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.

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 dif-
ferent 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.2

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 edu-
cational contributions of Piaget’s theory generally are sparse and focused on some aspects analyzed in the first periods with-
out looking at the whole body of his work. In the words of Droz (1980, p. 10), “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 an easy task, for different reasons. First, in con-
trast to the Piaget’s single theory, neo-Piagetian psychology is a collective work composed by different (and, for a non-spe-
cialized 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 re-
fect on the actual contributions of both of them to education. Therefore, it will be analyzed the evolution of the work of Pia-
aget 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 “Post-Piagetian” refers to authors critical of Piaget, without a Piagetian orientation. “neo-Piagetian” refers in a more systematic way to the theories of
authors (called themselves neo-Piagetian) who manifest, albeit in a critical way, a Piagetian orientation.