "a process by which the presence of the observer is maintained in a social situation, with the purpose of conducting scientific research".[5] (p.57) [our translation].

In the course of our professional experience, we identified three profiles that are repeated on a regular basis among signing deaf students in schools. The students differ in terms of performance levels, class grades and behaviors, and such differences motivated our choices, because comparisons can be made. We chose this research technique because

> [...] the researcher has a face-to-face relationship with the people observed, and as he participates in their lives, in their cultural setting, he collects data. Thus, the observer is part of the context under observation, while he modifies and is modified by such context.[5] (p.57) [our translation].

The definition of parameters for observation and evaluation of students' profiles took into account their skills for four evaluative aspects: interaction in sign language (understanding and production of messages in Libras); organization of thought for production of semantically acceptable phrases in written Brazilian Portuguese; the establishment of relations between signified and signifier[6] and proper understanding of concepts. We also considered the observation of the possible presence of students' parents to schools, which, in general, because of the complexity of the process, offer a specific physical space to include students' parents and guardians and, thus, promote more participatory actions on the part of families. As some parents participate in daily activities in the school, they take a more active role in their children's schooling.

Our first impressions of the field showed recurring patterns among students which did not go unnoticed. There are similar problems and profiles that could be observed in different classes in different years of teaching experience. These patterns among students were, thus, grouped as follows:

1. First profile = elementary school students, semi-proficient in Libras, semi-illiterate in written Portuguese, Special Education students since the beginning of the process of schooling.

2. Second profile = elementary school students , semi-illiterate in Libras, semi-illiterate in written Portuguese, introduced into inclusive public schools (municipal school network) and transferred to Special Education.

3. Third profile = high school students, proficient in Libras, proficient in reading and reasonable knowledge of written Portuguese, Special Education students since the beginning of the process of schooling.

Based on these three profiles, we believe it is possible to construct a mosaic that will allow us to understand the process of perception of these patterns among students. We use the term *mosaic* from the perspective of Howard Becker,[7] to whom "the image of the mosaic is useful in thinking about such a scientific enterprise. Each piece added to a mosaic adds a little to our understanding of the total picture".[7] Thus, the different fragments that compose the mosaic contribute in different ways to our understanding, and none of the parts is loose or meaningless; they all are related to each other.

Understanding the concepts of language, human speech and thought

We take into consideration, in this study, the concept of depathologization of deafness,[8] which has been developing since the 1980s, as sign languages have been legitimized in different societies. Such legitimations move deafness to a place of formation of cultural groups, i.e., the pathology is no longer the problem, because there is a need to build a culture and an identity per se, based on a language of one's own.

When sign language is thought of as an entity capable of providing deaf subjects with the possibility of understanding not only the concreteness of the world, but also abstract concepts, we thus have the concept of language, as conceived by Saussure,[6] which enables understanding subjects and the world around them, through this component of human speech. Human speech, seen from the perspective of Bakhtin,[9] is intended to handle the process of human communication as an anthropological element, whose unit of study is the utterance.

In theory, when Brazilian deaf children are taught language from the perspective of bilingualism, they naturally structure sign language at an early age as L1 (first language) and acquire written Portuguese as their L2 (second language). However, pragmatically, the need to express oneself in social contexts that require written communication leads to the process of contamination,[10] i.e., a deaf person uses the syntactic-semantic structure of sign language in Portuguese. The same occurs in hearing subjects, who "contaminate" standard written Portuguese with the spontaneity of spoken language. Such practice produces stigmata[11] to the the deaf and the hearing, but they are even more intense in the case of the deaf, whose *pre-discursive ethos*[12] is already socially stigmatized and is confirmed in the communicative situation[13] by building or corroborating their own image and the image that is perceived by their interlocutors.[14] This characterizes the process of social exclusion and auto-exclusion.

Nevertheless, Vigotsky,[15] in *Fundamentals of Defectology*, discusses the concept of *higher forms of abstract thought*, which we now develop and relate to the process of language acquisition by the deaf. To approach this concept, we need to make a comparison, albeit superficial, between the hearing child and the deaf child, at the time of language development and structuring of thought.

According to Vigotsky,[1] the development of inner speech is typical of human beings; therefore, the deaf and the hearing will compose such speech and will use it with in other phases of their lives. Thus, the process of emergence of inner speech is identical for children, regardless of whether they are deaf or hearing. However, as such speech is developed, the formation of thought will depend on an element that will provide it with materiality. While hearing children can rely on speech sounds which bidirectionally establish the formation of verbal thought together with the sign (union of thought and speech on the meaning of the word[15]), deaf children, if exposed to a signing environment, use signs instead of speech sounds. However, if the environment is not favorable to the acquisition of systematized signs, deaf children will not be able to complete this process through the "normal" path, as done by hearing children. Therefore, they develop the *higher forms of abstract thought*[16] and, through them, they seek indirect ways to achieve the process of formation of thought. Such quest occurs because, in virtue of their deafness, they cannot take the direct paths of development.

These paths are more closely related to biological human aspects, while the indirect paths depend on an additional effort to achieve identical results. The indirect paths are hence related to culture. Thus, deaf children are obliged to pursue other paths to achieve what they could not fulfill through biological aspects. These indirect paths are intrinsically linked to children's capacity to circumvent the limitation of their biological process and, through cultural aspects, complete the process with the same or similar level of success than that of hearing children.

Deaf children, unable to follow the direct paths and without the materiality which will serve to form and externalize thought - which is the case of deaf children of hearing parents - will probably develop higher forms of thought. Thus, they will create their own signs to communicate with their family, i.e., their first interlocutors, until they have started to learn systematized sign language in order to transition from their own mimicry to the sign language systematized by the cultural group of deaf. Therefore, in fact, we can say that the deaf are, by nature, trilingual individuals, because, theoretically, they are supposed to master an incipient code of communication, which will serve provisionally for the communication with their nuclear family; a sign language, recognized among cultural groups of deaf people; and the written language of the geographical area where they live; in the case of Brazilian deaf people, written Portuguese.

We believe, therefore, that a moment of extreme importance for the cognitive development of the deaf is one in which children perform this process, which was tested and described by Vigotsky

as phase of language acquisition. If the family can promptly provide a child with the opportunity to learn a systematic sign language as well as offer affection through relationships where people meet (for example, by encouraging family commensality by having meals at the table), it creates an environment conducive to the strengthening of the deaf person, at the linguistic, cognitive and social levels. It is not difficult to imagine that the conjunction between sign language and family affection by sharing meals at the table will make deaf people feel more confident and aware of the various socio-cultural impacts that they will have to face throughout life.

Family commensality as a tool to strengthen a deaf person

When we think of the food eaten in the most diverse situations of daily life, we do not usually think of the symbolic meanings present in the man-food relationship. In this study, we see food as a symbolic mediator, which operates in the cultural, social and psychological dimensions; it can form codes of behavior and social interaction. It is by the table that diners interact, exchange experiences, agree and disagree on tastes and preferences. It is a place of symbolic exchange. It is a place of anthropological unification,[17] in which the language of care for the other, of affection, of self-care, of taste, of likes and preferences signifies or resignifies the subject, regardless of other languages that may exist.

According to Contreras & Gracia,[18] food is characterized as a basic element at the onset of reciprocity and personal exchange, as well as for maintenance of social relations. A purely nutritional approach cannot account for food-introduced relations. The act of eating goes beyond its biological aspect; it is the reason for the construction and maintenance of social relationships, including those that are established in the nuclear family.

When the deaf who grow up in hearing families are kept away from the universe of deafness, they face quite a complex situation,[19] which requires public policies to provide parents with tools for an early diagnosis and for the immediate introduction of sign language. However, the issue is much more complex at the level of language policies, since the historical debate between oralism and signing continues nowadays. While one cannot rely on effective measures of public authorities to instruct and provide parents of deaf children with effective tools, the educational process needs to find ways to mitigate the cruel reality of deaf children who cannot count on the safe support from their parents for timely acquisition of sign language, which otherwise can help them structure their thought and enable them to establish concrete and abstract relations in the social world.

Contreras & Gracia[18] described a very interesting framework that shows twenty sociocultural functions of eating, namely: satisfy the hunger and nourish the body; start and maintain personal and business relationships; show the nature and extent of social relationships; provide a focus for

community activities; express love and affection; express individuality; proclaim the distinction of a group; show the sense of belonging to a group; overcome psychological or emotional stress; signify social status, rewards or punishment; strengthen one's self-esteem and gain recognition; exercise political and economic power; prevent, diagnose and treat physical illnesses; prevent, diagnose and treat mental diseases; symbolize emotional experiences; express piety or devotion; represent security; express moral feelings; signify wealth. All items, in different ways, are valid for this study, in the sense that they reinforce the thesis that the development of the habit of eating at the table (as well as keeping such habit) strengthens subjects in their sense of belonging.

Members of families that identify their children as deaf are usually unaware of the linguistic complexity that their children have to face. Parents tend to naturalize the distance that begins to occur in their own home. Parents are not able to communicate with their children, and the latter isolate themselves in their worlds of silence; the former, because they do not have enough knowledge, time, and sometimes willingness, accept the silence imposed by the fatality of deafness and, when they realize, it can sometimes be too late to redeem this contact which strengthens affection. They miss the opportunity to help their deaf children in the fight for "their place in the world".

Eating at the table, in all cases, it is of utmost importance for the maintenance of our condition of civilized individuals. However, in the case of hearing parents and deaf children, as observed in this study, when those precious moments of family commensality are wasted, deaf children are deprived, in their first years of life, of the ritual of conviviality, whose representation is the encounter at the table to eat. In this case, the result can be tragic. The act of abandoning the encounter at the table symbolizes the withdrawal of communication between the members of the same family.

According to Boutaud,[17] there are two fundamental axes of our humanization which are relative to the table: a vertical axis and a horizontal axis. The horizontal axis refers to reunion, the cohesive force that affects diners and is encouraged by commensality. The other axis, the vertical one, refers to hierarchy, which in the context of commensality is placed at the table to identify, distinguish, and respect the roles played by the individuals that sit at the table.

In this sense, we can list the roles staged by actors at the table, which, *stricto sensu*, refer to unity, bonding, ability to share, openness, relaxation, fun, hierarchical places, social roles, beauty, good taste, sublimity. These axes are dimensions of commensality which, under a socio-historical perspective, cover the whole range of social organization established in different cultures, whose variations with respect to eating rituals can be taken into account without detriment to the characteristic essence of the action which is understood as commensality.

> The practice of peaceful coexistence in its true sense, the very image of life in common (*cum vivere*), strengthens, from the very beginning, the idea that eating and drinking with others can favor empathy, mutual understanding, communion of sentiments.[17] (p.1215) [our translation].

Having and keeping a habit of eating at the table can offer families the opportunity of commensality. In the case of families with deaf people, this opportunity seems to have an instrumental value for social integration of deaf children. It is a chance to be together and share experiences and affection; it is the basis of empowerment for the emergence of a deaf identity with high self-esteem. Having a deaf child join the eating rituals as part of the family is equivalent to telling them, in another way, that they are welcome to the family. It means that that child is one of the diners, therefore, he is an equal, who shares the food and the affective moment of the act of eating; otherwise, it may mean isolation, distance and absence of communication.

Descriptions of the observed profiles and reflections on the characteristics of each profile

First profile: *The need of the family as a structural element of school life*

Students who attended the second year of elementary school; however, they were already in their twenties or past them, i.e., they were very late compared with the "normal" process of schooling. Their appearance revealed a certain carelessness with their body. Their school uniform was usually quite worn, and their white shirt was yellowish. They seemed apathetic and indifferent in class. Their class marks were low and they were not very likely to pass. It is worth noting that, although these students were already over 20 years of age, their mothers or a guardian continued to come to school meetings; it is a common event in the case of deaf students who are not socially emancipated and who require special attention.

Through the comments of parents or guardians, observed in the physical spaces of schools, we became aware of various situations relative to the structure of families: general issues about the students' family relationships. It was not uncommon to take knowledge of cases in which the students did not communicate with anyone else outside the school environment - in pedagogical meetings, teachers and coordinators often made comments about familiar situations of students with school-related problems. These students lived with parents and siblings, but whenever they came back home they did not show any willingness to communicate with the people in their nuclear family. We know, furthermore, that, in this type of family, no member had learned the Brazilian sign language (LIBRAS).

Considering that this language is the code of communication in signing schools, it can be concluded that these students could only communicate in the school environment. Some parents or guardians reported lack of time and the need to have a job as some of the reasons not to take Libras classes which are offered to the community, either online or on-site, by schools or by NGOs linked to issues of deafness. Parents present arguments for lack of communication and we are not supposed to judge them, because they are all acceptable. However, there is a breakdown of

the family structure when a member of a family is deaf. After diagnosis, which is usually late, the family, whose members are inexperienced in the field of deafness, must make the difficult choice to refer the child to a school oriented to either signing or oralization as far as communication is concerned. Because they are not informed enough to make this choice, they use other criteria, e.g., ease of locomotion, availability of vacancy for the treatment and schooling. These criteria are peripheral and cannot encompass the complexity that underpins the choice of the educational process of deaf children. Many parents do not realize that the deafness requires a multidisciplinary approach, in order to cover the various aspects involved: social, anthropological, linguistic, cultural and cognitive ones.

Our observations have shown hopeless fathers and mothers who feel powerless to undertake any action which facilitates the access to their child. Mothers and fathers who, after the childhood and adolescence of their children, are still unable to communicate with them in the household. There is clearly a problem of lack of communication in these strained and failed relationships, which hinders social interaction and causes exclusion in the household itself.

Second Profile: *The absence of a language that can form thought on acceptable sociolinguistic bases*

Students who came to signing schools at an older age, having studied in a school from the municipal education network, seemed to understand the message sent by us when prompted to a communicative interaction. However, they responded with few signs that mostly resemble mimicry than the signs legitimized by LIBRAS. These students quite often present difficulties in communicating through sign language, which is often resolved by the students themselves, in their interaction with their peers and teachers. As LIBRAS is the natural language of the deaf, they naturally tend to acquire it, even at an older age. In addition, special education schools have regular LIBRAS classes, with deaf teachers, in addition to remedial classes for this particular audience.

A few days later, we began to detect the elements that form a subgroup of the group of students coming from the process of inclusion of municipal school networks. Those students are the ones who were not able to learn sign language for effective communication with other deaf people at school. Nevertheless, we insisted on communicating with them through signs. Frequently, these students attempted to speak, especially if they were interacting with hearing teachers. However, the language policy in signing schools is communication through sign language, within the pedagogical proposal of bilingualism. Thus, the majority of the cultural group of signing deaf students in schools pressure oralized students not to communicate by oral speech, but rather to learn sign language. In addition to all this complexity, those who insist on oral communication with hearing students produce sounds that misrepresent the sonority of phonemes, as they are not able to control the timbre of their voice and cannot control the volume of speech sounds. The

words do not conform to the syntax of Portuguese. When intelligible, their communication is restricted to concrete ideas, because they generally do not have the capacity to deal with symbolic concepts through signs.[2]

We noticed that these students need special attention, since they do not have the language code that is typical of that geographic and symbolic space. They do not know either type of language, hence communication is difficult with both deaf and hearing people. In these cases, educational advisors are informed, and they request various assessments and make appropriate referrals, for example, to psychological support and to remedial Libras classes.

Thus, in group 2, students lack of enough knowledge of language for the establishment of human speech. The process of communication cannot be realized because there is no code. The second profile was composed of students who, during troubled and inconsistent processes of schooling, have not acquired neither sign language nor human speech, in the phase of language acquisition. The remnants of their speech are insufficient to establish communication; these remnants prove that the students of this group were submitted to speech therapy and learned how to utter some words but they lack auditory reference, hence they produce strange sounds that fall behind phonological and phonetic standards. Also, they are not familiar with the relationship between the word and the concept relative to it (*langue* and *parole*).[6]

According to Sacks,[20] ii ts not only language that should be introduced, but thought as well. Otherwise, children will inevitably fall prey to a concrete and visible world. This is possibly the case of students with the second profile, who have been subjected to oralization without much success, however, and are now stuck to the concreteness of the world that they can perceive. Parents and guardians of these students do not know sign language and communicate by means of spoken language. Deaf children with this profile, in order to make any communication with the former, have to resort to lip reading, which does not always occur successfully. Reasons include the position of the interlocutor, use of beard and moustache by the interlocutor, dentition of the sender of the message, among other aspects that can hinder lip reading.

Third profile: *Successful cases of success in the universe of signing*

Unlike the other profiles, students whose profile fits in the third description had noteworthy skills and competencies in the classroom and in other fields at school. They are young deaf people, who appear to be like any other; however, in the heterogeneous universe of bilingualism, they stand out for their cognitive capacity in various fields. They have some limitations with respect to writing, because, as almost all humans, they tend to reproduce the language of natural communication in written language, which we mentioned earlier as a process of contamination.

Libras is a language with very specific characteristics and still lacks a corresponding written form; hence, when it is reproduced in written Portuguese, it does not follow the same syntactic norms of the latter, among other differences. Because the linguistic aspect is closely linked to the sociological one, the writing of deaf students is discriminated against and is socially devalued by those who are unaware of the linguistic complexity of deaf people.

For Marcuschi,[21] writing has become a social asset, a symbol of education, development and power; it has achieved a higher social value than spoken language and is often used as a form of discrimination. In this statement, writing is opposed to speech; thus, by logic correlation, the universe in question is that of the hearing, but the process for the deaf is analogous.

The development of the students in group 3 made us wonder how much their parents and guardians participated in their lives. Our assumption was confirmed: they participated actively in the school environment. Since diagnosis, they focused on deafness in order to understand it and to be able to deal with it while bringing up their children. Mothers and fathers who actively participate in the lives of their children communicate with them through sign language and are proficient signers. Since the early identification of deafness in their children, they sought to learn about the social issues that the latter would be exposed to. Moreover, they taught their children how to be strong and empowered, and refused to see deafness as a limiting disease, as diagnosed by the "indisputable" authority of Medicine. Possibly, the skills developed by these students and the skills they present for the various fields of knowledge are the result of a series of actions on the part of the family, which includes the development and encouragement to affection, through family commensality by eating at the table.

Final remarks

The narratives above illustrate serious problems faced in the Education of the Deaf, in whatever form they take. The pedagogy currently used in some special education schools is based on bilingualism. This modality is oriented towards educating bilingual individuals, who are able to acquire two languages: a natural one, namely, sign language (which the deaf would be inclined to acquire, just like hearers are prone to acquire speech, as we are predisposed to acquiring a language, as a result of the innateness of the language faculty[22]) and another language, which is that of the country where we are born, in its written modality. This didactic-pedagogical perspective or approach, however, does not take into account an important expression of communication by deaf children: the Primary Code of communication (PCC).

PCC, as previously stated, is the first communicative manifestations of deaf children with the objective of expressing and forming thought, i.e., structuring their socio-anthropological process

of language use. This code stems from people's need to socially interact with their more immediate interlocutors: their family. Verbalized by different manifestations, the code is not treated as a language by Linguistics, because of the lack of systematization and production. Nevertheless, its empiricism leaves no doubt that children themselves intend to communicate in these communication demonstrations. Generally, this code is triggered by biological issues such as hunger, pain, cold, i.e., natural sensations of the human body.

It should be noted that when deaf children seek to resolve the limitation of deafness (which also hinders the possibility of speech) by creating their own code of communication, they are performing the higher mental functions studied by Vigotsky.[16] These functions are indicative of human capacity, which is often disregarded because many congenital or acquired pathologies are considered to be irreversible by medicine, which is the case of congenital deafness. Importantly, we shall not consider cochlear implants as a solution, because of their numerous cultural implications for the deaf. PCC shows that medical protocols can be relative, when human language is seen to manifest itself in ways which, while considered to be informal or unorthodox, can handle processes that are apparently irreparable.

The three profiles indicate, on the one hand, a complex situation which is difficult to solve; on the other hand, a horizon of possibilities created by paths of human development, which lack scientific detachment, by means of qualitative multidisciplinary research.

The first two profiles consist of deaf children who are not offered scientific guidance that could foster efficient policies to meet the complex and disparate specificities as far as deafness is concerned. Future studies should approach the theme without the intention of creating a single and large group of deaf Brazilians - i.e., unifying the diversity found in the group of deaf people in Brazil. In the present study, we only deal with signing deaf children or children who were taught how to sign. However, even within this small sample, there is diversity and it should be taken into consideration, otherwise the few current public policies may be precluded! What can we say about policies that attempt to unify so many different universes within the realm of deafness?

Initial observations led us to realize that the first type of inclusion that deaf subjects should undergo is inclusion within the family. We believe that acceptance by the family can provide deaf individuals with the notion of "a place in the world", thus fostering the feeling of belonging, which is so important for future human development. Thus, commensality in the family environment can be an opportunity to establish affective bonds, which make deaf people stronger to face future endeavors.

We have noticed the existence of a very strong relationship between intelligent young deaf people who are capable of expressing concrete and abstract ideas as well as formulating and understanding concepts, and parents who are committed to the intellectual development of their

deaf children. On the other hand, we know that there are parents who are not so committed (in virtue of issues that we are not supposed to judge), who go to school very occasionally, usually upon the request of teachers or pedagogical coordinators. Because of personal issues, which are not discussed here, such parents do not know how to communicate in Libras, nor were they able to attend speech therapy clinics, for a possible attempt to oralize their children.

Although we do not intend to associate the poor educational development of deaf students with this type of parents, there should be further research in these cases, because the first profile shows deaf children who need to be monitored and whose family members should be more present in the school environment. The second profile indicates a relationship between deaf children devoid of a language for communication and parents who attempt, through signs, to recover time lost, by replacing the vision of deafness as a pathology with the perspective of linguistic specificity - i.e., by depathologization.

There is a perceptible communicational distance between deaf students and their respective parents whose profile fits in the first two descriptions. Although it is a recurring issue in different spaces and times, the generational impact, which interferes with the communication between parents and children of any social group, whether deaf or hearing, is sharper and clearer in the case of deafness, because the distance is quite considerable. It should be also emphasized that deaf people should have their most important interlocutors in the family, because it is with them that children are expected to have the most intimate language exchanges.

In the Education of the Deaf, it is common for teachers, students and parents to meet, since they share the same physical spaces - school premises. Therefore, participant observations are possible and non-invasive, and they offer reliable results.

In short, it can be stated that when parents - as the first mediators between deaf children and the world around them - use family commensality as an instrument, they make a considerable difference in the lives of young people and adults who are deaf. Eating at the table, far from being a matter of etiquette or a mere social convention, can be a methodology for access to deaf children, and also of strengthening their self-esteem. This can maximize deaf children's structuring of language, cognitive development and the notion of belonging to the society where they live. Thus, one can possibly think that social structures can be redimensioned for the deaf.

Libras, much more than a right, can be a possibility of structuring the thought of the deaf; the reason is that when parents are aware of their children's deafness, Libras can be taught at the first moments of formation of language, thus offering support such process, and forming structured thought, which is able to understand the sociolinguistic world in its complexities.

Collaborators

de Oliveira RG participated in all stages, from design of the study until the revision of the final manuscript; Ferreira FR and Prado SD participated in the design and revision of the study.

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