

## THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE FORMATION PROCESS OF CRITICAL-REFLEXIVE THINKING: A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** This article aims to discuss the role of the context of the public university in the human development process, highlighting, in particular, its function in terms of expanding a critical-reflective thinking that allows the subject to access reality from the multideterminations that constitutes it. For this, Historical-Cultural Psychology was adopted as theoretical and methodological assumption, having Vigotsky as its main representative. Still, Spinoza's ideas were also used as a theoretical basis. The study was carried out in the context of a public university, located in the interior of São Paulo, and had as a subject a student who excelled during the collection of information from a postdoctoral research. In the results, it appears that the university is configured as an important training space, consisting of numerous and complex social development situations that allow the experience of relationships that expand the way the subject understands himself, the other and society. One of the aspects that stood out in the analysis was in relation to the role of the university in the formation of critical thinking, especially by overcoming an individual thought, based on self-will, developing in the subject the commitment to the community and the demands of its future profession. Thus, the present study is a defense of the public university and its important role in the transformation of the subject and social relations.

**Keywords:** Higher education; psychology; students.

## O PAPEL DA UNIVERSIDADE NO PROCESSO DE FORMAÇÃO DO PENSAMENTO CRÍTICO-REFLEXIVO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

**RESUMO.** Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir o papel do contexto da universidade pública no processo de desenvolvimento humano destacando-se, em especial, sua função no que se refere à ampliação de um pensamento crítico-reflexivo que permite ao sujeito acessar a realidade a partir das multideterminações que a constitui. Para tanto, adotamos como pressuposto teórico e metodológico a Psicologia Histórico-Cultural, tendo como principal representante Vigotsky. Ainda, também utilizamos como fundamento teórico as ideias de Espinosa. O estudo foi realizado no contexto de uma universidade pública, localizada no interior de São Paulo, e teve como sujeito um aluno que se destacou na amostragem da coleta de informações de uma pesquisa de pós-doutorado. Nos resultados, constatamos que a universidade se configura enquanto importante espaço de formação, constituída por inúmeras e complexas situações sociais de desenvolvimento que permitem a vivência de relações que ampliam o modo como o sujeito compreende a si, o outro e a sociedade. Um dos aspectos que ressaltamos na análise foi em relação ao papel da universidade na formação do pensamento crítico, em especial pela superação de um pensamento individual, pautado na vontade própria, desenvolvendo no sujeito o

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comprometimento com a coletividade e as demandas da futura profissão. Sendo assim, o presente estudo é uma defesa da universidade pública e seu importante papel na transformação do sujeito e das relações sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação superior; psicologia; estudantes.

## **EL PAPEL DE LA UNIVERSIDAD EN EL PROCESO DE FORMACIÓN DEL PENSAMIENTO CRÍTICO-REFLEXIVO: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO**

**RESUMEN.** Este artículo tiene como objetivo discutir el papel del contexto de la universidad pública en el proceso de desarrollo humano, destacando, en particular, su función en términos de ampliar un pensamiento crítico-reflexivo que permita al sujeto acceder a la realidad desde las multideterminaciones. que lo constituye. Para ello se adoptó como supuesto teórico-metodológico la Psicología Histórico-Cultural, teniendo a Vigotsky como principal representante. Aún así, las ideas de Spinoza también se utilizaron como base teórica. El estudio se realizó en el contexto de una universidad pública, ubicada en el interior de São Paulo, y teve como sujeto un estudiante que se destacó en la recolección de información de una investigación postdoctoral. En los resultados del estudio, parece que la universidad se configura como un importante espacio de formación, conformado por numerosas y complejas situaciones de desarrollo social que permiten la vivencia de relaciones que amplían la forma en que el sujeto se comprende a sí mismo, el otro y la sociedad. Uno de los aspectos que se destacó en el análisis fue en relación al rol de la universidad en la formación del pensamiento crítico, especialmente por la superación de un pensamiento individual, basado en la voluntad propia, desarrollando en el sujeto el compromiso con la comunidad y las demandas de su futuro. profesión. Así, el presente estudio es una defensa de la universidad pública y su importante papel en la transformación del sujeto y las relaciones sociales.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior; psicología; estudiantes.

### **Introduction**

This study is part of a post-doctoral research and its main objective is to discuss the role of the public university in the process of human development, highlighting, in particular, its role in expanding critical-reflective thinking that allows the subject to access reality from the multideterminations that constitute it. Our central idea, in this article, is the defense of the university as a context that promotes social development and favors the construction of collective modes of action and thought.

These meanings are based on the theoretical-methodological assumptions of historical-cultural psychology, whose main representative is Vigotsky (2009). According to this theorist, human development takes place from an inseparable connection between the subject and the historical context, which occurs based on a dialectical relationship in which both are permanently constituted. Furthermore, in our analysis, we intend to establish a dialogue with Espinosa's theory (1957), which is an important foundation for Vigotsky's ideas. Given the influence of Espinosa (1957), Vigotsky's theory allows us to understand man as a whole, as it overcomes the dichotomized understanding of human development. Therefore, Espinosa and Vigotsky are epistemologically connected, as they understand intellect and affection as inseparable and founding elements of the human constitution.

Inspired by Espinosa's theory, Vigotsky (1995) argues that it is a function of affection that the world is appropriated and signified by the subject, and is the source of subjectivation processes. According to Sawaia, Albuquerque & Busarello (2020, p. 4), the "[...] world is experienced, as well as its contradictions, conflicts, and ideologies [...]" through affections. In this sense, affections can direct our existence towards both emancipation and human servitude, depending on how much our process of reflection and awareness about them is possible. In this sense, the important relationship between thought and affection in Vigotsky's work is understood, since the form and level of understanding of the subject concerning their affections is a mobilizing source of their higher psychological functions. From this groundwork, it is possible to understand educational processes as fundamental dimensions in the constitution of the subject, and in this article, we emphasize their role in higher education.

Current studies (Gomes, Comonian, & Araújo, 2018; Libâneo & Pulino, 2018; Ximenes, et al., 2019; Freitas, Marinho-Araujo, & Almeida, 2020) highlight university education permeated by countless experiences, expectations, activities, and desires that favor human development. There is not only the development of technical thinking, which allows the subject to understand and solve practical problems that their profession requires, but it also favors the construction of ways of thinking that significantly expand how the subject understands themselves, others, and their surrounding reality. Therefore, the university context allows students to come face to face with countless experiences and knowledge that favor the development of higher psychological functions. However, there is still little known about higher education in the field of psychology, especially in the context of public education (Marinho-Araujo, 2016; Moura & Facci, 2016). Therefore, research focused on higher education is necessary, as this context is the focus of numerous problematizations regarding its function and role in society.

According to Santos (2010), in recent years there has been an institutional crisis in public universities, which in developing countries is even worse, including in Brazil. Especially since neoliberal globalization, there has been a gradual loss of investments in public universities as an important focus for the development of a nation. This scenario intensifies with the process of commodification of higher education, in which the process of privatization and the consequent transformation of knowledge into merchandise increasingly grows. We can observe the state's movement to reduce investment in public education and, in return, facilitate the expansion of private education and student loan policies.

This scenario is quite worrying because, as Chaui (2003) points out, the state sees public higher education only considering the expenses generated and not as an investment in the development of a country. When thinking about reformulations in higher education, it is also necessary to consider that there has been a significant change in the understanding of what knowledge is. According to Chaui (2003, p. 7), teaching and learning processes have been understood "[...] as rapid transmission of knowledge, contained in quick manuals and easy-to-read knowledge, with preferences rich in illustrations and with duplicates in CD-ROM". Therefore, Chaui (2003) criticizes the race against time that higher education has been characterized by, and the gradual loss of investment in training contexts characterized by reflection, criticism, expansion, and overcoming of knowledge historically constructed. From this logic, the appropriation of knowledge is not promoted, only information, because knowledge requires time, space, and powerful encounters that lead to complex forms of thoughts. We understand the concept of powerful encounters following Espinosa (1957), as relationships that increase our capacity as human beings to persevere in existence.

Another factor affecting higher education is the loss of guidance regarding the social role of public universities. According to Santos (2010), it is necessary to reinforce its importance and specificity, which is formed from actions based on the tripod: teaching, research, and extension. Based on these fundamental elements, the university allows the student to be inserted into a complex training context, allowing the appropriation of scientific concepts and offering different social development situations that transcend the classroom, in addition to providing important support and monitoring for the community.

In this sense, the social role of the public university must be rescued, favoring its identity legitimization process. To this end, this article aimed to contribute to the understanding of the role of the university in the process of human and societal development. These are aspects that we intend to discuss here and that become even more important given the current political situation, in which there are many threats and changes concerning investment priorities in public higher education (Ximenes et al., 2019).

## **Method**

The present study was carried out in the context of a federal university, located in the interior of the state of São Paulo. An undergraduate was chosen as the subject of the study, selected from a sample of ten subjects from the collection of data from a post-doctoral research. She is a 25-year-old undergraduate in the final year of her degree in pedagogy, and her fictitious name is Esperança. Regarding her family context, her mother has completed higher education, her father has completed high school, and to stay at university, Esperança counts on financial help from her parents. In this sense, this research is a case study as it focuses on the analysis of one subject, which is representative of a broader group of students. Therefore, the choice to analyze the case of Esperança is justified because her experiences are representative of higher education, allowing, according to Severino (2007), a generalization to similar situations and contexts.

We used a sociodemographic questionnaire, the application of a complement of sentences, and a semi-structured interview as a methodological instrument. The sociodemographic questionnaire aimed to collect more general identification information such as, for example, age, year of graduation, and parents' education, among other aspects. The use of sentence complements is justified because it is an instrument that allows access to the subject's conceptions and experiences about a given situation, as it allows the subject to express themselves freely about the object investigated (González Rey, 2011). In this instrument, seven beginnings of sentences were used and which the subject would need to complement, as illustrated in Box 1.

The sociodemographic questionnaire and the sentence completion instrument were sent by email to the research subject. Subsequently, the interview was carried out, which consisted of two moments: (1) asking questions that aimed to deepen the information accessed in the sentence completion instrument; and (2) the presentation of different artistic images (paintings and photographs) asking the subject to choose the one that best represented their experience in higher education. The choice of images presented to the participant was carried out by the main researcher of this study, seeking to encompass different natures of human emotions and based on the principles of Souza & Dugnani (2018). The interview was carried out in a private room, audio recorded, and transcribed shortly after the meeting. According to Sionek, Assis and Freitas (2020), the interview enables the mobilization of affections from recalling memories and also the construction of new meanings about the relationships in which the subject participates.

**Box 1 - Sentence completion instrument.**

1. Before starting undergraduate studies, my expectations about university life were...
2. Regarding my expectations, during my university years I realized that...
3. In this context, my university adaptation process is being...
4. Regarding my professional future, I believe that...
5. What I like most about the university or program is...
6. What I like least about the university or program is...
7. If someone I knew wanted to take the same program, I would say...

Based on the information accessed, consecutive readings were made to access the indicators and construct categories that express experiences about the higher education process that impact student development (González Rey, 2011).

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of a Federal University (CAAE: 18399119.0.0000.5504) and the participant signed the Informed Consent.

**Analysis**

The analysis conducted aims to present reflections on an undergraduate about the role of the public university in her human development process. Despite being a study focusing on a single subject, the analysis presented does not lose sight of the collective and political dimension that is constitutive of the human condition.

Esperança is 25 years old, lives with her parents, and reports her experience at the university with great enthusiasm and contentment, feelings that also compete with suffering and discontent. The dialectic of feelings that Esperança experienced and continues to experience in her training process means that her life story in higher education intensifies the certainty and defense of the public university as a fundamental condition for transformation and humanization, marked by encounters that increase the power to act and favors the constitution of what we call 'us' to the detriment of the 'I'. Ultimately, the analysis carried out is in defense of public higher education, and Esperança intensely demonstrates in her narratives the important role of the university in her formation - which is why we chose her for this analysis.

Esperança reports her entry and stay in higher education as an important achievement in her life and a reason for happiness, and that other people also share this same feeling, as is the case of her mother. The emotions that are configured by Esperança throughout her training process, and sources of configuration of meanings regarding her academic training, are possible to be experienced by sharing them so that the emotion experienced within the subject is also experienced by so many others. Therefore, the affections that characterize the human condition can only be understood from the logic of the collective which, according to Espinosa (1957), resides in the inseparable relationship between affection and collective that social and subjective transformations are possible, allowing the process of human and societal development.

The feeling of achievement did not mark Esperança's trajectory only with her entry and completion of higher education, but accompanied her throughout her five years of education, as she reports countless opportunities that contributed to her development, such

as the possibility of becoming involved with research and extension projects. Some of the opportunities that Esperança reported are below:

One of the things that marked my education was the opportunity to go to Argentina to participate in a scientific conference. Because I had never left the country, I had never been on a plane. It's a personal thing, but it was also academic in the sense of presenting work that took me a long time to do. It was my scientific initiation work that took me a year to do.

I think the university allows spaces for training not only academically, but as an individual as well. I participated in several projects, involving other public universities in the city, such as the natal action project. These are things that go beyond training. These are spaces for social interaction, training as an individual, and acting in society, taking/giving back what you have at university. But that was all because of the opportunity I had to just study.

While recounting her countless experiences at university, Esperança also highlights them with the feeling of privilege, for the opportunity that her family was able to provide, being able to dedicate herself exclusively to higher education. However, she also highlights on several occasions that many people do not have the same opportunity:

The university has several training spaces that include both cultural and academic issues. And they are at different times of the day. Now as for the possibilities of experiencing them, this is not for everyone. Anyone who is a father, a mother, someone who works out of their home, in other words, someone who doesn't have free time like me, makes it very difficult to enjoy everything. Today I can choose to go to a lecture, but those who have a routine that needs to work to support themselves don't have that possibility.

One thing I saw during scientific undergraduate studies was that many people at universities go hungry here, and it's not in a peripheral place, but they are people from the intellectual elite and these people are going to transform society and go hungry. There was a year that I was here and the dean's office was invaded to demand students' rights, and they were asking for food. These are people who live here and fight for food to be able to stay here, to remain! This is very sad.

At the same time that Esperança reports with great satisfaction and enthusiasm the opportunities she had throughout her degree, she also shows some frustration due to the situation of colleagues who are unable to make the most of university, due to countless circumstances imposed by life, such as: being a father, needing work, or even not having the basic conditions to stay at university. Esperança seems to share the reality of her colleagues with suffering, and that this feeling is a source of the configuration of her senses about the university, which for Espinosa (1957) is configured as a process of the order of affections and imagination.

According to Espinosa (1957), the subject appropriates reality not through direct access to it, but through the affections<sup>3</sup> they suffer in the interactions and meetings they establish, resulting in feelings of different natures that may or may not mobilize action. And, in this process, imagination plays a key role as it allows the subject to create ideas and images about the conditions they suffer in relationships with other bodies. According to Vigotsky (2009), affection and imagination present an inseparable relationship in the process of human constitution, the latter being based on the experiences the subject experiences throughout their history, which can be a source of their own experience or the experience of others. (which can also be experienced with the same intensity and vivacity as if it were experienced as one's own).

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<sup>3</sup> Term used in accordance with Espinosa's writing (1957).

In the case of Esperança, it seems that the experiences that shaped her experiences at the university and that mobilized her imagination to reflect on different aspects of her training and configuration of her meanings about the university are not limited to her experiences. They also include the experiences of her colleagues that she experienced with suffering, pain, and non-conformity. Therefore, the positive experiences that Esperança had at university, dialectically coexisted with those of her peers who did not have the same possibilities, evoked feelings of sadness that made her perceive reality not only from the parameters of the 'I' but of the 'us'.

Espinosa (1957) calls an affect joyful when it increases the power of the mind and body to act, guided by excitement and contentment. On the other hand, sadness is the affect that tends to curb the power to act, but if it is lived in dialecticity in the conditions in which sad situations cause us together with the hope of a different, better condition, it can promote the power to act in the sense of wanting to ward off sadness. In the case of Esperança, her sadness at the conditions of her peers is also experienced by the desire and belief that they could be different, mobilizing her power to act expressed by the discourse that considers the 'us' dimension as central in her way of thinking about herself and her relationship with the university.

Esperança reports her concern and thoughts focused on the common or 'us' not only about her classmates but also on the experiences involving the local community with whom she developed different projects:

Another factor is the extension projects, in which we developed some activities with needy children about literacy because many children were in the literacy process. There was also another project that mobilized the entire university where several programs came together to carry out solidarity actions aimed at the city.

In Esperança's speech, she notes her involvement with actions involving the local community, through the extension projects she participated in throughout the program. Therefore, the important role of the university in the constitution and way of thinking of Esperança, characterized by 'us' to the detriment of 'I', becomes significant. 'Us' is understood as the capacity of thought and language to deal with our own needs and desires, also considering those of others, therefore constituting a 'us'. Therefore, the 'us' does not in any way nullify the subject's individuality but considers and overcomes it to the extent that it also takes the other as a point of reflection and driving force for their higher psychological functions. Therefore, it resides in the dialectic between the 'I' and the 'other' that the 'us' emerges as a way for the subject to think about themselves and their surrounding reality.

Talking about the dimension of 'us' or the collective has never been as important in our society as in the current situation, a logic that characterized the history of humanity for so long but which has been lost due to the political and social intentions that mark our neoliberal society, guided by market, meritocratic and competitive principles aimed at defending the triumphant individual. Therefore, in a society focused on individual valorization, collective thinking, characterized by 'us', seems almost extinct. Now, if the collective is what characterizes our constitution as humans, it therefore seems that we are in a process of dehumanization. Esperança, the subject of our study, demonstrates the university as a way of rescuing the human, through the constitution of collective thought, that is, the university as a space for rescuing humanization.

Still, advancing in the analysis, talking about collective also refers to what Espinosa (1957) calls affect characterized by the relationships we have with other bodies, which can result in a state of greater or lesser power of action. In this sense, we are always involved

in encounters that can increase or decrease our *conatus*, a term used by the philosopher to designate the subject's effort to persevere in human existence. In the case of Esperança, the university seems to be configured as meetings that allow her to increase her *conatus*, making her consider the human dimension that characterizes her existence and the challenges of her future profession.

Therefore, the encounters that Esperança had throughout her life enabled her to form her thinking focused on 'us' to the detriment of 'I', in addition to developing critical and reflective thinking that allows her to think about her own formation, highlighting the limitations of the program without leaving aside the 'common' as a mobilizing horizon for her actions and thoughts. In this sense, despite enjoying the program and pointing out the countless privileges she had and still has in studying at a public university, Esperança highlights some weaknesses:

My program curriculum is quite rigid, it says it's open but it's not. You have those texts; you have no opening. And the issue of assessment [...] what is taken into consideration for the student to achieve the goal is to achieve the expected scores to be able to pass. Then, sometimes, I wonder if I'm just answering questions to pass the test or if I'm learning what I really should. [...] Just because the program has bad things doesn't mean I don't like it. There are good things. I can exactly take this critical look at the good things the program offers.

It is possible to notice in Esperança's speech a very consistent criticism of her training, especially the evaluation process, which she feels is not aligned with what is taught in her pedagogy training. The evaluations often seem to be based on pragmatic parameters. Nevertheless, Esperança is aware that her criticisms are only possible due to the training she had, which highlights the importance of collective learning and training in developing reflective critical thinking. Esperança advances further in her reflections by also thinking about the role of the community, particularly the students themselves, in overcoming the limitations of the training process.

However, I think the curriculum could be improved by listening more to the students, with political participation within university spaces, especially in department meetings and program coordination meetings. There may be other forms of evaluation, such as institutional evaluations of the program itself, and evaluation of the subject itself. Assessment is sometimes carried out by the professor asking questions in the last class, handing in the necessary work, and always in the last class they ask how the subject went, and what the students thought. I'll be honest, I don't feel safe saying what I really think. Because whether you like it or not, this professor can fail me.

Esperança's way of thinking focused on what we call 'us' is also highlighted in her feelings regarding her program, expressed in the idea that she should consider the collective as a source of construction and reformulations of a curriculum, which does not always happen. Esperança painfully demonstrates the dilemmas that occur in her formation process. It is the experience of the university as suffering that characterizes and reveals the meanings configured by Esperança about higher education, which we will delve deeper into later in the analysis.

At the same time that Esperança reports the lack of political participation of students concerning the constitution and management of the program, she highlights with hope the feeling of acceptance that seems to permeate relationships at the university:

I had a lot of problems with religious acceptance, in basic education it bothered me a lot because I wasn't part of the religion that most people were. At university, here, I can calmly talk about my religion, and I feel very welcomed. I see that this continues in other areas, for example, I have several friends who are LGBT and found greater acceptance at the university campus.



In Esperança's speech, acceptance is noted as a feeling that seems to permeate the university spaces. And, without a doubt, this is a feeling that generates power for action, which makes her recount her university journey with hope, belief, criticism, and suffering. Furthermore, it makes her believe in the public university as a space of transformation, of hope for the construction of a more just, egalitarian, and humane society. All these affections and feelings that the university gives her, allow her to build her awareness as a future professional, especially in her field of activity: being a teacher. In her view, her future profession as a teacher seems to be extremely important and socially responsible: "Any action you take as a teacher makes a lot of difference. You can maintain or transform society".

The speech of Esperança and her movement of criticism and reflection on the role of her future profession in society, permeated with sad and happy emotions, allows her to live the university experience as ethical-political suffering as a driving force for her academic and professional training process. But, after all, what is this feeling called ethical-political suffering?

According to Sawaia (2001), it is not possible to separate discussions that involve exclusion and social commitment from affectivity, because the political dimension is supported and maintained exactly by the emotions and feelings that are at the basis of affections. An example of this is the discussion focused on the level of poverty and social inequality that marks our country, a political situation sustained and maintained by affections that seek to place the blame on the subject for 'non-social ascension', accentuating superstitions such as 'marginal', 'without will', 'incompetent', among many others. This way of thinking is characterized by a decrease in the power of action, guided by thinking based on superstition, favoring the maintenance of social values and laws. According to Espinosa (1957), superstition is an immediate political condition, which legitimizes an unfair country, a corrupt government, and an unequal society. On the other hand, it is a function of affections marked by 'indignation' and 'nonconformity' that feed ways of thinking that question relations of domination and that, therefore, are at the basis of political transformation, with knowledge of reality being the main mobilizing force. The concept of a domination relationship is understood as defined by Guareschi (2007, p. 90), characterized as an "[...] asymmetric, unequal, unfair [...]" relationship.

Therefore, based on the inseparable discussion between the political and affective dimensions, Sawaia (2001) highlights the function of two affections that seem to permeate situations of social injustice: pain and suffering. Pain refers to an affect typical of human life, which is inevitable. It is the subject looking at a certain social situation with 'pity' as if nothing were possible to change that condition. Suffering, on the other hand, is the pain measured by social injustices, a source of concerns, discomfort, and revolts, supported by critical-reflective thinking that the condition is not given naturally, but was constituted intentionally and, therefore, human. Therefore, it refers to the feeling of suffering as an ethical-political dimension. Therefore, inequality experienced as pain inserts the potential for transformation within the scope of the impossible. Inequality, experienced as suffering, inserts the potential for transformation within the scope of what is necessary.

In this sense, from the exploration of the concept of ethical-political suffering and returning to the case of Esperança, the thesis is clear that she seems to experience the university with such affection in mind, this is because at different times she demonstrates frustration and discontent with the injustices and differences that she experiences and perceives in university relationships. And, it is precisely because of the ethical-political

suffering with which she experiences university and the challenges of her future profession, that the importance of university in her life and also for society stands out, an affection that should be a horizon for the entire training process, in especially about higher education.

Another characteristic of Esperança is her involvement with the arts, revealed during the interview in which images were presented so that she could choose one to represent her experiences at university. Throughout the presentation of the images, Esperança commented on some of them. When presenting the photograph entitled *Ganhando sapatos novos* (Waller, 1946), which portrays the image of an orphan boy (his parents died in the Second World War) receiving a pair of new shoes, Esperança expresses: "Such joy in this situation! Show hope! Understanding the history of a photo is very interesting. It's just a shoe [...] how many things he must have lost. He is a child and his greatest affection is his family".

Esperança is affected by the photo, which even without asking her to talk about it, triggers her thoughts, almost without being able to control them. In the process of appreciating the work, she seems to be placed in the situation of the child, extremely touched by the vulnerable condition and at the same time by the joy it presents. The image allows Esperança to reflect on the child, his family, and the joy and sadness that the photograph expresses in a single image, that is, it turns to the social condition portrayed in the image which reflects in the form of affections, emotions, and thoughts.

The images presented to Esperança remind her of others she has seen, such as a photograph of a child in a museum imitating a ballerina.

The other day I saw an image of a child in the museum and she imitated the same image as the dancer. And then I was thinking about schools where you are in closed spaces, and then any bodily action is always blocked. And then in the museum, a place that not everyone has access to, and the child tries to enter, be together, experience it. And then I thought how sensational! Because, sometimes, we are in spaces that could be used to train the individual. With this image, I started thinking about how the city could educate better.

The images presented and appreciated by Esperança make her face again with countless affections that make her think about her future profession. Images, on the one hand, allow us to evoke thoughts and conceptions, on the other hand, they sometimes cause unusual affections that are difficult to describe.

What an impact! I wish I had the right words to define emotions. You see that my words to define emotions are just happy, sad, happy [...] The image gives me a sensation [...] it's not astonishment [...] I don't know how to say it, I'm missing the word [...]

See in Esperança's speech her effort in trying to describe her thoughts, affections, thinking about emotions to describe the affections that her body suffers in the process of aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, we can think that art enables encounters that put the body in movement and increase the human power to act, making the subject, at the same time, turn to an external condition, objective, also enabling them to think about their own life and their role in their relationship with society, that is, art seems powerful in promoting an encounter with 'us'. In other words, art can be an aesthetic mediation that favors *conatus*, promoting and raising different forms of thought that consider the other, reality, and oneself, in a movement permeated by the dialecticity of life.

After examining countless images, Esperança chooses one of them that, according to her, represents her experiences at university. It is a photo of the work of artist Zenos Frudakis (2001), called *Freedom*.

This image brings movement and I was thinking: what could those parts be that you seem to be stuck in? And this liberation? Liberation from what? Just body or total? I don't understand. At this moment, if I were to put myself in that image, I would see myself at the end of a cycle and freeing myself for a new cycle, which is the completion of higher education. This image makes me think about the issue of freedom, because I, as a professional, can enable people to stay where they are, in their thoughts, or I will free them. I believe that education has the possibility of creating a feeling of liberation, little by little and transforming. This image calls for movement, even when I was speaking, I started to move [...]

Esperança makes an important contribution to the concept of freedom and it is worth further deepening and reflection on this issue that is so dear to historical-cultural psychology. Discussions about freedom have never been used as much as they are today, a concept that is associated in common sense with the idea of free will, exempting the state from responsibility and valuing meritocracy. These ideas therefore present a false dichotomy between freedom and social determination (Sawaia, 2009).

For Vigotsky (2006), freedom refers to a concept related to the process of appropriation of the social by the subject, which is based on the logic that the more they know their historical and social reality and that schooled knowledge has an extremely important function, the greater their possibilities of choice, of knowing the affections of their body and, therefore, the greater their freedom. Therefore, Vigotsky (2006) states that the only way to achieve freedom is through the development of thought through concept. It is through knowledge that it is possible to overcome relationships based on stereotypes and prejudices that in no way contribute to the subject's liberation, on the contrary, imprison them in dogmatic conceptions.

It is due to these characteristics and attributions of freedom that Esperança seems to be aware of its social function in enabling conditions for the process of human emancipation, taking upon herself the responsibility that her future profession presents. Therefore, in the same way that Esperança presents an awareness of her commitment to the formation of other people, this was only possible due to the emancipatory transformations she underwent in her own formation process. Perhaps, it is precisely because of her experiences at university that allowed Esperança to develop her way of thinking about herself, others, and reality in a critical and reflective way, making her value her future profession as a teacher.

The concept of experience, based on Vigotsky's postulates, can be understood as an experience charged with emotions that allows the construction of new meanings and configurations of meanings, making it possible to expand how the subject understands reality. In this sense, the experience promotes the development of higher psychological functions, especially consciousness. To this end, the experience is only possible from the presence of a social situation of development, which allows encounters that enhance human development (Vinha & Welcman, 2010). Therefore, it is possible to understand the university as a context rich in social development situations, capable of providing different experiences and mobilizing student development in different ways.

Therefore, based on the analysis of Esperança's trajectory, it is possible to reaffirm the importance of higher education, especially public universities, which offer countless opportunities and possibilities for access, questioning, and transformation of individuals and society. Reaffirming this thesis may seem a little obvious, perhaps a bit rhetorical, but in the current situation, it is necessary to rescue the social and political role that the public university has in our country and that this analysis highlights the characteristic of 'us' as the main aspect of contribution among so many others that public education makes possible.

From the above, it is possible to highlight what Chaui (2003) defines as training, which involves a relationship with time. Training takes place through a process that allows the subject to be inserted into the past of their culture, making them take ownership of the history of knowledge, awakening them to the present implications and projections for the future. There is only training when there is the process of developing thought, which only happens at a time conducive to reflection, interrogation, and criticism. To enable the understanding of reality on its conceptual level, it is necessary to have experiences in the context of affections, questions, and clarity of problems, elements that need to be permeated by the dimension of social responsibility. Therefore, in the analysis presented by Esperança, it is possible to think and reflect on its training process and reinforce the defense of the public university as defended by Chaui (2003).

According to Vigotsky (2006), through the appropriation of scientific knowledge thinking and other functions develop. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that it is not enough for the subject to be at university, it is necessary to acquire knowledge that provokes the development of critical thinking. An important question to consider is whether will everyone have the same experiences and appropriations at a university like Esperança. We know that the university is appropriated and experienced in a very diverse and unique way by different subjects. However, the idea of bringing the case of Esperança is to highlight the power of the university in constituting critical-reflective thinking, even though we know that not everyone experiences it in this way.

### **Final considerations**

In a society where knowledge is devalued, it becomes increasingly important to reinforce and highlight the role and complexity of educational processes in the human constitution. The case study presented allowed us to discuss and analyze the main elements experienced by the collective in the context of higher education by Esperança throughout her training and which were sources of the configuration of her meanings about higher education, also allowing us to think about the implications of this training for her development process. The analysis enabled us to understand that entry into public higher education is marked by the expansion of the future perspective and the subject's belief that they will have quality training. In this sense, entry into higher education for Esperança was something much desired, and could also be generalized to a large proportion of entrants. This aspect further reinforces the idea of the public university in Brazil being represented with a certain reliability in terms of its quality and social role, being represented as synonymous with social ascension.

However, despite the expectations aimed at entering higher education being filled with positive emotions for Esperança, throughout her university years she came across a series of factors that made her realize that in addition to the university being a privileged space for training, there are other aspects characterized by exclusion, suffering, among countless other forms of expression of human emotionality. In this sense, it was possible to verify that Esperança's experiences concerning higher education are diverse, arising from tension and polarized relationships that permeate the training process.

One of the aspects that stood out in the analysis presented was the role of the university in the development of critical thinking, favoring Esperança the possibility of building more complex ways of understanding herself and her reality. These aspects, especially about the way she understands her reality, go beyond a dimension of individual thinking, based on her own will, to incorporate thinking committed to the community and the

demands of her future profession. In this sense, these meanings allow us to understand that the university is configured as a space that rescues and recovers the human dimension of living in and with the collective, giving thought and speech the characteristic of reflecting on the construction of dignified, egalitarian, and healthy relationships.

If, on the one hand, Esperança recognizes the important role of the university in terms of transforming and expanding her way of thinking, on the other hand, it is precisely because of these same aspects that she reflects on the pedagogical practices in which she participates at the university, such as questioning the presence of domination relationships. In this aspect, it was possible to verify the meaning configured about the relations of domination that circulate within the walls of the university and which, often, end up excluding people who had greater difficulty or faced obstacles in being able to attend a public university, or who, due to the condition of life are unable to take advantage of all the training spaces that the university provides. Therefore, at the same time that the university is configured as a democratic space, offering its students the opportunity to appropriate knowledge articulated with social commitment, it is also configured as a space where relations of domination are present and are sources of configuration of meanings about higher education.

Therefore, it is through the tensions that characterize the university space that the training process is constituted and offers the possibility for its actors to construct critical and reflective thinking that allows them to think about their education, highlighting the limitations that the program presents, without leaving aside human relations as a horizon for reflection. It is in the daily university experience that Esperança has the possibility of countless experiences that shape her way of thinking, acting, and being in the world.

Still, another aspect that deserves to be highlighted is that at the moment we finalize this article, we were in a pandemic context, in which face-to-face classes have been suspended, being replaced by remote classes. This scenario allows us to reflect on the implications of the absence of everyday university life in higher education and to think about whether the concept of training (as we defend during the analysis) can be possible without the daily and face-to-face elements that the university offers. Without a doubt, these are questions for future studies.

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