

**SCHOOL (IN)SUCCESS AND MEDICALIZATION: HISTORICITY AND  
ALTERNATIVE FROM THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL THEORY**

***(IN)SUCESSO ESCOLAR E MEDICALIZAÇÃO: HISTORICIDADE E ALTERNATIVA A  
PARTIR DA TEORIA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL***

***(IN)ÉXITO ESCOLAR Y MEDICALIZACIÓN: HISTORICIDAD Y ALTERNATIVA  
DESDE LA TEORÍA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL***

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**ABSTRACT:** The article features a critical analysis of the history of the conception of school failure and medicalization. It can be observed that historical research reveals that the current ideas about the conception of school failure is the result of the historical process of development of society in the capitalist mold of production, and this conception is intrinsically related to the process of medicalization of education. From the critical analysis based on Historical-Cultural Psychology, it can be concluded that medicalization does not contribute to the education process, and that the alternative falls on an adequate and systematized process of education, because it is through this that human development becomes possible.

**KEYWORDS:** Success. School. Medicalization.

**RESUMO:** *O artigo apresenta uma análise crítica da história da concepção do fracasso escolar e da medicalização. Pode-se observar a pesquisa histórica revela que as ideias atualmente em vigor sobre a concepção do fracasso escolar são resultado do processo histórico de desenvolvimento da sociedade no molde capitalista de produção, sendo que esta concepção está intrinsecamente relacionada ao processo de medicalização da educação. A partir da análise crítica baseada na Psicologia Histórico-cultural pode-se concluir que a medicalização não contribui para o processo educacional, e que a alternativa recai sobre um processo adequado e sistematizado da educação, pois é por meio desta que se torna possível o desenvolvimento humano.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Sucesso. Escolar. Medicalização.*

**RESUMEN:** *El artículo presenta un análisis crítico de la historia de la concepción del fracaso escolar y la medicalización. Se puede observar que la investigación histórica revela que las ideas actuales sobre la concepción del fracaso escolar son el resultado del proceso histórico de desarrollo de la sociedad en el molde de producción capitalista, y esta concepción está intrínsecamente relacionada con el proceso de medicalización de la educación. A partir del análisis crítico basado en la psicología histórico-cultural, se puede concluir que la medicalización no contribuye al proceso educativo, y que la alternativa recae en un proceso*

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*educativo conveniente y sistematizado, porque es a través de esto que se hace posible desarrollo humano.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Éxito. Escuela. Medicalización.*

## Introduction

This article aims to critically analyze the growing process of medicalization of everyday life and its expressions in the context of school education, in the light of Historical-Cultural Psychology. The phenomenon of medicalization, which is increasing, is defined by Suzuki, Leonardo and Leal (2017, p. 44), as:

[...] a process in which medical issues are attributed to problems that are of another order, that is, problems of a different nature, however, presented as 'diseases', 'disorders', or 'troubles' that conceal major political, social, cultural, affective questions that afflict people's lives. Collective issues are taken as individual, social and political problems are made biological, and the school space has become a fertile field for the proliferation of these issues, with a high number of students using different types of drugs to solve behavioral problems and learning.<sup>2</sup>

'Neurological disorders' stand out among the main causes of diagnosis of children with learning and/or behavioral problems such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) and Conduct Disorder, with ADHD being the disorder with the highest prevalence rate (KAMERS, 2013).

Historical-cultural psychology understands that the development of the psyche is not only the result of organic maturation, or the development of typically human functions, such as language and voluntary attention (on which the diagnostic criteria of ADHD are concentrated). Human development is historically constituted, in human interactions, through mediations. Thus, one must understand the issues related to the schooling process of children who do not appropriate knowledge, based on the teaching and learning process, in multideterminations, and not only in the individuality of the problem.

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<sup>2</sup> [...] um processo em que se atribui a questões médicas problemas que são de outra ordem, isto é, problemas de natureza diversa, porém, apresentados como 'doenças', 'transtornos', ou 'distúrbios' que escamoteiam as grandes questões políticas, sociais, culturais, afetivas que afligem a vida das pessoas. Questões coletivas são tomadas como individuais, problemas sociais e políticos são tornados biológicos, sendo que o espaço escolar tem se constituído em um campo fértil para a proliferação dessas questões, com um alto número de escolares utilizando diferentes tipos de medicamentos para resolver problemas de comportamento e aprendizagem.

To understand the phenomenon of medicalization, it is essential to know the historical process that permeates and naturalizes this biologizing form of understanding the difficulties of schooling.

### **Theoretical basis of the study on medicalization**

In order to understand the historical process of school medicalization, it is necessary to understand how the ideas about school learning difficulties came to be understood and disseminated, especially among children from the most impoverished segments of society. Historical research reveals that the ideas currently in force were based on the struggles suffered by society during the historical process of development of society in the capitalist mold of production.

For the researcher Maria Helena Souza Patto (2015), it is essential to know the social reality in which the ideas about differences in school performance among children from different social groups were created, assuming that the conceptions defended by certain groups are not born alone, isolated from a given social context, but they are the result of a historical process that gave rise to social differences, which include learning difficulties and, consequently, school failure.

In his research, Patto (2015) remotes the development of European society in the 18th and 19th centuries, the period of the two great revolutions: French Political Revolution (1789-1792) and the English Industrial Revolution (1760-1860). These revolutions marked the emergence of a new relation of production which caused changes in the way of organizing social life.

European society, before the period of revolutions, was constituted by the feudal mode of production, formed by three social groups: the clergy, the nobility and the workers (not nobles). After the French Revolution, the clergy lost political and religious power, the nobility (monarchy) lost political and economic domination, peasants were forced to leave the countryside and left for urban centers in search of survival. Then a new dominant class, the bourgeoisie (composed of lawyers, businessmen), and a new dominated class, the proletariat, ascended, composed of workers who sold their labor power to maintain their own subsistence.

Called the 'Third State', this new social class, made up of the nobles and the workers, defended the principles established by the French Revolution: Equality, Freedom and Fraternity. However, the historical analysis shows that the poor population became more and more

impoverished, losing the conditions they previously had as producers, farmers, starting to sell their energy and their workforce.

They are the ones who will form the contingent of industrial workers and the poor populations of the cities, subjected to a regime and a type of work that were foreign to them, but which they could not escape. They are the ones who will work in the machines and in the mining industry from sun to sun, in exchange for wages below or within the physiological limit of survival (PATTO, 2015, p. 40).<sup>3</sup>

The antagonism between capitalists and proletarians grew as the increase in profit and the accumulation of capital not equally distributed, started to differentiate the two social classes. Segregated from the new social order, the workers began to be considered as inferior, less capable, prone to failure, since successful men were no longer successful because of their noble origin, as in the Old Regime, but because of their skills and personal merits. In this sense, according to Hobsbawn (1982), success and social ascension depended solely on the individual and his abilities. According to Patto (2015, p. 45), justifying the differences in capacities in upper and lower classes “[...] will be the task of the human sciences that are born and become official in this period”<sup>4</sup>.

In view of the new social order, it was necessary to train the working class to work in industries, as well as to maintain the ideology of equal rights for all. The school has become a priority for the illustration of the people, for national unity, in the conception of education as a redeemer of humanity and a promoter of social mobility. For the working class, the school envisioned the dream of ascension to bring the upper classes closer together. However, teaching was also demarcated for the different classes, because during the first seventy years of the 19th century, primary education was limited to teaching only school rudiments, such as reading, arithmetic and moral obedience, without deepening scientific knowledge. Since the goal was not to educate to provide the individual with the acquisition of the knowledge historically produced by humanity and necessary for humanization. It was up to the education systems, just to insert the working class in the school, for the formation of labor.

In the analyzes of researcher Patto (2015, p. 52), the First World War, strongly affected the belief in school as a redeemer of humanity, as there was an increase in social inequality and exploitation, in the face of the belief that education would favor better life conditions. Thus, the

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<sup>3</sup> São eles que vão formar o contingente dos trabalhadores da indústria e as populações pobres das cidades, submetidos a um regime e a um tipo de trabalho que lhes eram estranhos, mas dos quais não podiam fugir. São eles que trabalharão nas máquinas e na indústria extrativa de sol a sol, em troca de salários aquém ou no limite fisiológico da sobrevivência (PATTO, 2015, p. 40).

<sup>4</sup> “[...] será a tarefa das ciências humanas que nascem e se oficializam nesse período”

precepts and practices of education were revised, the traditional school received harsh criticism, being held responsible for the problems that occurred in society.

The pedagogy of imposition should be opposed to a pedagogy based on the knowledge accumulated by nascent psychology regarding the nature of child development that replaces the teacher's verbalism with the student's active participation in the learning process (PATTO, 2015, p. 52).<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, we sought to change teaching methods without, however, changing the real conditions of access and structure of that same teaching.

The new reflections on learning difficulties were based on teaching methods and not on the student's difficulties, prioritizing the analysis of factors called intra-school problems in education. To resolve this impasse, a new understanding about childhood, the student's individuality, the individual's ontogenetic development, became the guideline of educational methods and programs. However, the emphasis on individuality did not prioritize the differences of each one, but the term individual called the representation of a group, and not necessarily a distinct being, unique in its potentialities. As the analysis of individual differences advanced in the course of the 19th century, the conception that the differences depended on the social context of each one was outlined, coming from the society in which men were inserted, that is, the problem of not learning was with the individual and it was up to the school to enhance their capabilities.

In this sense, pedagogy and psychology have come together to enhance the individual capacities of the student, whether through heredity studies, psychometry, or through school mental hygiene. These conceptions have always been elaborated by those considered competent to interpret the world, without considering the division of classes to which men are subjected and, thus, conceal and hide the real reasons for school failure, creating stereotypes and prejudices considered as legitimate interpretations of individual differences, as stated by Patto (2015).

According to studies by Pessotti (1975 *apud* Patto, 2015), in Brazil psychology was born in the medical field. The first Psychology courses were held at medical schools and classes were taught by doctors. With the International Mental Hygiene Movement, in the early twentieth century, many of the doctors who served as psychologists began to assist school departments in education secretariats, coordinating multidisciplinary school service teams.

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<sup>5</sup> À pedagogia da imposição deveria se opor uma pedagogia calcada nos conhecimentos acumulados pela psicologia nascente a respeito da natureza do desenvolvimento infantil que substituisse o verbalismo do professor pela participação ativa do aluno no processo de aprendizagem (PATTO, 2015, p. 52).

Thus, medicine and psychology were linked to pedagogy, in order to explain the causes of school failure.

In Spazziani's analyzes (2001, p. 42), at the end of the 20th century, the space occupied by Medicine around Brazilian society is verified, “[...] it is considered fundamental, from then on, in any environment or social group, forming a network and exercising constant vigilance over the manners and customs of the common man”<sup>6</sup>.

In the speeches of Brazilian intellectuals of that period, the defense of the school for all is noted for the improvement of the current social conditions. However, there was a large contingent of poor people in urban centers and the discourse promoted was that misery would be contained when the school promoted the reconstruction of the individual, for the advancement of society (SPAZZIANI, 2001).

In this sense, medical practice linked to the understanding of the individual's difficulties, of biological and physical nature, would be fundamental to “[...] organize and define the roles that individuals from different social strata should play [...]”<sup>7</sup>. Thus, “society becomes medicalized, that is, social problems become a medical problem”<sup>8</sup> (SPAZZIANI, 2001, p. 44).

For Moysés and Collares (2011, p. 135), “Life is being medicalized by the medical system, which appropriates people's knowledge and life and, presenting itself as competent to solve any and all problems”<sup>9</sup>.

In the observations made by the researchers Akemi, Tessaro and Leal (2017), in the face of the challenges encountered by the school, such as indiscipline, violence, and learning difficulties, responses are still sought to face these problems in purely biological causes, which allows the strong presence, nowadays, of medicine in the school space. This fact explains the high rate of students using drugs to solve different problems at school.

For researchers, this fact is very questionable, since it would be up to education professionals to attend to school-related problems, and it is not the role of the doctor, especially that of the neurologist, to attend to school demands, as is currently observed.

The school complaint has been an object of concern and theme for several researches over the years, due to the demand of students who are referred to health professionals for having

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<sup>6</sup> “[...] é considerada fundamental, a partir de então, em qualquer meio ou grupo social, formando uma rede e exercendo uma vigilância constante sobre os modos e costumes do homem comum”

<sup>7</sup> “[...] organizar e definir os papéis que deveriam desempenhar os indivíduos das diferentes camadas sociais [...]”

<sup>8</sup> “medicaliza-se a sociedade, isto é, os problemas sociais passam a ser um problema médico”

<sup>9</sup> “A vida está sendo medicalizada pelo sistema médico, que se apropria dos saberes e da própria vida das pessoas e, apresentando-se como competente para solucionar todo e qualquer problema”

learning problems and behavioral disorders at school. Psychologists Leal and Souza (2014, p. 19), claim that the school complaint needs to be understood as

[...] A movement that is part of the school's daily life and which contains the difficulties and contradictions that make up this daily life, showing dissatisfaction, denial, resistance, prejudice, paralysis, stereotypes, frustration, tiredness and many other aspects.<sup>10</sup>

This broad view, of the complete whole, allows the understanding of the complaint not only as the individual's responsibility, but of the real circumstance of the factors that originated the problem. In view of this, the culprit is not sought, but the causes of the conflict.

For psychologists, the relationship between education professionals and how the educational institution is considered today is already a factor that discourages the teacher. For students, school has ceased to be a dream for social ascension and attending classes has lost its importance. Thus, complaining has become common and the search for answers is directed to health professionals who look for the causes of problems in the psychometric assessment tests and make the referrals arising from this assessment. According to the authors,

Adherence to this psychologizing or medicalizing model of attending school complaints reflects a worldview that explains reality based on psychic structures, denying the influence of institutional and social relationships on the psyche (LEAL; SOUZA, 2014, p. 25).<sup>11</sup>

It is necessary to reflect critically on the school complaint, looking for the origins that constituted the concepts disseminated as widely as school failure, learning problems, learning disorders and so many other names given, without, however, analyzing the social, economic, political context in which the school is inserted. The determinants arising from antagonistic social classes promote conflicts, which are justified or denied to obscure the reality of domination of the capitalist order.

For the doctor José Augusto Barros (1983), the highlight of the abusive use of medications cannot go unnoticed by Brazilian society. Capitalist society, largely consumerist, proposes the exaggerated consumption of its various products, among which are medicines.

Like any business sector, it is in the pharmaceutical industry's interest to encourage maximum consumption. In purely marketing terms, in the sectors

<sup>10</sup> [...] um movimento que faz parte do cotidiano da escola e que encerra as dificuldades e contradições que compõem esse cotidiano, transparecendo insatisfação, negação, resistência, preconceitos, paralisação, estereótipos, frustração, cansaço e tantos outros aspectos.

<sup>11</sup> A adesão a esse modelo psicologizante ou medicalizante de atendimento à queixa escolar reflete uma visão de mundo que explica a realidade a partir das estruturas psíquicas, negando a influência das relações institucionais e sociais sobre o psiquismo (LEAL; SOUZA, 2014, p. 25).

of production and commercialization of medicines, the occurrence of a maximum number of treatments, that is, “medicalization”, is interesting (this includes the “prescription drug”, going, however, further to cover the placement under the purview of medicine of “situations” or “problems” that originate in the class structure of society) (BARROS, 1983, p. 378, quotes of the author).<sup>12</sup>

In the research by Suzuki, Leonardo and Leal (2017, p. 44), “Brazil is the second country that sells the most Ritalin<sup>13</sup> (widely used to solve behavior problems in schoolchildren), second only to the United States”. In Brazil, in 2000, the sale of the drug reached 70,000 boxes, in 2009, there was an increase in sales to 1,700,000 boxes. For Barroco, Facci and Moraes (2017, p. 21) “The situation is worrying! There is a growth in the consumption of this medicine, indicating the growth of the pharmaceutical industry, which has been moving figures almost incalculable”<sup>14</sup>.

These data reveal how much the medicine has become “[...] a pedagogical resource, used as a way to concretize the appropriation of knowledge by students”<sup>15</sup> (SUZUKI; LEONARDO; LEAL, 2017, p. 44).

For Barros (1983), medication understood as a commodity is opposed to the principle of a medicine whose function would be to minimize diseases and promote healing, with the patient's health as a major concern.

In view of the data analyzed, it is worth reflecting on the following words:

The student's health problems, usually identified as the main causes of school failure, such as malnutrition and minimal brain dysfunctions (dyslexia, dyslalia, hyperactivity), are in fact a false scientific discourse to cover up a certain ideological claim, that is, the biologization of eminently social aspects, thereby exempting the social, political and economic structure from its responsibilities, as well as the institutions, their leaders and executors (SPAZZIANI, 2001, p. 50).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Como qualquer setor empresarial, interessa à indústria farmacêutica estimular o máximo consumo. Em termos puramente mercadológicos, nos setores de produção e comercialização de medicamentos, interessa a ocorrência de um máximo de tratamentos, ou seja, de “medicalização” (esta inclui a “prescrição medicamentosa”, indo, no entanto, mais longe para abranger a colocação sob a alçada da medicina de “situações” ou “problemas” que têm origem na estrutura de classes da sociedade) (BARROS, 1983, p. 378, aspas do autor).

<sup>13</sup> "Trade name of the drug Methylphenidate, widely used in the diagnosis of ADHD-Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder" (SUZUKI; LEONARDO; LEAL, 2017, p. 44).

<sup>14</sup> “A situação é preocupante! Há o crescimento no consumo desse remédio, indicando o crescimento da indústria farmacêutica, que tem movimentado cifras quase incalculáveis”

<sup>15</sup> “[...] um recurso pedagógico, utilizado como via para concretizar a apropriação do conhecimento pelos escolares”

<sup>16</sup> Os problemas de saúde do aluno, normalmente apontados como as principais causas do fracasso da escola, como a desnutrição e as disfunções cerebrais mínimas (dislexia, dislalia, hiperatividade), constituem na verdade um falso discurso científico para encobrir uma determinada pretensão ideológica, ou seja, a biologização de aspectos eminentemente sociais, com isso isentando a estrutura social, política e econômica de suas responsabilidades, bem como as instituições, seus dirigentes e executores (SPAZZIANI, 2001, p. 50).



For Historical-Cultural Psychology, the specificities of the human psyche are produced according to social and material conditions, these social conditions and the development of the individual's real relations with the world do not depend on him or his conscience, but on the concrete historical conditions and social situations in which he lives and the way his life is formed under these conditions (LEONTIEV, 2004). For the author, the great differences in the conditions and ways of life of men - in the wealth of material and mental activity, in the level of development of intellectual forms and aptitudes - do not come from their biological differences, but from relations formed in the course of the socio-historical process, such as economic inequality and class inequality, for example.

Therefore, for Historical-Cultural Psychology, the individual is born endowed with elementary functions, but the higher functions (in which the medicalization process falls) are developed through mediated learning, resulting in typically human cultural behaviors and surpassing elementary functions. This overcoming occurs with the help of the signs and instruments that are characterized as mediators between man and the world, since the signs are means to regulate the individual's conduct, while the instruments are constituted as resources to modify the external reality (VYGOTSKY, 1995). For Vygotsky when culture is appropriated by individuals, it allows them to overcome the purely biological state to become the cultural human being, which demonstrates the social nature of the psyche.

In this sense, “[...] the act of teaching is a condition for the promotion of human development”<sup>17</sup> (VYGOTSKY *apud* MARTINS, 2011, p. 354). In this way, school education is one of the main responsible for promoting mediation between the child and the social environment, through the development of higher functions. However, the child's relations with the schooling processes, institutional relations, school, historical-cultural and pedagogical experiences are left out, they do not appear in the assessment carried out by professionals in the outpatient clinics (MARÇAL, 2011). The diagnosis is centered on the student and his family, as pointed out by the discussions of several authors (MOYSÉS; COLLARES, 1992; 2000; PATTO, 1990; 1992; 1997; FRELLER, 1997; SOUZA, 1996 *apud* MARÇAL, 2011).

In view of the above, a teacher who has difficulties in learning with the context presented to him in the classroom, presents a deficient work, not very critical, only reproducing widespread conceptions, without real awareness of the importance of the implications of his performance. An example is when educators collaborate, even without intention, for the use of medicalization, in which learning difficulties are understood and treated as disorders, being

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<sup>17</sup> “[...] o ato de ensinar é condição para a promoção do desenvolvimento humano”

medicated for this reason (MOYSÉS; COLLARES, 2012). Since these are mainly problems of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity, which start to be noticed and considered undesirable in the school context, as it is in this environment that the child's demand for disciplined conduct and focused attention begins, being attention a basic psychological function for the development of the others, and difficulties in its control could impair the learning of school contents (VYGOTSKY; LURIA, 1996).

However, Historical-Cultural Psychology proposes that attention and will (voluntary control), as well as other higher psychological functions, are products of human social relations and result from the appropriation of instruments and cultural signs (VYGOTSKY, 1995). In this sense, it is concluded that when a child is unable to focus attention or have self-control of behavior, the difficulty may be the result of failures in mediations and cultural appropriations, especially in the schooling process, not as a result of a biological disorder.

In the historical-cultural perspective, development is a process constituted by two fundamental moments - the natural and the cultural -, which are dialectically related, and the biological functions are modified based on social relations through the integration of the individual in the socio-cultural environment (LEONARDO; LEAL; FRANCO, 2017). The authors also emphasize that it is from the appropriation of the socio-cultural environment that it develops, modifying its psychic functions and building new levels of behavior.

In this process, the role of schooling, well oriented and organized, contributes greatly to the development of higher psychic functions, with the teacher as the main mediator between what was previously produced by humanity, which is materialized in school content and in the forms of reasoning involved to understand them (LEONARDO; LEAL; FRANCO, 2017). Thus, taking into account the above, under the framework of Historical-Cultural Psychology, teachers who play their role as effective mediators would be an alternative/solution to medicalization.

Therefore, before prescribing a medication for controlled use, which in addition to not helping in the construction of superior psychological functions and bringing side and psychic effects, it is necessary to assess all educational possibilities, looking for methods that favor overcoming difficulties of the child, because the directed work of the teacher, which aims at the development of higher psychological functions, cannot only decrease the number of children medicated for learning disorders, but also collaborate to increase the quality of education (TULESKI; CHAVES, 2012) .

## **Final considerations**

To understand the phenomenon of medicalization, it is necessary to understand the historical process of this process, to face this fragmented biologicist process of diagnosing and medicating children, it is necessary to indicate an alternative, which is effective schooling. This confrontation is possible when we think in the light of the assumptions of Historical-Cultural Psychology, due to the fact that school education, according to Vygotsky (1995), is primarily responsible for promoting child psychic development. However, education is required through organized and systematized teaching with theoretical content based on scientific knowledge, so that the development of higher psychological functions occurs.

Thus, it is understood that it would not be the solution for the development of the psyche through the use of medications, which have an action on the central nervous system, as biologicism does not contemplate the socio-cultural multideterminations to which the child is exposed, being a right of children and adolescents, according to the National Council for Children and Adolescents, in Resolution 177/2015, not to be subjected to excessive medicalization:

Considering that psychotropic drugs can cause physical or psychological dependence, according to Ordinance no. 344, 12 of May, 1998, of the National Health Surveillance Agency, according to the package leaflet. [...] children and adolescents have the right to full protection, particularly access to non-medical alternatives for their learning, behavior and discipline problems that take into account pedagogical, social, cultural, emotional and ethnic aspects, and which involve the family, professionals responsible for the care of children and adolescents and the community (CONANDA, 2015).<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, it is concluded that in addition to not helping in the teaching and learning process, in human development, medicalization is a violation of rights, due to the fact that it does not provide the identification and correct solution for the problem in question, thinking only about the product and not in the process, in addition to possible physical and/or psychic dependence.

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<sup>18</sup> Considerando que os medicamentos psicotrópicos podem causar dependência física ou psíquica, conforme Portaria nº 344, de 12 de maio de 1998, da Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária, segundo a bula do medicamento. [...] a criança e o adolescente têm direito à proteção integral, particularmente ao acesso a alternativas não medicalizantes para seus problemas de aprendizagem, comportamento e disciplina que levem em conta aspectos pedagógicos, sociais, culturais, emocionais e étnicos, e que envolvam a família, profissionais responsáveis pelos cuidados de crianças e adolescentes e a comunidade (CONANDA, 2015).

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