Contributions of Piagetian and post-Piagetian theories to education

Helena Marchand *

Education Institute, University of Lisbon, Alameda da Universidade, 1640 013 Lisboa, Portugal

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The aim of this article was to reflect on the contributions of Piagetian and neo-Piagetian theories to education. Topics analyzed included the evolution of Piaget’s and co-workers’ theory, the reaction by the scientific community to the main theoretical and methodological aspects of each period of his work, the educational potentialities of methodological and theoretical aspects of his theory, the criticisms about the potentialities of Piagetian theory for grounding educational practice. Then the emergence of the neo-Piagetian theories was described, as well as their major aims and their educational potentialities. Finally some considerations concerning the strengths and weaknesses of Piagetian and neo-Piagetian theories were presented.

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1. Introduction

Although the main goal of his work was the analysis of the development of knowledge, in spite of the fact he stated that “I have no opinions about pedagogy” (in Bringuier, 1978, p. 202), and (if we take into account all his work) he wrote only two books on education – Psychologie et Pedagogie (Piaget, 1969) and Où va l’ Éducation (Piaget, 1972). Piaget was indeed concerned about and interested in the question of education. In his words, “the problem of education interests me greatly, because I’m under the impression that there is a huge amount to transform and to reform” (Bringuier, 1978, p. 202). Above all in the second and third decades of the 20th century, and retaining a fascinating topicality, he focused on pedagogical issues such as:
Piaget’s concerns about education cannot be separated from important positions he occupied in Institutions linked to education. Since 1921, Piaget worked in the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute as a research coordinator, an institution acknowledged for its high-quality psychological and pedagogical research. Years later, in 1929, he became the Deputy Head of this Institute and the Director of the Bureau International de l’Éducation (BIE), whose main aim was to promote peace and international understanding through education.

Piaget’s interest therefore soon shifted to the study of psychogenetic development arguing that pedagogy “has everything to gain from looking at the child just as he is” (Piaget, 1928, p. 12, cited by Parrat-Dayan, 1997, p. 250) and that “the role of the psychologist is to provide data that the pedagogue can use and not to put himself in the role of the educator, or to give him advice” (cf. Bringuier, 1978, p. 202). The enthusiasm for Piagetian theory in the educational world, which was especially prevalent the first decades of last century, visibly waned from the 1970s. Several authors, based on studies conducted on cognitive psychology, refuted Piaget’s general conception of development and highlighted the importance of domain specific constraints on the construction of knowledge; others proposed, as an alternative to Piaget’s theory, models grounded on different epistemological traditions, such as the socio-historical tradition; and others proposed new theories – the so called neo-Piagetian theories – whose aim was to preserve the strengths of Piaget’s theory and to eliminate its weaknesses.

The main aim of this article is to reflect on the contributions of Piagetian and neo-Piagetian theories to education, 40 years after the first expressions of scepticism about the potentialities of Piagetian theory for grounding the educational practice and on the emergence of neo-Piagetian theories.

Analyzing the educational implications of Piaget’s work is not easy task, first because of the constant refinements and revisions, some of them important, of central constructs (e.g., constructivism) and second, because the studies on the educational contributions of Piaget’s theory generally are sparse and focused on some aspects analyzed in the first periods without looking at the whole body of his work. In the words of Droz (1980, p. 10), “to my knowledge no author has attempted to take all the pedagogical consequences from the entirety of Piaget’s work.”

Analyzing the educational contributions of neo-Piagetian theories is also a no easy task, for different reasons. First, in contrast to the Piaget’s single theory, neo-Piagetian psychology is a collective work composed by different (and, for a non-specialized reader, difficult) approaches. Second, the efforts to integrate the different approaches have only partially succeeded. Third, neo-Piagetian theorists seem to write primarily for one another rather than for a broader audience such as teachers, educators and practitioners. Fourth, few studies have focused directly on educational practices and processes.

It is important, 30 years after the death of Piaget and 40 years after the first descriptions of neo-Piagetian theories, to reflect on the actual contributions of both of them to education. Therefore, it will be analyzed the evolution of the work of Piaget and his collaborators since the 1920s up to the last two decades of the 20th century, the reaction by the scientific community in general, and by the pedagogical community in particular, of the main theoretical and methodological aspects of each period of his work, the educational potentialities and also the constraints of factual, methodological and theoretical aspects of Piagetian theory, the neo-Piagetian theories, their educational potentialities and also constraints.

2. The four periods of Piaget’s theory

Piaget’s theory is usually divided into four periods (cf. Beilin, 1992; Montangero & Naville, 1998; Saada-Robert & Brun, 1996).

The first period, which covers the studies on child’s reasoning (e.g., *Le jugement et le raisonnement chez l’enfant*, 1924; *Le langage et la pensée chez l’enfant*, 1923) and the second period, which covers the studies on the first phases of children development (e.g., *La construction du réel chez l’enfant*, 1937; *La formation du symbole chez l’enfant*, 1946; *La naissance de l’intelligence chez l’enfant*, 1936) reflect Piaget’s functionalist concerns (i.e., his interest in the analysis of the psychological mechanisms underlying the child’s activity). Children’s reasoning is described not yet by logical structures but rather by a specific way of thinking more intuitive and more syncretic than deductive (the egocentric or pre-logic thinking), development is seen as shifting from the egocentric to socialized thinking, due to coordination of points of view, and Piaget’s central hypothesis of a subject that actively explores the environment and actively creates object, space, time, and causality notions.
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