

# Interview with Anna Maria L. Padilha: Personal history and academic trajectory intertwined by Vygotsky's defectological studies

Entrevista com Anna Maria L. Padilha: História pessoal e trajetória acadêmica entretidas pelos estudos defectológicos de Vigotski

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Professor and researcher Anna Maria Lunardi Padilha has a degree in Pedagogy from the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (1974), a master's degree in Educational Psychology from the State University of Campinas (1994) and a doctorate in Education, in the line of research Knowledge, Language and Art through State University of Campinas (2000). She was a professor and researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Methodist University of Piracicaba until 2017. She works as a researcher in the following groups: Pesquisas em Educação Especial no Sistema Comum de Ensino Group, from Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES); Estudo, Pesquisa e Intervenção em leitura, escrita e literatura na escola Group in Federal University of Oeste do Pará (UFOPA) and SaúdeAntar Project in Research Institute Heloísa Marinho/RJ (IPHEM).

Member of the Brazilian Study Group about Defectology and Psychopathology in Historical-Cultural Theory - GT, at the University of Brasília (UNB). She has experience in the Education area, with an emphasis on Human Development and the Vygotski School, working mainly on the following topics: Teacher Training, Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusion; Historical-Critical Pedagogy; Health Education, Early Childhood Education, School and Non-School Educational Practices, Teaching and Learning Processes. Author and book organizer. Author of book chapters and articles in journals.

Anna Padilha is one of the pioneers in deepening the themes addressed by Vygotski on disability, such as for example, her study about the constitution of the symbolic subject, compromised by mental disability, which reveals the possibilities of this subject in attributing meaning to the world around them. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting the relevance of her name for understanding the challenges of special education from an inclusive perspective.

## **Anna, we would like to know your professional and academic trajectory. Could you tell us a little about your biography?**

Anna Maria Lunardi Padilha: Upon finishing the Normal course, in 1963, on the eve of the coup that installed the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil, already as a militant and member of the JEC (Juventude Estudantil Católica), I dedicated myself to the political training of young students. This is linked to the choice I made later, studying Pedagogy at PUC-Campinas and working in the Education field.

For 30 years, I have dedicated myself to monitoring and pedagogical guidance for children and adolescents with school problems, victims of school failure and/or intellectual disabilities. I was a pedagogical coordinator - from Early Childhood Education to High School and a teacher trainer at CEFAM (Centro Específico de Formação e Aperfeiçoamento do Magistério, in Campinas). I educated adults, sailors on the Paraná River, in projects linked

to Paulo Freire and participated in the training of lay and indigenous teachers in the Médio Araguaia region, in the state of Mato Grosso.

Between 1993 and 2000, the focus was on academic studies and research – master’s and doctorate – at the University of Campinas (Unicamp), where I met Lev Vigotski: Soviet Psychology and the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Having been guided by professor Maria Cecília Rafael de Góes, by Angel Pino and also receiving guidance and possibilities for clinical experiences at the Centro de Convivência de Afásicos, at Unicamp, with professor Maria Irma Coudry, were decisive experiences in understanding human development in Historical-Cultural theory.

From 2002 to 2017, I was a teacher and researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Methodist University of Piracicaba (Unimep). I wrote some books, several articles and book chapters, most of them in the field of research and pedagogical practices for public school children and adolescents with disabilities, from the perspective of social and educational inclusion of disabled children and young people.

From 2018 onwards, I became part of the He-loísa Marinho Research Institute, in Rio de Janeiro, working alongside PhD. Jairo Werner in the Child, Youth and Family Psychiatry Sector, at the Medicine Faculty of the Fluminense Federal University, in Niterói. Teaching courses, participating in the training of public school teachers in several municipalities, guiding studies about the work of Lev Vygotski and Defectology, as well as writing academic texts have been, even today, works to which I dedicate myself.

**Anna, which experiences do you consider as a milestone in your professional trajectory that brings you closer to scientific production at the interface among development, health and education and what concerns did these experiences bring? Why?**

AML: Health and Education are fields of knowledge that have been part of my studies and my work for a long time. First, in the many years that I worked with children and adolescents who

were victims of academic failure and/or with disabilities and other pathologies considered to be in the area of mental illnesses, in order to promote the development of cultural psychic functions. That was when I was able to develop studies on assessment, teaching and school failure, at the interface between health and education.

Then, research and studies on intellectual disability considered serious. “Bianca’s case”<sup>1</sup>, as the research developed between 1996 and 2000 and later published, with the encouragement of professor Gilberta Jannuzzi - became known - an important milestone in Special Education in Brazil - was one of the very significant experiences in my academic career and professional at the interface among development, health and education. And last, not least, the work with Prof. Dr. Jairo Werner, as mentioned in the previous question.

I identify four groups of concerns arising from these experiences, linked together, that have accompanied me and continue to accompany me to this day and can be summarized as follows:

- a) the desire to overcome capitalist society and build a new society that will constitute a new man, as Vigotski desired. He said that “along with the liberation of the many millions of human beings from oppression will come the liberation of the human personality from the chains that restrict its development” (Vigotski, 1930/2015). Such concern presupposes a dialectical, uninterrupted movement in the formation of consciousness and education plays a central role in the formation of new generations, overcoming the division between physical and intellectual work;
- b) respect and the fight for the right to socially referenced quality schooling for all people, especially the most impoverished and invisible. For this, an enormous challenge: if it is violence to leave children and young people without food, without care, without housing and without school, it is equally violence to leave them at school, without learning;

<sup>1</sup> Padilha, A. M. L. (2021). *Práticas Pedagógicas na Educação Especial: a capacidade de significar o mundo e a inserção cultural do deficiente mental*. Autores Associados.

- c) a deep concern with the so-called inclusive perspective of school education. This perspective has still been under construction since the last century and has a long and difficult road ahead, with significant clashes, advances and setbacks because we live in a society divided into antagonistic and fighting classes. Hegemonic public policies, conceptions and educational practices have constituted serious limitations to human development, both in relation to studies and research, and in relation to the objectification of social and educational inclusion of people with disabilities and;
- d) the possibilities of composing Historical-Cultural Theory and Historical-Critical Pedagogy, both collective constructions whose matrix is the Historical and Dialectical Materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

**How did your approach to Vigotski's studies occur, especially with Defectology, and what was this author's great contribution to the scope of your work, considering research, teaching and extension?**

AMLPL: The approach to the Lev Vigotski's studies and his school and, in particular, to Defectology, happened when I entered the Master's degree in the early 1990s, with my participation in the Thought and Language Research Group (GPPL - Unicamp) which is based on, since its formation, on the theoretical assumptions of the Historical-Cultural perspective in Psychology, with Lev Semionovitch Vigotski as one of the main reference authors. The writings of this author and two of his companions Alexander Luria and Alexis Leontiev, as well as other followers of this theory, began to be part of my readings, studies and research, both individual and collective. As the object of my research was (and still is) the development of higher psychic/cultural functions of people with developmental delays and/or intellectual disabilities, in addition to other problems related to mental health, it was coherent and necessary to study the Lev Vigotski's Defectology.

Another relevant fact – which contributed and still contributes to my approach to defectological studies – was having known and been able to follow the work in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry developed by psychiatrist PhD. Jairo Werner Jr., as well as getting to know and follow the work developed at the Centro de Convivência de Afásicos (CCA), at the Institute of Language Studies (IEL) at Unicamp.

I found in Lev Vigotski's work the answer to many of my doubts about human development in the most different living conditions and, specifically, the development of people with disabilities. This author, anchored in the historical and dialectical materialist philosophical contribution, highlighted the cultural nature of the human and, in this way, the development of the psyche as a product of the appropriation of cultural signs.

Professional life and research demanded/demand reflections and searches for a better understanding of the psychic system functioning and the role of education. The answers, however, were accompanied by more questions and difficulties in the face of the human problems we meet for social and school inclusion. The more I study Vigotski's work, the more I find myself faced with theoretical and practical challenges and the more I feel the need to study. The studies I undertook to construct the dissertation and thesis were foundational milestones for the path I began to follow in the fight for the psychic development of children and adolescents with disabilities, dedicating myself more deeply to intellectual disabilities and Defectology studies. In research, the fundamentals of human development and case studies; in teaching, the training of new researchers and educators and in extension, collaborating with theoretical training and solving concrete problems in Specialized Educational Assistance (SEA) in state and municipal schools.

**From a conceptual point of view, what is Vigotski's main theoretical elaboration that most impacted your way of understanding human development?**

AMLPL: This question is challenging. In order to answer it, it would be necessary to develop a

synthesis of the guiding thread of Lev Vigotski's work and its theoretical and practical developments, which would not be possible in this interview. His Historical-Cultural Theory radically changed my conception of human development and education, but at the same time, it responded to my desires for social transformation and provided/provides me with more coherent epistemological foundations.

This Russian author was elaborating and re-elaborating his theory in the short years of his life, without losing the foundations of his position towards the world and humanity. He was part of the construction of a Soviet project for a new society with a view to the new socialist man's formation. As Zoia Prestes (scholar and translator of Vigotski's works) once wrote, "much of what he said has not yet been understood and much of what he wrote has not yet been made public." (Prestes, 2012, p. 57).

Vigotski was a revolutionary thinker of his time and, I think, of our time as well, going beyond the limits of a subjective, innatism conception and fragmented psychology. From his General Law of Human Development, other concepts can be inferred, understood and related to each other: we become ourselves through others. All properly human functions were, before, collaborative relations among people.

Access to cultural tools, and the unity of thought and speech, goes from the social to the individual level, in a dialectical relation between nature and culture, individual and society, development and teaching, normal and pathological. Development is an extremely complex and uninterrupted process of new things emergence through qualitative leaps. His studies and teachings about disability are not restricted to texts about Defectology (study of disabilities) precisely due to the development conception that he develops. However, the conception - which inverts the logic of psychology in general - that it is important to study atypical behavior to understand common or typical processes, is an epistemological novelty, a conceptual revolution that moved/moves me towards studies about education and health.

To this end, based on studies by other authors, Vigotski develops concepts that were decisive for my understanding of the cultural development of people with serious affective-cognitive impairments: the theory of the functional system and the concept of social compensation. This is the conceptual articulation that had an important impact on my way of human development understanding, although appropriating this knowledge as foundations of practice presupposes (and demands) other studies, both of Vigotski's work and of his followers.

### **Considering the 100 years of Vigotski's first texts about disability, how current and relevant is this work?**

AML: A century passes and it still wasn't enough for us to take ownership of Vigotski's proposals about the humanizing process. A century later, we are faced with hegemonic thoughts that are not only different but also opposite to Lev Vigotski's, making it difficult to socialize his teachings. Precisely because we lack in-depth knowledge about human development from a materialist and dialectical perspective and we so desperately need to recognize the possibilities of overcoming the biologizing vision of health and education, Vigotski's work is so promising and pertinent.

The author's his disciples' ideas and began to be known in Brazil between the 1970s and 1980s and suffered deformations due to omissions and mistranslations and also, due to the fact that Vigotski proposed a new society - socialist - that constituted people as well socialists. This means that being coherent with the Historical-Cultural theory of Lev Vigotski and his companions and followers requires us to take political positions in the face of the so-called history of special education in Brazil. But not only that!

Vigotski's proposal for a school that would allow disabled children and young people to learn, collides with the ways in which policies and practices of social, cultural and school inclusion are organized in Brazil.



It is known that Vigotski's ideas have been studied and shared in various parts of the world, showing us the relevance of his work to several countries. If we pay attention to what Vigotski says about Defectology (study of deficiencies), we feel that we still need a lot of progress in reading, research and teaching practice. Giving just one example, even if very briefly, what an impressive lesson we have to learn, when reading what Vigotski taught! He criticizes the internalized idea, at his time and still in ours, that the principles of education and teaching of normal children could not be transferred to the education of children with delays. He called it a pessimistic and minimalist point of view that resulted in little teaching, little effort from educators, few demands and aspirations and, as a result, a reduction in development possibilities.

This thinker, who transformed and rebuilt psychology, dealt with the formation of consciousness and higher/cultural psychic functions; the psychology of art and emotions; the relation between thought and speech; psychology and its relation with pedagogy; teaching that precedes development and does not follow it like a shadow. He researched and wrote about the conceptual elaboration and role of the school and dedicated himself to study the atypical cultural development of defective children: blind, deaf, physically disabled, intellectually disabled and also difficult children.

He taught about what constitutes primary and secondary disabilities, warning about the harmful social consequences of disability due to the way people with disabilities are treated, separated, segregated, humiliated, put in second plan or made invisible. He drew attention to the negativity of isolating disabled children from living with other non-disabled children and pointed out the movement towards compensation processes. All this with methodological rigor and in a very original way. This is the best proof of the relevance and relevance of his work.

**Thinking about issues involving people with disabilities, how do you observe the progress of Vigotskian ideas in education and health? Considering the contemporary context in the context of health and education, what are the main challenges for an effective dissemination and appropriation of Vigotskian concepts?**

AML: I can't answer in the affirmative as I would like to. I still do not see significant advances in the knowledge and understanding of Vigotski's writings, the writings about him and from him, in the education and health field or in the psychology field itself. Hegemonic thinking hides/distorts the materialist and historical assumptions, essential to this theory – the Historical-Cultural Theory of human development.

In a process of advances and setbacks in the public policies development for the children and young people with disabilities education (the so-called special and/or inclusive education), the very concepts of disability, normality, health and illness, for example, point to a mechanistic and organicist understanding of human development and learning. A theoretical confusion, the result of multiple social, political and economic determinations, takes over the training of educators, psychologists and other health professionals, which can be seen when reading the diagnoses and reports that are delivered to and by educators accepted as being the voice of truth about the lives of disabled children and young people and/or those with autism spectrum disorder.

The very proposal for school education in Brazil, the National Common Curricular Base, contradicts Vigotskian principles, studies and research and perpetuates social inequalities. In Brazil, we have a scandalous number of illiterates and young people who have not completed Basic Education.

It is evident that there are studies, writings and research that seek to be faithful to Vigotskian contributions, here in Brazil and in other countries. There are also some rare pedagogical proposals that are based about Historical-Cultural Psychology and Historical-Critical Pedagogy (elaborated by Dermeval Saviani and under collective construction), both with theoretical-methodological foundations

of historical and dialectical materialism. However, they still do not reach decision-making spaces and therefore do not transform the institutions responsible for the lives of people with or without disabilities, with or without mental health problems.

It is worth highlighting that some fundamental concepts of Vigotskian theory, such as: the concept of imminent development, of the collective as a factor in the development of higher psychic functions and of the relation between thought and speech, have mistaken, non-historical interpretations and without the due methodological foundation proposed by the author. Unfortunately, progress is slow and our work needs to be tireless.

Another point can be added: the collective effort for a socialist society, as Vigotski wanted, still scares teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, researchers and health professionals, as well as those who develop public policies for health and education.

We are facing challenges of various orders. I consider that the way our capitalist and neoliberal society is configured and how our institutions are organized are already challenging for understanding a vision that aims to overcome this social and economic life way, with a view to a new society.

I want to draw attention to what I think is the biggest challenge, (before another, of equal importance, which is the dissemination of Vigotskian concepts in training schools for teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, specialists in special education and pediatricians, psychiatrists and neurologists). I'm talking about what Vygotsky himself pointed out in the aforementioned text *The Socialist Alternation of Man*, written in 1930. He speaks, precisely, of the formation of awareness that we are cultural, historical beings – determined and that also determine life:

As an individual only exists as a social being, as a member of some social group in whose context he follows the path of historical development, the composition of his personality and the structure of his behavior have a character dependent on social evolution whose key aspects are determined by the group. [...] The various internal contradictions that are

found in different social systems find their expression both in the type of personality and in the structure of human psychology in that historical period. (Vigotski, 1930/2004)

The challenges branch out, based on the general premise. Education, for Vigotski, must play a central role in the transformation of new generations. Education, for him, and for those who accept his theory as the foundation of practices, promising and current, is the basis for changing the old man, the man of the capitalist system: “The new generations and their new forms of education represent the route main path that history will follow to create the new type of man” – said Vigotski (1930/2015). Therefore, the dissemination of his ideas depends on their full appropriation, without being fragmented according to one or another momentary or specific interest. Lev Vigotski's theory cannot be divided or divided according to pedagogical or psychological fads. To achieve this, it is necessary to study and effectively engage in a movement of cultural transformation, amidst the contradictions inherent to our society of antagonistic, unequal, unjust, racist and patriarchal classes.

### **Considering your studies in Historical-Cultural Theory and the contemporary challenges at the interface of health and education, what would you say to the new professionals' generation?**

AMLP: To the new generation of education and health professionals, I have some words of encouragement: study - in depth - the Vigotski's work of and his disciples, reading it in the best translations we have to date. Read the author himself, preferably, to be able to make a more conscious critical selection of how to read his current followers. Study to broadly understand its teachings and base your practices, avoiding the fads or miracle recipes that the consumer society presents to us.

Vigotski's concrete psychology, as a materialist and Marxist, the method of study consistent with the historical and dialectical materialism that supports him in the development of his theory and

his writings, fills gaps that I feel in relation to the unity of theory and practice. This means the need for theoretical depth that can guide transformations in educational practices, which should happen in the training of education and health professionals.

Such studies, developed in some universities in Brazil, do not become hegemonic – and perhaps this is far from happening – due to the strength of the capitalist modes of production of human existence, which compromise the set of interpersonal relations – those that are converted into intrapersonal, as Vigotski taught, in his general development law. The privatization of education in Brazil and the fetish of technology, the exponential increase in distance learning (EAD) have made it difficult for teachers and children and young people from the popular class to acquire knowledge. This is a huge challenge!

To the new generations of students, researchers and teachers, get together, organize groups to study and discuss the issues they face in their fields of activity, in a way that is consistent with the foundations of Historical-Cultural Psychology. Knowing that we are experiencing a collective and historical construction of this theory for a collective and historical construction of a new society. I end with another quote from Lev Vigotski, from the same 1930 text:

However, this change in human behavior, this change in human personality, must inevitably lead to the evolution of man to a higher type, to the alteration of the *human biological type*. Having mastered the processes that determine his own nature, the man who today is struggling against old age and disease will undoubtedly rise to a higher level and transform his own biological organization. But this is the source of the greatest historical developmental paradox contained in this biological transformation of the human kind: that it is achieved primarily through science, social education, and the ways of life rationalization. The biological alteration of man does not represent a precondition for these factors, but, rather, is a result of man's social liberation.

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