

# Using Cultural-Historical Theory to Analyze Educational Inequality: Potential, Barriers, Prospects

**Sergey G. Kosaretsky**

Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0777-1111>, e-mail: [ivanov@yandex.ru](mailto:ivanov@yandex.ru)

The cultural-historical theory, which is basic for Soviet and post-Soviet Russian psychological science, is based on the idea of “specifically human” higher mental functions. The key concepts for the theory of “social situation of development”, “zone of proximal development” include as a central element the cooperation of the child with other people. The article shows that in the works of followers of cultural-historical theory psychology in the USSR and modern Russia, very little attention was paid to the problems of development and learning related to differences in the characteristics of the sociocultural environment and interaction with teachers and peers. Explanations of this phenomenon are offered. The examples of the development of L.S. Vygotsky’s ideas in the studies of educational inequality in foreign sociology are analyzed, the importance for Russian science of using cultural-historical theory to understand the mechanisms of the relationship between the peculiarities of social circumstances and the dynamics of child development, the analysis of pedagogical discourse is substantiated.

**Keywords:** cultural-historical activity theory, socioeconomic status, academic achievements, educational inequality, zone of proximal development.

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# Использование культурно-исторической теории для анализа образовательного неравенства: потенциал, барьеры, перспективы

**С.Г. Косарецкий**

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»  
(ФГАОУ ВО «НИУ ВШЭ»), Москва, Россия

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-8983>, e-mail: [skosaretski@hse.ru](mailto:skosaretski@hse.ru)

Базовая для советской и постсоветской российской психологической науки культурно-историческая теория основывается на представлении о социальной природе «специфически человеческих» высших психических функций. Ключевые для теории понятия «социальная ситуация развития», «зона ближайшего развития» включают в качестве центрального элемента сотрудничество ребенка с другими людьми. В статье показано, что, несмотря на это, в работах последователей

культурно-исторической психологии в СССР и современной России проблематике особенностей развития и обучения, связанной с различиями в характеристиках социокультурного окружения и взаимодействия с учителем и сверстниками, уделялось крайне мало внимания. Предлагаются объяснения данному феномену. Анализируются примеры развития идей Л.С. Выготского в исследованиях образовательного неравенства в зарубежной социологии, обосновывается важность для российской науки использования культурно-исторической теории для понимания механизмов взаимосвязи особенностей социальных обстоятельств и динамики развития ребенка, анализа педагогического дискурса.

**Ключевые слова:** культурно-историческая теория, социально-экономический статус, академические достижения, образовательное неравенство, зона ближайшего развития.

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## Introduction

The study of the influence of factors of the social, economic, and cultural status of students' families, the socioeconomic composition of schools on differences in learning outcomes and the emergence of the phenomenon of inequality has become one of the key areas of research in the field of education from the 1960s of the 20th century to the present [36; 42; 46].

Despite the fact that most studies relate to the fields of sociology, education, and psychology, the topic of the influence of the socioeconomic status (SES) of a family on the behavior and cognitive development of a child is at the center of attention. [19; 23; 34].

Russian psychological studies of SES and mechanisms of influence of social circumstances on the dynamics of child development are few in number [1; 19]. In turn, research in the field of education is characterized by the use of foreign sociological concepts and methods for studying the relationship of SES with the characteristics of education and child well-being [16; 24].

This seems surprising if we recall that the basic cultural-historical theory for Soviet and post-Soviet psychology had as its key thesis, starting with Vygotsky, "socio-cultural mediation of the development of higher mental functions".

In this article, we aim to find confirmation of this phenomenon, offer its explanation and justify the possibility and prospects of using cultural and historical theory to study the problems of socio-cultural conditionality of development and learning, and to overcome educational inequality.

## The Influence of Socio-cultural Factors on the Development and Educational Success of a Child: the Potential of Cultural and Historical Theory and its Implementation in Soviet and Russian Science

L.S. Vygotsky proposed an original and profound concept of social mediation of the development of higher mental functions by cooperation with adults and signs. Its key concepts, "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) and "social situation of development" clearly showed psychologists and teachers the need to study the social environment (relationships) of the child in order to understand the processes of individual development and build adequate pedagogical practices. At the same time, Vygotsky himself did not have time to develop on this basis studies that allow us to see the social aspects of differentiation of cooperation relations and the specifics of the signs used (first of all, language) and their manifestation in the features of psychological development and educational experience of students from different social groups, although such plans seem to have existed [3]. The potential of cultural-historical theory in the analysis of social status and social relations in the family and at school for understanding the processes of development, the formation of educational inequality is recognized by modern researchers abroad [25; 28; 29; 30; 31; 33; 41].

A certain step in this direction was taken by A.R. Luria, who together with his colleagues organized pioneering empirical studies of speech and thinking features related to the social circumstances of a child's life [9]. Luria believed that "only an attempt to find out the transformative influence of a particular social historical and cultural situation on the development of behavioral processes can

give them a fairly complete understanding" [9, p. 8]. "intellectual experience is directly related to the specific features of the social situation, and here we should expect maximum conditionality of speech activity that regulates and forms a certain social context". experience from the specific environment that raised the child" [9, p. 9].

For Luria, the conclusions from the study are fundamentally important for building a fully rational pedagogical process, which he sees as "taking into account the accessibility coefficient of each stimulus used in the process of influencing the child", which "is by no means the same and stable for all ages and social groups" [9, p. 35].

At the same time, P.P. Blonsky in 1930 proposed to introduce differentiated methods of studying and combating second-handedness. The types of second-year students identified by him empirically included those whose problems were related to social circumstances, in particular, "children with a difficult social environment", "children transferred from a village school" [5].

Our analysis shows that neither Vygotsky's basic theoretical models, nor the program of empirical research for the construction of Luria's pedagogical system, nor Blonsky's proposals received continuity in the future in Soviet psychology.

The most obvious explanation for this circumstance is the change in the political situation in the country. The creation of Soviet society started the process of erasing class and social distinctions, which, on the one hand, made their research less relevant, and perhaps even contrary to political attitudes. In addition, since the state sought to take over the functions of educating (re-educating) the child (not trusting the family or compensating for the lack of its participation), it did not show interest in the influence of the family on the development and educational success of the child and even sought to exclude this influence by equalizing the power of uniformly organized education. Thus, the study of the relationship between social circumstances and development/learning did not seem to be a priority, and even directly blocked.

There is actual evidence that this topic has fallen victim to a campaign against pedagogy. Documents of the time noted that "pedologists combined with reactionary bourgeois theories that sought to prove that the intellectual abilities of bourgeois children were inherently superior to those of workers' children", using a number of "anti-scientific techniques and methods of studying children", including the study of their "ancestors". Attention was drawn "to the negative situation in children's lives." As a result, "tens of thousands of normal Soviet schoolchildren were transferred from ordinary schools to special schools for the ill-educated, to "auxiliary" schools, to "additional" and "special" classes, etc." [5].

Publications of the next period warn teachers against identifying so-called "objective" conditions as the cause of academic failure, that is, reasons that do not depend on either teachers or students, since it was these conditions that pedagogists explained the failure of schoolchildren [12].

In the subsequent tradition of research in line with cultural and historical theory, including current ones, we do not find any interest, and even more so original approaches to revealing the connection between differences in the sociocultural characteristics of the child's life environment and his development and learning. As noted in the only review to date, existing Russian publications dealing with SES "mainly concern the level of concern of adolescents with problems in various spheres of life, as well as educational opportunities and the nature of child-parent relations, with the greatest attention paid to families with various variants of socio-economic disadvantage" [19, p. 74].

The topics of differences in development and inequality of academic achievements caused by SES are not highlighted in the results of the analysis of publications of the journal "Cultural-Historical Psychology" [18; 20], scientometric analysis of the cultural and historical direction in scientific publications [11].

To update our assessments of the situation, we turned to the analysis of publications over the past 5 years in psychological journals that are, on the one hand, the most authoritative in Russia, and, on the other, most representative of authors associated with the methodology of cultural and historical psychology: "Cultural-Historical Psychology", "Psychological Science and Education". We analyzed about 500 publications from 2017 to 2023. Only four publications connected differences in development, school adaptation, and academic achievement with the characteristics of the child's sociocultural living conditions, socioeconomic characteristics of his family, and peer community [7; 10; 13; 17].

In most studies of cognitive and non-cognitive development of children, and even in a number of works dealing with learning difficulties, school maladaptation, including those presenting the results of validation of the relevant measurement tools, the analysis of variables that characterize the level of education, cultural capital, income, and place of residence of families is not carried out. The features of communication styles, forms of parental participation, teachers' cooperation with the child, and the views and attitudes of children, families, and teachers towards learning are considered mainly out of connection with the social characteristics of families and schools.

As for Russian publications in the field of educational sciences, in the Soviet period and the first decades after the collapse of the USSR, this was a small number of mainly sociological works that revealed the correlation between the socioeconomic characteris-

tics of children and youth and their opportunities for higher education [15; 21; 32]. The ability to work with data from international studies of the quality of education, the Unified State Exam, as well as the first longitudinal studies have stimulated the growth of publications in recent years. That revealed the impact of SES on academic achievements and educational trajectories of students, and differences in the quality of education between groups of students and schools [16; 24]. A recent analysis of trends in the study of educational success factors in Russian science shows that the emphasis of scientific interests in this area “is shifting towards studying non-cognitive factors (predictors) that determine the academic success of students (social, socio-psychological, personal, etc.)” [16, p. 19].

Are there any reasons other than political ones that have limited the use and development of Vygotsky's ideas and cultural-historical theory in general in Russian psychology and pedagogy for studying the influence of sociocultural features of relationships and sign systems on child development? After all, they certainly should not have had a deterrent effect in the post-Soviet period.

One version of the explanation of the reasons was formulated in the work of M. Inghilleri, which correlates the approach of the outstanding British sociologist Basil Bernstein with the ideas of another British researcher and educator, James Britton [31], which were influenced by Vygotsky's works.

Both scientists developed their research in a situation of aggravation of the issue of equality of educational outcome for students from different sociocultural backgrounds in the United Kingdom. Both Britton and Bernstein defended the ideas of social factors' impact on cognitive functions, paying special attention to the role of language.

At the same time, Britton used Vygotsky's ideas on the social mediation of development, and, in particular, the idea of a ZPD with an emphasis on formative interaction. For Britton, on an individual cognitive level, all students, regardless of class/cultural background, were considered equally (in fact innately) competent, and the presence of caring adults (teachers, parents, etc.) is all that is needed to ensure successful interactive communication. Cognition and learning were considered independently of the social background reflected in the language of interaction.

In the discourse of Britton and his followers, as Inghilleri notes, “the personal growth model, however, social' simply came to mean 'interactive', and the zone of proximal development was interpreted as a site of benign interactive processes... in which a child's consciousness met a more mature adult consciousness, enabling the child to internalise gradually various forms of shared social behavior” [31, p. 474]. Thus, in the works of Britton and his followers, “Vygotsky was essentially recon-

textualised into a pedagogic theory that offered a rationalisation for language-based, interactive learning in the classroom” [31, p. 475].

Bernstein focused on the differences in the forms of language (language codes) that students acquire as a result of socialization within a particular family and/or class. Through these codes, adults convey the principles of organization of the social world(s) in which they were located, which determine the features of cognition and communication. They show different school performance due to the way the school operates and its relationships with its different communities, and thus influence is different in their educational achievements: children from working-class families show lower results. For Bernstein, the ZPD space is not a neutral place for creating or exchanging mutually interpretable meanings, and adults are not just assistants or facilitators, but to a greater or lesser extent, determinants of the formation of children's consciousness. In his view, the ZPD was “the cognitive representation of a social world, and hence the meanings as well as the ‘tools’ that were employed or made available within it — the social context of learning — would be subject to the uneven social regulation and distribution of the content and framing of the knowledge” [31, p. 475].

It seems that the course implemented by Britton and his followers, unlike Bernstein, is very similar to the trajectory of Soviet psychology after L.S. Vygotsky. The ZPD was “cleared” of any heterogeneity associated with the socio-cultural characteristics of its participants. The abstract, or rather ideal adult, replaced the real ones, and the very interest in such an adult prevailed for a long time over the interest in those real adult parents and teachers with whom the student interacts. ZPD diagnostics began to focus on artificial environments that are autonomous from real-world practices, with adults specially trained to conduct experiments or teaching within the framework of a particular variation of developing training. The design of educational practices began to rely on the understanding development of the psyche and thinking as an artificial, controlled process, and the processes of cooperation between children and adults in real socio-cultural environments were ignored [6; 25].

The way in which the real adult is replaced by the “ideal”, and the natural content of the environment and its relations by the ideal, doesn't misrepresent Vygotsky's theory, but it became its dominant interpretation. Vygotsky considered the process of development as an interaction between the primary and ideal form, where the latter is not directly revealed to the child, but is mastered with the help of its carrier or mediator, the adult, who actually acts as a supreme being and knows what and how the child should do” [2, p. 104]. And for D.B. Elkonin, as noted G.G. Kravtsova and E. E. Kravtsov, an adult is not

a specific adult (for example, a mother), but a social adult; relationships a child has with him are identified with the fundamental relationship “individual-society” [8].

### **Application of the Ideas of Cultural and Historical Theory in Modern Studies of Educational Inequality**

Now that the problem of inequality is becoming more serious, the basic ideas of cultural-historical theory continue to influence the development of modern foreign methods for investigating the relationship between schooling and social inequality, mostly using Bernstein's approach to sociology [28; 29; 33; 37; 40; 41].

Concepts of the mediating role of adults, peers, and cultural tools, as well as the idea of a ZPD, are used to analyze teaching process in a multiethnic school environment [24], educational features and support practices used for migrant children and underrepresented groups [41], transition trajectories between different educational cultures of primary and secondary schools [27], and to analyze the educational benefits of some groups. [44]. These concepts are used for the organization of the mediative teaching for students with low-income and differentiated social relations in school [39]. It is proved that for effective work, the teacher must know the specific social dynamics of the environment children are developing in. [43].

Vadeboncoeur and Panofsky transform Vygotsky's “dyadic conception of ZPD into a “triadic” one, where area child, a teacher, and a parent, to demonstrate that middle-class parents “insert a proleptic vision (the authors use M. Cole's term “prolepsis”) for their children's future in the ZPD” [45, p.194]. Using the communicative capital (speech genres of advocacy, the social language of educational professionals, the discourse of parental involvement) they purposefully mediate its implementation in the student-teacher relationship, helping teachers to see the child's capabilities and creating the necessary resources for educational experience. In turn, the low communication capital of parents from low-income families does not allow them to be effective in solving this problem [45].

### **Conclusion**

The key tenets of the cultural-historical theory, described in the works of L.S. Vygotsky, define the social as a source of development of higher mental functions. At the same time, differences in the social environment, socio-cultural characteristics of adults and peers, were not specifically considered in the works of followers of the cultural-historical theory as factors of differences in the development of cognitive and non-cognitive processes, as predictors of educational failure.

And, if in the Soviet period it can be to some extent explained by the political context, then ignoring this issue during fast growing socio-economic inequality in the late 20th and first quarter of the 21st century, can no longer be explained by this.

In this study we show that the reasons for this are related to certain aspects of the cultural-historical theory itself, how it was presented in the works of L.S. Vygotsky and were later consolidated. This is, first of all, the interpretation of the adult mediator as an abstract carrier of the ideal form and a controller of the development of this ideal form providing ZPD. The practices of cooperation between adults, peers and children that determine the value of ZPD were considered operationally without sufficient attention being paid to socio-cultural features and characteristics of dispositions at the micro level. Another limitation is the insufficiently researched problem of language features in various socio-cultural environments and communication practices as a source of differences in cognitive development and educational achievements.

Actualization of the problem of educational inequality in Russia has stimulated the emergence of Russian studies of this phenomenon. However, they are already based on foreign theories and methods of study, and those traditions that are least connected with Vygotsky's ideas.

It seems that the ideas of cultural-historical theory can become an important basis for Russian own tradition of studying the influence of socio-cultural factors on the development and education of children and designing educational models that open up opportunities, so every child could get a high quality education.

In particular, the idea of a ZPD can be used as a tool for operationalizing the concept of “fair education” in institutional and pedagogical practices, so that the realization of educational potential will be not the result of personal and social conditions [54]. In this case, the formation of a ZPD can be considered as the realization of high expectations about the achievements of children through children's integration/remediation and socialization in various socio-cultural environments (first of all, families).

The idea of ZPD can be used to analyze the phenomenon of academic resilience, the ability of schoolchildren from families with low economic, educational and cultural resources to overcome these limitations, achieving the highest results in achievement tests [38].

If we are talking about for improving educational opportunities for students from low-resource groups, it's important to focus on the study of students' collaboration. However, for this to be useful for all students, we need to understand the characteristics of cultural and social groups and the dynamics of group interaction.

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#### **Information about the authors**

*Sergey G. Kosaretsky*, PhD in Psychology, Director, Center of General and Extracurricular Education, Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-8983>, e-mail: [skosaretski@hse.ru](mailto:skosaretski@hse.ru)

#### **Информация об авторах**

*Косарецкий Сергей Геннадьевич*, кандидат психологических наук, директор центра общего и дополнительного образования имени А.А. Пинского Института образования, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики» (ФГАОУ ВО «НИУ ВШЭ»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-8983>, e-mail: [skosaretski@hse.ru](mailto:skosaretski@hse.ru)

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