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Practice-oriented science based on cultural-historical psychology: history and prospects

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Abstract

Context and relevance. Education systems around the world are facing the challenges of global changes in technology, the labor market, and demography. Strengthening the interaction between science and practice in education is considered one of the conditions for a successful response to these challenges. In the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, precedents have been created for building productive cooperation between scientists and practitioners in education based on cultural and historical psychology, which are relevant in the current situation inside and outside the country. **Objective.** The article examines the genesis and content of the idea of a practice-oriented science of education in the context of modern discussions about barriers, opportunities and promising models of interaction between researchers and practitioners. **Hypothesis.** The «practice-oriented science» approach can help in responding to the current challenges of transforming education systems in Russia and the world. **Methods and materials.** Two groups of publications are analyzed: 1) reflecting modern discussions about the gap between science and practice in education and ways to overcome it, the search for effective forms and mechanisms of cooperation between researchers and practitioners; 2) characterizing the history of the conception and implementation of practice-oriented science in education in the USSR (Russian Federation). **Results.** The foundations and key characteristics of the practice-oriented science of education in Russia are presented. The connection of its development with the processes of development of psychological and pedagogical science and general education in the USSR (Russian Federation) is shown. **Conclusions.** The «practice-oriented science» approach has prospects for implementation in Russia and the world to meet the challenges of transforming education systems, but it needs to be developed taking into account the experience of developing and implementing other models of partnership between researchers and practitioners, current discussions and the socio-political context.

Keywords: cultural-historical psychology, practice-oriented science, developmental education, design

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Практико-ориентированная наука на базе культурно-исторической психологии: история и перспективы

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Резюме

Контекст и актуальность. Системы образования во всем мире сталкиваются с вызовами глобальных изменений технологического уклада, рынка труда, демографии. Одним из условий успешного ответа на эти вызовы видится укрепление взаимодействия между наукой и практикой в образовании. В СССР и постсоветской России созданы прецеденты выстраивания продуктивного сотрудничества между учеными и практиками в образовании на базе культурно-исторической психологии, актуальные в современной ситуации внутри страны и за ее пределами. **Цель:** изучить генезис и содержание

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замысла практико-ориентированной науки об образовании в контексте современных дискуссий о барьерах, возможностях и перспективных моделях взаимодействия исследователей и практиков. **Гипотеза.** Подход «практико-ориентированная наука» может помочь в ответе на актуальные вызовы трансформации систем образования в России и мире. **Методы и материалы.** Анализируются две группы публикаций: 1) отражающие современные дискуссии о разрыве науки и практики в образовании и путях его преодоления, поиски эффективных форм и механизмов сотрудничества исследователей и практиков; 2) характеризующие историю замысла и реализации практико-ориентированной науки в образовании в СССР (Российской Федерации). **Результаты.** Представлены основания и ключевые характеристики практико-ориентированной науки об образовании в России. Показана ее связь с процессами развития психолого-педагогической науки и общего образования в СССР (Российской Федерации). **Выводы.** Подход «практико-ориентированная наука» имеет перспективы реализации в России и мире для ответа на вызовы трансформации систем образования, но необходимо его развитие с учетом мирового опыта реализации иных моделей партнерства исследователей и практиков, актуальных дискуссий и социально-политического контекста.

Ключевые слова: культурно-историческая психология, практико-ориентированная наука, развивающееся образование, проектирование

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Introduction

It is commonplace today to state that global changes in technology, labor market, demography create challenges for new generations and increase the responsibility of education systems to prepare for life and work in the future world, and form a demand for changes in existing models of education in order to realize this responsibility. There is a realization that the prescriptions offered for education as an answer to the challenges of the future have been left unfulfilled or ineffective (Elfert, Ydesen, 2024). There is a process of decolonization of scientific knowledge or epistemological decolonization, in which the hegemony of Western theories and methodologies in the sciences of education is criticized (Knobloch, 2020). This process, on the one hand, has actualized the question of countries' sovereignty in educational policy and science, developing authentic strategies that consider unique historical and cultural contexts, integrating national traditions and indigenous knowledge. On the other hand, it sets the agenda for the search for theoretical and methodological alternatives that could unite countries in scientific dialog and cooperation. This vector, in particular, is being discussed today within the BRICS framework (Barbosa Gouveia et al., 2024).

One of the reasons for the observed crisis in education is the problematic, if not also crisis situation regarding the interaction between science and educational practice. The debate about the gap

between science and practice in education has a long history (Korthagen, 2007), but it is currently intensifying (Schlicht-Schm lzle et al., 2024). It addresses the quality and reliability of research findings, the relevance of the research agenda to the problems of practice and the feasibility of practical use of the results, the accessibility of research findings to practitioners, their trust in them, and their motivation for application (Broekkamp, van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Supplee, 2023).

Proposed solutions tend to focus on one cause or element of the chain linking science and practice. Thus, as an incentive to focus science on practical problems, the assessment of impact, which is understood as change or benefit to the economy, society, is increasingly used. The criterion of impact is becoming more and more important in evaluations of science, including in the situation of crisis of scientometric criteria (Bornmann, 2013; Penfield et al., 2014). However, this movement is subordinated more to the objectives of justifying science funding and accountability than to the goals of educational and social progress (Hallonsten, 2021). Not practitioners with their vision of the practical impact of research outputs, but managers with performance metrics and ratings act as evaluators in this process.

Another model of problem solving assigns a central role to intermediaries (knowledge brokers) who select, integrate, adapt research results, and ensure the diffusion of knowledge into practice through various channels. They interact both with

scientists, addressing the challenge of “translating” scientific knowledge into practical knowledge, and with practitioners, seeking to ensure that they understand and contextualize scientific data, develop their research capacity, and simultaneously support the value of intuition and practical reflexive knowledge (Malin, Brown, 2019; Rycroft-Smith, 2022).

An area of focus for strengthening the link between science and practice such as the evidence-based approach, which focuses on the systematic application in educational practice of research findings with empirical evidence of the effectiveness of certain methods, technologies obtained using reliable methods (Slavin, 2020; Gorard, 2020; Owen et al., 2022). Specialized resources are created to provide practitioners with information about approaches and programs with proven effectiveness (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>; <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>; <https://ies.ed.gov/>), and school funding is linked to their use (Slavin, 2020). The evidence-based approach in education faces criticism (Hammersley, 2005; Wrigley, 2018). In particular, it is argued that evidence-based education neglects the expertise of teachers, limits the voice of practitioners in educational decision-making (Biesta, 2006).

That said, there is an emerging consensus that the solutions used do not bridge the gap and new ways of thinking about the links between research and practice are needed, seeing the path to bridging the gap as a bidirectional one in which the transformation of both research and educational approaches needs to be understood and addressed so that science and practice develop in tandem (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018).

The search for optimal models of partnerships between researchers and practitioners is being conducted today by advanced communities around the world (Penuel et al., 2021; Hadar, Baharav, 2025).

In the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, the followers of cultural-historical theory and the activity-based approach in education have set precedents for building productive collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

In this article we show that within the framework of cultural-historical psychology not only the most important theoretical ideas were formulated, which demonstrated their practical value and became the basis for building effective practices of developmental education, but also the original idea of practice-oriented science — a new type of relationship between science and practice of education and,

more broadly, social development — was formed and practically tested. We reveal the key characteristics of practice-oriented science and substantiate that this model of science can help to meet the challenges of transformation of education systems in Russia and the world.

Main part

Practice-oriented science based on the cultural-historical approach: genesis and precedents

In its basic theoretical ideas (“zone of proximal development”, “social situation of development”, “learning leads to development”) cultural-historical psychology initially laid down a special relationship between scientific research and educational practice. It clearly required a methodology that not only allowed for a deeper scientific knowledge of the natural processes of development, but also for the purposeful transformation of these processes within the framework of research. The cultural-historical approach in psychological science and education was closely connected with the Marxist pathos of total transformation of man and society, including overcoming the determinism of development by natural factors.

Initially, the followers of the cultural-historical approach and then of the activity approach saw the limitations of traditional laboratory research methods and proposed a new experimental method, later called “genetic-modeling” (Medvedev et al., 2010). Later on, in the works of P.Y. Under the influence of Halperin and his followers on the one hand, and Davydov and his school on the other, this approach developed into the method of formative experiment, focused on the purposeful formation of abilities with given properties (Foundations of General (Genetic) Psychology, 2022).

Many outstanding representatives of cultural-historical and activity approaches actively interacted with pedagogical practice, starting with the study of conditions of effective learning and moving on to the development and experimental testing of programs, methods, technologies and didactic systems of general education: D.B. Elkonin, L.V. Zankov, V.V. Repkin, N.E. Shuleshko, I.S. Yakimanskaya. In 1959, the staff of the Laboratory of Psychology of Primary School Children of the Research Institute of Psychology of Primary School Children of the USSR APN USSR headed by

D.B. Elkonin began a formative experiment in the 1st grade of the 91st school of Moscow. In 1961, the laboratory was headed by V.V. Davydov and experimental training was also deployed in elementary school in the village of Mednoe, Tver region, No. 11 in Tula, No. 17 of Kharkov, No.4 of Dushanbe.

The results of the experimental work attracted the attention of scientists and teachers, but for quite a long period of time the relevant questions were whether the facts on which the developers relied were not laboratory artifacts that could not be reproduced in the conditions of a mass school. It was stated that “a barrier was erected between the new system and the school (not at all for scientific reasons), which was overcome only in the late 1980s”, when teachers in schools in Krasnodar Krai and Kharkov began to teach first-graders using developmental education programs (Repkina, 1997).

V.V. Davydov and his collaborators, having proposed the author's system of developmental education, make the most decisive and consistent steps, going “beyond the walls” of laboratories, creating experimental classes and schools, not only in Moscow, but also in the regions. This has become possible not only due to the energy of scientists, but also due to the interest of practitioners, who become not just recipients of knowledge, but active participants in the process of its creation. The number of teachers, schools, and regions involved in the practice of developmental education began to grow rapidly, and soon classrooms, and even schools, were becoming “crowded” with the new science. A realization was forming that experimental practices could reach only a limited number of children, although their observed effects were an argument for scaling up.

At the same time, the depth of changes in the forms of organization of the educational process and especially in the content (and developmental education raised for the first time the question of content transformation), which began to be proposed by scientists, could not be implemented within the framework of the existing Soviet system of education. The demand for more large-scale changes to realize the concept of developmental education – more precisely, at this stage, the concept itself – focused on the idea that the development of a child's abilities could be achieved through changes in educational processes and, more broadly, in education management processes. These processes involve including the child

through the creation of educational development programs for territories and for the country as a whole. In terms of timing, this coincided with a period of fundamental changes in the country and society, which included reforms in education. Followers of the cultural-historical approach and developmental education become one of the leaders of the reform processes, offering them scientific foundations and support in the form of so-called practice-oriented science. This term began to be used in the 90s of the 20th century to oppose the traditional type of scientificity realized in the studies of the USSR Academy of Education and the Russian Academy of Education, including many followers of the CPS and activity approach, as well as in foreign science of that time.

In practice-oriented science, the scientist initially organizes work on the transformation of existing activities (processes, communities) together with practitioners, works in close contact with those who create new educational practices: methodologists, teachers, managers, parents; the entire environment surrounding the child; the entire socio-cultural sphere. Psycho-pedagogical research and development of this type is oriented not to the discovery of new “pedagogical truths”, but to the improvement of the practical state of affairs. Science generates such knowledge, on the basis of which it is possible to build fundamentally new educational practices. The development and implementation of educational innovations involve teachers, school heads, specialists and heads of educational authorities and local administrations. Various forms of interaction between researchers and practitioners are being worked out: seminars, organizational and action games.

The scale of ambitions of practice-oriented science was most vividly articulated in the program article by Y.V. Gromyko and V.V. Davydov (Gromyko, Davydov 2011). Davydov (Gromyko, Davydov 2011). The article stated that the ideal reality of formation and problem-targeted development of the region should be reflected in the content of education and in the structure of education as a whole; “breakthroughs”, i.e. qualitative advances in science, engineering, technology, etc., should be translated into the content of general education. The concepts of IEP and developmental learning are beginning to be applied not to an individual child, his/her development and learning processes, but to education and even to the country and the world as a whole.

The idea of practice-oriented science has become not only a response to the challenges of education, but also to the challenges to the organization of scientific research, a strategy for the transformation of psycho-pedagogical science itself. The new type of scientificity requires a special methodology. In this capacity, design began to be used in the 90s. The methodology of design in education has a direct connection with cultural-historical psychology and the research models developed in it. In the process of developing this theory and its practical application, the experimental-genetic method of research introduced by L.S. Vygotsky and his collaborators, naturally turned into the method of formative experiment or genetic-modeling method, in which an important role is played by design, — V.V. himself notes. Davydov (Davydov, 1996). In the 90s, this initial version receives an expanded interpretation in the works of V.V. Rubtsov, E.I. Isaev, V.I. Slobodchikov, Y.V. Gromyko. (Rubtsov, Ivoshina, 2002; Slobodchikov, 2003; Isaev, 1997; Gromyko, 1996.)

Another essential feature of practice-oriented science is its polydisciplinarity, which implies special technologies and methods of communication between specialists of different profiles and their participation in the development of educational practice. Practice-oriented science implies correlation and synthesis of many knowledge and values of different status and modality — scientific and life-practical, spiritual and political, ethical and aesthetic. Their synthesis into a scientific and pedagogical program cannot be realized within a separate, mono-subject discipline (Slobodchikov, 2008).

Therefore, practice-oriented science seeks support outside the natural science approach dominating in modern educational sciences. This, according to its leaders, is due to the specificity of the object, which is the sphere of education. This type of object is not exclusively natural, natural, but also has mechanisms of self-consciousness and self-modification, which makes it impossible to apply traditional methods of natural science research to it (Slobodchikov, 2008).

This support is found in the anthropological approach. Anthropological (educational) knowledge should be not so much about what is — as in any science of nature — as about how it should (or — can) be. Its initial basis is not the doctrine of objectivity and generalizability of what is, but the value and meaning of human existence itself. Humanitarian

(human-centered, anthropic) sciences should be built in accordance with axiological (value) bases, which allow building practices of actual cultivation of "humanity proper in man".

Overcoming the gap between science and practice in practice-oriented science is not limited to the field of epistemology and axiology, but involves a change in the position of the scientist, scientific groups, on the one hand, and practitioners, on the other. It becomes constructive, managerial, oriented to the organization of practical processes. We see in it a similarity with the position of scientists in the field of natural sciences, who in the second half of the 20th century launched large-scale projects related to the development of the atom and space (Kurchatov, Korolev). In this position, the scientist expands the range of his roles and competencies. He must master the methodology of design, must be able to formulate the problems of practice and develop strategies for the development of education, to determine the immediate and ultimate goals, to create projects of activities that can ensure the development of education, and to develop ways to implement the projects. In turn, the practitioner — teacher, due to a certain form of reflexion and specially organized polyprofessional interaction is able to occupy the position of researcher, constructor, designer. (Isaev, Slobodchikov, 2012).

In the 2000s, the continuation and a new level of development and concretization of the concept of practice-oriented science was the proposal of the "School of the Future" model based on the provisions of cultural-historical theory and the activity approach. This model was seen as a response to the challenges and risks of modern society, which are provoked by the rapid disintegration of existing social institutions and established communities of people, the intensive process of functioning and formation of new types of communities and types of activities.

This model was not only seen as a way to overcome the limitations of the existing and virtually unchanged school institute built on the ideas of Jan Amos Comenius, but also as an alternative to existing models ("Chinese School of the Future", "European School of the Future", etc.). It considered changes both inside and outside of education, in particular, for the first time in the tradition of the TRC so thoroughly considered the issue of additional education of children and digital technologies in education (Gromyko, Rubtsov, Margolis, 2020).

It should be recognized that in the first decade of the 21st century the concept of practice-oriented science was practically unclaimed in Russia. As noted above, the concept of practice-oriented science of the 1990s was formed and began to be realized in the conditions of education reform in Russia in the late 80s – early 90s, when scientists received a “mandate” to change practice, and practitioners received autonomy in the implementation of initiative and innovation on the ground. The proximity of this situation to the nuclear and space projects noted above is manifested in this aspect as well. Further, in education, the mandate for its transformation has been transferred from academics and practitioners to financiers, who have rebuilt education on market principles to save public expenditure and profit from the private sector, and to industry representatives, who have made these profits by promoting their products, in recent years primarily digital ones. Both the previously convincing ideas of competency-based approaches, social-emotional learning, in conjunction with psychometric monitoring of educational outcomes, and today, the more recent ideas of the neuro-affective turn and precision education governance respond to neoliberal economic values, satisfy the needs of the labor market, and encourage the marketing, privatization, and commodification of education. Their goal is to mobilize (non)cognitive and emotional regulatory strategies, prompting subjects to adapt to the prevailing sociopolitical order.” (Yliniva et al., 2024).

At the same time, the potential of cultural historical theory to organize formative interventions as a powerful way of conducting socially influential theoretical research has been in demand abroad. The theory of expanding learning activities proposed by J. Engeström's theory of expanding learning activities began to be used in a number of countries to transform the practices of education, health care, and social work (Sannino, Engeström, 2018).

The prospects for practice-oriented science based on cultural-historical psychology today are important to consider not in isolation, but in the context of intensifying the construction and testing of models of partnership between researchers and practitioners (educators, local community) in the 21st century.

Attention to the “voices” of practitioners and their inclusion in the research process is discussed as an important condition for improving the impact of research and developing evidence-based practice

(Hemsley-Brown, Sharp, 2003). In turn, researchers' partnership with practitioners creates a sense of social responsibility and an understanding of the real contribution of research to social life (Ansley, Gaventa, 1997).

Engaging practitioners by building partnerships with researchers is being defined as a new research paradigm and is being implemented under different names: participatory research, collaborative research, participatory inquiry (Galletta & Torre, 2019; Penuel et al., 2021).

In the US, for example, the best known approach is the research-practice partnerships approach, a long-term collaboration between practitioners and researchers to explore practice problems and develop solutions for school improvement (Donovan, 2013; Coburn et al., 2021). It builds trust, creates a sense of social responsibility, ensures greater use of research in decision-making, and improves educational outcomes (Sjölund et al., 2023; Kamga et al., 2023).

At this stage, it is not only supported on a large scale by government and private philanthropic organizations, but has itself become the subject of research on how and under what conditions partnerships improve education, how to ensure the appropriate quality of partnerships (Welsh, 2021; Cooper et al., 2020).

The organization of such partnerships is based on a negotiation process, developed rules and procedures (Coburn et al., 2021). An important characteristic is the long-term nature of partnerships: they are not limited to the local research issue and publication of individual research results, but consistently develop the research field and initiate new projects. Models of partnerships between researchers and practitioners, partnership schools are being implemented in other countries, taking into account their specific contexts (Hadar, Baharav, 2025; MacMahon, et al., 2022).

The paradigm of researcher-practitioner partnerships encompasses not only educators but also community members — “community-academic partnerships”. In different variants of implementation, school and community partners are involved in designing research programs, collecting data, interpreting results, preparing data-based solutions, and analyzing their translation into practice. Research is organized in such a way as to draw on a variety of knowledge (teachers and administrators about the school, parents and community members about ways of life, values, cultural and historical ex-

periences). This helps to increase the ecological validity of research methods, the validity of research-based practices, and the benefits of the innovations that are implemented (Bowers, 2017; London, Claassen, 2023).

This approach is particularly relevant for transforming societies, in particular the BRICS countries. In South Africa, for example, universities are striving to become active community partners, rethinking approaches to building university engagement with external social partners, and actively engaging the local community in research to provide a deeper understanding of the context for research and implementation (Ebers hn, 2015).

Conclusion

The crisis of the dominant model of mass education has as one of its causes the ineffective interaction between science and practice. Strengthening productive links between science and practice can become one of the leading conditions for restructuring education to maximize the development of each person's abilities and ensure social justice and well-being in society.

In the 20th century in Russia on the basis of cultural-historical theory the idea of practice-oriented science of education was formed. The precedents of its realization demonstrated the potential of this type of science in solving the problems of children's education, development of child-adult communities and territorial educational systems. At the same time, both internal and external circumstances did not allow to continue the realization of this concept on an adequate scale.

Global changes in the political and socio-cultural situation actualize the demand for practice-oriented science, giving (in Russia — returning) to it the “mandate” to transform education both in our country and in other countries.

In justifying these prospects, it is important to frankly note not only the opportunities, but also the debatable aspects and limitations.

As applied to the situation in Russia, it is necessary to expand the scope of tasks solved by the practice-oriented science of education, linking the traditional problematics of the development of ways of thinking, the formation of types of activities and types of communities with the issues of justice and inclusion, which previously in the Soviet/Russian tradition of cultural-historical psychology

were not given sufficient attention (Kosaretsky, 2023), the issues of upbringing and personal development, as well as covering the areas that are intensively developing in the 21st century: new formats and technologies of education.

Cultural-historical theory in psychology in the period of its birth (post-revolutionary construction of a new society) carried the features of anthropological and social utopianism characteristic of many new directions of science and art of that time, the pathos of total transformation of man and society (including overcoming the determinism of development by natural factors). These characteristics in their specific version became typical for the design methodology of the last third of the 20th century.

In the current situation, they and the accompanying energy of agency are undoubtedly valuable for overcoming determinism of another type — globalist marketing-technocratic determinism.

At the same time, the role of natural sciences in understanding the processes of development and learning has changed markedly over the years: the achievements of genetics and neuroscience cannot be ignored, but should be included in a dialogue with them, actualizing the above-mentioned polydisciplinarity as a characteristic of practice-oriented science and taking into account the fundamental complication of epistemological discussions since the end of the 20th century.

On the other hand, the historical experience of the 20th century in various spheres, which clearly demonstrated the risks of social experimentation and design without regard for natural processes and subjective experience, obviously influenced the transformation of social and human sciences. In this respect, the considered anthropological approach in education emerges, on the one hand, in line with the general scientific paradigm shift, on the other hand, in response to the trends of humanization and personal orientation of education in the educational policy of the late 80s of the 20th century.

In Russia, it is formalized within cultural-historical psychology and the theory of developmental learning in dialogue with the school of S.L. Rubinstein — A.V. Brushlinsky regarding the category of subjectivity, the concepts of person-centered education (I.S. Yakimanskaya), pedagogical support (O.S. Gazman), and the ideas of Christian philosophy. Today it is the best defense against any form of determinism (biological, social, economic). In the case of practice-oriented science in education, it raises the question of participation in research and

design not only of practitioners (managers, teachers, local community), but also of learners (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2023).

One cannot step into the same river twice. The political situation in the country is markedly different from the considered period of the 1980s–90s of the 20th century, when the leaders of practice-oriented science, as noted above, received for a while a “mandate” to implement a number of multiscale projects. The nature of the “mandate” to scientists to transform education, and its very possibility in the current structure of distribution of power and authority, is a complex topic for discussion. In turn, the situation of potential partners of science — practitioners, leaders of the managerial and pedagogical community — is different. The boundaries of their autonomy are noticeably reduced, and grassroots initiatives and innovations are not encouraged.

In justifying the advantages and potential of practice-oriented science, it is important not to deny, but on the contrary, to support the need to develop other approaches that strengthen the link between science and practice, including those we have discussed above. In particular, for Russia and post-Soviet countries, it is crucial to promote an evidence-based approach, including increasing the number of experimental studies

and developing open data resources on the effectiveness of practices and programs. (Kersha et al., 2025; Evidence-Based Approach: A Guide to Verification of Programs, Technologies, and Practices in Education and Social Sphere: A Training Manual, 2024).

In turn, outside the country, practice-oriented science based on the cultural-historical approach has, in our opinion, a number of competitive advantages in relation to other models of interaction between science and educational practice and may be in demand, primarily in countries striving for epistemic decolonialization (Asea, 2022).

At the same time, as we have seen, in contrast to the second half of the 20th century, the world has already accumulated interesting experience of approbation of approaches to the interaction between researchers and practitioners in different sociocultural contexts, which is important to study and relate to the domestic methodology.

Hence, it is not only possible, but probably more important to consider these prospects of practice-oriented science based on cultural-historical psychology not only on the basis of Russian precedents, practices and project proposals, but also involving partners from friendly countries, forming international teams of researchers and practitioners.

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