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# Cultural-historical reflection on learning, place, and legacy of Vygotsky

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## Abstract

**Context and relevance.** This reflective paper explores the significance of personal academic experience in advancing understanding of Cultural-Historical Theory (CHT) and Activity Theory (AT). **Objective.** Drawing on Rolfe's (2001) reflective framework of What? So What? Now What? the paper situates the ten authors' participation in the Summer University and a visit to Lev Vygotsky's grave as moments of both intellectual and affective engagement with the cultural-historical tradition. **Hypothesis.** Engaging in structured reflection through Rolfe's (2001) framework enables participants to connect their personal experiences with broader cultural-historical concepts, thereby deepening their understanding of Vygotsky's legacy and identifying pathways for future research and practice. **Methods and materials.** The section What? provides a descriptive account of lectures, discussions, and embodied encounters with the historical legacy of Vygotsky. The section So What? analyses the meaning of these experiences for deepening conceptual awareness of key CHT/AT principles, including the concepts of zone of proximal development, contradiction, perezhivanie, and mediation, while highlighting the inseparability of theory, history, and lived experience. The section Now What? considers implications for future research and teaching, particularly the methodological potential of reflective practice in the study of contradictions within activity systems. **Results.** The results demonstrated that participants' reflections clustered into four themes learning CHT and AT concepts, visiting and participating in events, reflecting on the Summer University experience, and envisioning future research and applications. **Conclusions.** The paper concludes by proposing reflection as a valuable scholarly practice for linking history, and theory, thereby enriching cultural-historical psychology, as well as educational research based on it, and sustaining Vygotsky's intellectual legacy in contemporary contexts. Our findings suggest that future Summer Universities may benefit from adopting a reflective approach to support both the structuring of the educational process and the development of its reflective dimension.

**Keywords:** Reflection, Vygotsky, Summer University, Cultural Historical Theory and Activity Theory

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## Культурно-историческая рефлексия об обучении и наследии Л.С. Выготского, а также его месте в науке

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### Резюме

**Контекст и актуальность.** В данной рефлексивно-аналитической статье рассматривается значимость личного академического опыта в углублении понимания культурно-исторической теории (КИТ) и теории деятельности (ТД). **Цель.** Опираясь на рефлексивную модель Ролфа (Rolfe, 2001) «Что? И что? Что дальше?», в статье анализируется участие десяти авторов в Летнем университете и посещение места упокоения Л.С. Выготского в качестве примеров интеллектуального и эмоционального погружения в культурно-историческую традицию. **Гипотеза.** Вовлечение в структурированную рефлексивную модель Ролфа (2001) позволяет участникам связать собственный опыт с более широкими культурно-историческими понятиями, тем самым углубляя понимание наследия Л.С. Выготского и обозначая направления для будущих исследований и практики. **Методы и материалы.** Раздел «Что?» представляет собой описательный обзор лекций, дискуссий и воплощенных столкновений с историческим наследием Выготского. В разделе «И что?» анализируется значение этого опыта для углубления концептуального понимания ключевых положений КИТ/ТД, включая понятия зоны ближайшего развития, противоречия, переживания и опосредствования, с акцентом на неразрывную связь теории, истории и живого опыта. В разделе «Что дальше?» рассматриваются выводы для будущих исследований и преподавания, в особенности методологический потенциал рефлексивной практики в изучении противоречий внутри систем деятельности. **Результаты.** Результаты показали, что рефлексия участников сгруппировалась в четыре тематических направления: освоение понятий КИТ и ТД, участие в мероприятиях, рефлексия опыта Летнего университета и видение будущих исследований и сфер применения наследия Л.С. Выготского. **Выводы.** В заключении коллектив авторов рассматривает рефлексивную практику как важную научную практику, связывающую историю и теорию, что способствует обогащению культурно-исторической психологии и основанных на ней образовательных исследований, а также поддержанию интеллектуального наследия Л.С. Выготского в современных контекстах. Наши результаты свидетельствуют о том, что будущие Летние университеты могут получить пользу от внедрения рефлексивного подхода, направленного на поддержку как структурирования образовательного процесса, так и развития его рефлексивного измерения.

**Ключевые слова:** рефлексия, Л.С. Выготский, Летний университет, культурно-историческая теория, теория деятельности

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## Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of L.S. Vygotsky to psychology in general, and in particular to psychology in Russia. His works and research became a point of departure for numerous unique Russian approaches and theories: A.N. Leontiev's general psychological theory of activity, A.R. Luria's neuropsychology, the defectology school, P.Ya. Galperin's theory of the step-by-step formation of mental actions, D.B. Elkonin and V.V. Davydov's system of developmental education, and many others. The culture and traditions established by Vygotsky, his students, and colleagues are still alive in many psychology faculties of Russian universities, in scientific institutes, centres, and laboratories, and researchers continue to return to his works again and again. Why, then, is Vygotsky's legacy still relevant today? Two main reasons can be identified.

First, despite such obvious and widespread influence, many of the approaches proposed by Vygotsky can be described as an “unfinished project” (Falikman, 2017), since he simply did not have time to fully elaborate a number of fundamental concepts. This applies to the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (Zaretsky, 2007), *perezhivanie* (Vasilyuk, 1984), a holistic theory of child development (Blunden, 2008), the problems of will, personality and consciousness (Zaver-shneva, van der Veer, 2018), and several other notions. Such incompleteness, on the one hand, generates difficulties due to the absence of a fully integrated system, but on the other hand it explains the constant return to the texts even nearly 100 years after the author's death. In other words, rereading Vygotsky performs, in I. Lakatos's terms, the function of a positive heuristic, allowing modification of a scientific research programme (Lakatos, 1995). Attempts at theoretical and methodological reconstruction of Vygotsky's theory often lead to the creation of new and unique psychological approaches (for example, V.V. Rubtsov's sociogenetic approach (2024), V.K. Zaretsky's reflexive-activity approach to overcoming learning difficulties (Zaretsky, 2013), A.G. Asmolov's historical-evolutionary approach (Asmolov, 1986), and others). However, such “Vygotskian heuristics” are characteristic not only of psychology, but also of neighbouring disciplines. They manifest vividly, for instance, in the rapidly developing fields of cognitive sciences (Falikman, 2017; Vasileva, Balyasnikova,

2019; Asmolov et al., 2023) and neurocognitive sciences (Chen et al., 2009; Brockington et al., 2022), as well as in research on digitalisation and human-computer interaction (HCI) (Kaptelinin, Nardi, 2012; Falikman, 2021), which find in Vygotsky's work new lines of theoretical and empirical development.

Second, there is the continuing interest in Vygotsky's personality. In his very short life, he managed to create something that touches minds and hearts not only in his homeland but across the world. Inevitably, the question arises: what kind of person was he? Although we know much about his work, and a fair amount about his life, archival research still uncovers new dimensions of Vygotsky's personal history, giving us a clearer picture of who he was, what fascinated him, whom he loved, and for whom he cared. Several small but important archival discoveries have been made in the past five years. For example, it has become better known that the young Vygotsky, living at the crossroads of two revolutions, was deeply concerned with the theme of justifying the world as a resolution of a personal existential crisis (Sobkin, 2022), and, following Nietzsche, he viewed art as the instrument of such justification (Sobkin, Emelin, 2022). In addition, thanks to recently published letters, we can see Vygotsky both through the prism of a young man's romantic and existential experiences (Savchenko, Siyan, 2024), and through that of a great scholar, who in a difficult period of his life sought to save his brother from repression (Sobkin, Emelin, 2023). Here Vygotsky's biography becomes not merely the subject of detached study, but a source for shaping the image of the scholar as a human being, with his own emotions, fears, feelings, and aspirations – and it is vitally important to continue and support this line of inquiry.

These two fundamental reasons – Vygotsky's works and those of his followers as a source of ongoing scientific reflection, and the enduring interest in the scholar's personality – brought together participants from different countries in this study, who met within the framework of the ISCAR Summer University 2025 in Moscow. The ISCAR Summer University is a unique international forum for discussing current issues and practices related to the development and dissemination of the cultural-historical approach. Traditionally, its participants include young doctoral students from various countries whose research is grounded in the principles of Cultural-Historical Psychology (CHP) and Activity Theory (AT). During IS-

CAR, participants present their studies and projects, engaging in dialogue by posing questions to one another, offering solutions and alternative perspectives on research designs, and exchanging views and ideas. Moreover, established scholars and practitioners who actively advance the cultural-historical approach conduct workshops and seminars with participants, enabling them to learn about contemporary developments in CHP and AT, explore ongoing elaborations of Vygotsky's and Leontiev's concepts, and experience both classical and contemporary practices through master-class formats.

We believe that the text of this article may be regarded as the result of collaborative work within our own zones of proximal development. And this once again proves: the legacy of Vygotsky lives on and will continue to live.

## Materials and methods

The key concept for this article is “reflection”. This concept has a long history. The term itself was introduced by the philosopher J. Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1847). He proposed dividing human experience into external experience, the source of which is external objects, and internal experience, the source of which is the activity of the mind. In this way, a distinction emerged between sensation and reflection. Subsequently, the concept was actively developed within philosophy. In a specifically psychological sense, the concept of reflection was further elaborated in the works of J. Dewey. He introduced the notion of “reflective thinking” as a particular type of thinking that differs from the stream of associations and other forms of unstructured conscious experience (such as day-dreaming, fantasising, and so on). Reflective thinking is characterised by sequence, logical coherence, and directionality (Dewey, 1933). Reflection itself, according to Dewey, is oriented towards resolving a problematic situation and is “triggered” when one encounters doubt or uncertainty, situations in which it becomes necessary to change the course of one's thinking and transform established ways of acting.

Dewey's ideas on reflective thinking were later transferred into the context of professional practice by the researcher D. Schön. His well-known statement is that “competent practitioners usually know more than they can say... most of which is tacit” (Schön, 2017, p. viii). He demonstrates that experienced professionals possess tacit knowing-in-action, that is, a form of knowledge that is enacted directly in practice, relies on implicit understanding, and becomes accessible only through reflection. Schön distinguishes between two forms of reflection: reflection-in-action, which takes place directly in the course of action, when the practitioner experiments with the situation and adjusts actions on the spot as necessary; and reflection-on-action, which occurs after the action and is directed towards analysing one's experience, formulating conclusions, and transferring them into future actions (Schön, 2017). What the reflective

practitioner primarily works with is the construction of the problem itself, because in situations of high uncertainty he or she determines what should be considered a problem and, on the basis of this understanding, subsequently structures their activity.

Dewey and Schön thus provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding reflection. It is also important to highlight the work of T. Borton. As a school teacher, he approached the issue of reflection from a purely practical perspective, conceptualising reflection as a key process in education, as it enables learners' experiences to be made sense of. In Borton's conception, reflection is a pedagogical procedure. For its implementation, he proposes a very simple scheme consisting of three sequential, cyclical questions: *What? So what? Now what?* These three questions reflect the progression from a factual description of an event or experience, to its interpretation, and then to the subsequent planning of changes in ways of acting and in action itself (Borton, 1970). His approach was later developed by G. Rolfe, whose methodology is employed in the present study. Rolfe extrapolates Borton's approach to practice more broadly (not only educational practice) and situates reflection within the domain of critical reflection: not merely making sense of experience, but evaluating the grounds for action, its consequences, and its context (including macro-social, ethical, and other dimensions), and only then arriving at a justified decision (Rolfe et al., 2001).

This study employed the reflective framework of Rolfe et al. (2001) to guide both the design and analysis of the reflections from the participants of the Summer University at Moscow State Psychological and Pedagogical University (MSUPE). The research was conducted within a qualitative paradigm, as it sought to capture participants' subjective experiences, personal meaning-making, and insights into their academic and professional development during the Summer University at MSUPE.

A total of eleven participants from the Summer University voluntarily agreed to take part in this study. The reflective prompts were formulated using the Rolfe's reflective framework. Participants were instructed to respond to three guiding questions: “What?” (description of the event or learning moment), “So what?” (interpretation and significance), and “Now what?” (implications for future action). These questions provided structure and consistency in the reflective responses. Each participant was invited to write a personal reflection by responding to three guiding questions from Rolfe's reflective model (“What?”, “So What?”, and “Now What?”). The participants represented diverse international context (see Table 1).

This diversity allowed for cross-cultural perspectives to emerge in the reflective narratives from different contexts which represent one connecting factor between participants work of L.S. Vygotsky contribution.

In Russia, the Cultural-Historical Theory (CHA) and Activity Theory (AT) are actively applied in the following domains: education, especially preschool and primary school education (for example, the Elkonin –

Table 1

**The participants for this study**

Participant ID	Professional position	Country of Origin
Participant 1	PhD Candidate	Russian Federation
Participant 2	Lecturer	South Africa
Participant 3	PhD Candidate	Brazil
Participant 4	Postdoc	Brazil
Participant 5	Professor	India
Participant 6	PhD Candidate	Brazil
Participant 7	Professor	Brazil
Participant 8	PhD Candidate	Russian Federation
Participant 9	PhD Candidate	Brazil
Participant 10	PhD Candidate	Russian Federation
Participant 11	PhD Candidate	Brazil
Total		3 from Russian Federation 1 from South Africa 6 from Brazil 1 from India

Davydov system); developmental psychology and special (corrective) education, particularly in work with children with special educational needs and in corrective-developmental interventions; and clinical and rehabilitation psychology, including neuropsychological rehabilitation and psycho-correction.

In Brazil, India, and South Africa the Cultural-Historical Theory and Activity Theory developed against the background of postcolonial discourse. And first of all, having appeared in the educational context, they also received development in socio-psychological, anthropological, sociological research, educational policy to address issues of equality, inclusion, and social change.

Additionally in Brazil and South Africa the Cultural-Historical Theory and Activity Theory are applied mainly in the fields of education and psychology, particularly in schools, universities, and teacher education programs. These approaches are most frequently, but not exclusively, used by teachers, teacher educators, and educational psychologists. They are also present, to a lesser extent, in areas such as health, social services, and organizational studies, often within public institutions. Rather than being adopted as formal institutional frameworks, they are typically applied through research groups, university-based projects, and collaborative initiatives, rather than by organizations that explicitly identify themselves as operating under these approaches. In the clinical field, particularly within psychology, there has been growing application of the cultural-historical framework in psychotherapy, offering an alternative to strictly individualizing or biomedical models.

The two leading authors facilitated the data collection and analysis process. Participants were provided access to a shared Google Drive document and were asked to complete their written reflections over a period of two weeks. The reflections were collected in Microsoft Word format, ensuring that participants could freely express their ideas in a flexible and accessible medium.

Once all reflections were submitted, the authors conducted a thematic analysis of the responses. Each

reflection, structured around Rolfe’s three guiding questions, was read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content. Codes were then generated, clustered into themes, and interpreted in relation to the reflective framework and the aims of the study. This analytical process allowed the researchers to identify recurring patterns, unique insights, and points of divergence across the participants’ accounts.

The data were organised and coded using ATLAS.ti 25. This ensured that data was treated systematically, following a consistent coding process, and allowed for a large amount of qualitative data to be produced, handled and analysed. In this study, we worked with 11 documents (reflections) in ATLAS.ti 25, highlighting 134 quotations, which yielded 60 codes. The number of codes is because, at the beginning, authors were coding at a descriptive level. Then, after more detailed analysis and merging the codes, the number of codes was reduced to 48 (categories and sub-codes), which showed the conceptual level of analysis. All these codes were grouped into four families.

**Results**

The results of the qualitative data analysis are presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of codes across four overarching themes, showing how participants contributed to each category. In particular, it highlights the extent to which each participant’s responses aligned with the themes of future research, conceptual understanding of Cultural-Historical Theory (CHT) and Activity Theory (AT), experiences of the Summer University, and involvement in events.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the qualitative data analysis revealed four themes, each corresponding to Rolfe’s (2001) model of reflection. At the descriptive level (What?), participants emphasised learned CHT and AT concepts as well as visited and participated in

	2: Participant 1 29	3: Participant 2 8	4: Participant 3 8	5: Participant 4 12	6: Participant 5 9	7: Participant 6 21	8: Participant 7 7	9: Participant 8 7	10: Participant 9 5	11: Participant 10 6	12: Participant 11 10	Totals
Future research( Now What?) 19	7	1	1	3			3	1	2		1	19
Learned CHT and AT concepts (What?) 29	9	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	29
Summer University (So What?) 43	4	4		5	2	10	3	2	1	5	7	43
Visitend and participated events (What?) 43	10		4	3	5	9	4	3	2		3	43
<b>Totals</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>134</b>

**Fig 1.** Code document analysis from ATLAS.ti 25: distribution of participants’ responses across four themes, including the number of codes and supporting quotations for each theme

events, where they described their conceptual insights and experiential engagement. At the reflective level (So what?), the theme of Summer University captured participants’ evaluation of the significance of their learning and participation. Finally, at the action-oriented level (Now what?), the theme of Future research and “message taking home” highlighted participants’ intentions to extend their insights into future scholarly and practical directions.

Looking more closely at the distribution of responses, Figure 1 shows that the most frequently coded themes were Summer University and Visited and participated events (each with 43 quotations), indicating that participants placed strong emphasis on both the reflective meaning of their experience and their active involvement in events. In contrast, the themes Learned CHT and AT concepts (29 quotations) and Future research and “message taking home” (19 quotations) were less prevalent, though still significant. This suggests that while participants valued conceptual learning and forward-looking actions, their reflections were especially shaped by the immediate experiences and collective engagements of the Summer University.

The final themes presented in the Discussion were derived by moving from initial open coding to focused thematic clustering. During analysis, descriptive codes were grouped through constant comparison until three coherent clusters consistently emerged across the data. These clusters reflect recurring empirical patterns relating to developmental mediation, socio-historical place, and Vygotsky’s legacy. They were selected because they provide the most analytically grounded synthesis of the qualitative results and align directly with the cultural-historical framework of the study.

## Discussion

The presentation of results and discussion will be structured according to the study’s methodological framework into three parts: “What?”, “So What?”, and “Now What?”. The “What?” section will encompass the key concepts addressed during the lectures and sessions of the summer school, as well as the events and sites visited by the participants.

### What? ZPD and mediation

According to L.S. Vygotsky, the adult functions as an agent of the social environment and, consequently, as the bearer of the “ideal form” that the child must internalize (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 265). Importantly, what is internal-

ized includes not only knowledge itself but also the relational forms and content through which this knowledge is successfully constructed.

*I had the opportunity to directly ask a professor [from MSUPE] what, in fact, constitutes the essential activity of the teacher, considering the problematic context surrounding the interpretation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in Brazil. I was both surprised and relieved by the explanation I received: in Brazil, the idea has become consolidated that the term “student” should replace “pupil,” under the justification that the former emphasizes the learner as the protagonist of their learning process. However, this conception can lead to distortions, as it attributes to the teacher merely the role of facilitator, thereby denying their fundamental function of teaching. The key question, then, arises: if the teacher does not teach, what is their actual professional activity? (Participant 3)*

Even when the teacher, acting as a facilitator, refrains from providing the correct answer and instead structures conditions for cognitive development, such as through guiding questions, it is assumed that these conditions are designed to lead the learner toward an appropriate method for solving the task (Zaretsky, 2007).

This perspective reveals a horizon of tensions that emerge in educational settings marked by cultural differences between teacher and student. For instance, in his presentation, Prof. Azwihangwisi Edward Muthivhi addressed the urgent need to decolonize education in postcolonial contexts. The South African case illustrates a situation in which the teacher, and the methodological system they represent (including knowledge and ways of knowing), embodies an “ideal form” that does not align with students’ cultural realities (Muthivhi, 2021).

Furthermore, Participant 6 highlights the relationship between the articulation of CHT, decoloniality, the pedagogical perspective of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and inclusive education presented by lecturers from the African continent. Freire’s (1970) pedagogical perspective is consistent with the CHT’s perspective on human development, as both argue that it is necessary to recognize the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive differences of human beings as part of the substrate of their development – and not as deficits to be corrected. Emancipatory education is a process of meaning-making and collective agency between educator and student (Freire, 1970), in which the student’s active energy is stimulated to seek and acquire knowledge independently, with the mediation of the teacher (Vygostky, 1992).

In an inclusive and decolonial pedagogy, learning occurs mediated through dialogues that stem from students’

lived experiences, promote the appreciation of what they have to say, and celebrate the plurality of historically marginalized languages and cultures (Muthivhi, 2021; Hardman, 2021). To this end, this educational perspective of emancipation and social transformation focuses on praxis, which is a conscious engagement with the contradictions that emerge in a sociopolitical reality permeated by inequalities, which are products of power relations, to critically promote the understanding and transformation of this reality. Thus, it is an epistemology of collective well-being and the ethics of care, which seeks to promote critical reflection on dominant colonial Western epistemologies, the protagonism of marginalized people – including so-called persons with disabilities – and the reduction of social inequality (Hardman, 2021).

Crucially, the teacher must remain open to the possibility that these actions, methods, and concepts may differ from those familiar in their own cultural context. The teacher's primary mediating role is to identify and validate those culturally grounded actions and concepts that, when integrated into the educational process, can acquire a distinct psychological function in problem-solving activity.

*One of the questions that emerged for me [which] I have been investigating since my undergraduate studies: the educational context and, in particular, educational practice. Throughout my undergraduate, specialization, master's, and doctoral studies, I observed that the teacher's activity of teaching is often conceptualized through the notion of the "mediator teacher." This understanding, however, has always caused me some discomfort, especially due to the successive translations of the original works – from Russian to English, and subsequently into Portuguese – which result in significant conceptual losses (Participant 5)*

The learner's difficulty may not lie primarily in mastering a specific subject but may instead represent a broader challenge to their sense of self (Zaretsky, 2024). In such cases, the teacher addresses the student as "the subject of their own learning activity and their own development" (Zaretsky, 2007, p. 101). Therefore, the teacher must attend to how the student interprets the task and, more broadly, how the student situates themselves in relation to it. When the teacher recognizes the student as "the subject enacting their own intention," the ZPD can accommodate "the most diverse developmental vectors determined by the child's intentions" (Zaretsky, 2007, p. 100).

Notably, the teaching of the ZPD concept itself during the Summer School exemplified the very principles it describes. The session on this topic was conducted as a genuine workshop, not a lecture merely labeled as such, and instructors facilitated participants' reflective processes through carefully designed prompts:

*Their workshop [Professors Viktor and Alla] was truly a workshop, not a lecture labelled a workshop, as the professors interacted with us and gave us tasks to complete, even though the time allotted to them was regrettably short.*

*... They made me reflect on something I need to change in my agency, in the teaching-learning activities within I'm the main responsible for mediations, as well as in my own learning and development processes (Participant 6)*

### **Drama**

This section discusses the concept of drama as a broader challenge to students' sense of self (Rubtsova, Daniels, 2016; Zaretsky, 2024). In such situations, the teacher positions the student as "the subject of their own learning activity and their own development" (Zaretsky, 2024).

Both child and adult are embedded in complex networks of social relationships, but not all of these relationships drive development. What qualities must social interactions possess to serve as conditions for personality development? Social interactions – whether interpersonal or embedded within object-oriented activities like learning or work – can catalyze development only when they involve a "dramatic collision" (Veresov, 2007, p. 58), infusing social relations with emotional content that embodies the principle of the unity of "affect" and "intellect," which sustains the integrity of dynamic meaning systems. For this reason, academic content must hold personal meaning for the learner, enabling not only intellectual but also emotional engagement, thereby activating the development of those meaning systems. Only then can genuine understanding emerge in education, as an alternative to mechanical repetition and rote memorization. The very challenge of solving a task can provoke a strong emotional response, drawing the learner into authentic experience. Thus, the task ceases to be merely cognitive and becomes a catalyst for personality development.

The theme of drama underscores the generative potential of contradictions within teacher-student interactions. This highlights the particular relevance of a cultural-historical lens in educational contexts marked by differences, whether cultural, physical or psychological between participants. Crucially, these differences are not merely present; they are actively experienced by all involved.

*...[the presenter] presentation provided great clarity on how the concepts of perezhivanie and drama allow us to understand both salient experiences and those that may seem minor but nonetheless leave profound marks on the formation of subjectivity. This perspective directly informs my future doctoral research, in which I aim to explore how children in institutional care process everyday experiences that influence the development of their identities (Participant 11)*

Another important concept that emerged from the data was that of contradiction, which was identified as a *new* and significant idea for participants 1 and 6. As participant 6 reflected: "At the Summer School, it became clearer to me that contradictions are an essential driving force in human development not only in children, but in people throughout life. Identifying contradictions can also be considered a universal methodological principle." Similarly, participant 1 highlighted how the event prompted deeper reflection: "... an event [Summer University] focused on CHT, made me deeply reflect on the contradiction of the disproportion."

Participant 1 further elaborated on the methodological potential of this concept, noting that "contradictions can serve as a heuristic method for data analysis in

research.” In later discussion, the same participant observed: “I also found it interesting to observe different manifestations of contradictions.” They connected this insight to a broader theoretical tradition, suggesting that the idea of contradiction can be further developed by drawing on the historical-evolutionary approach proposed by A. G. Asmolov (1986).

### **The Russian Federation Autism Centre**

*During the event, we visited the Russian Federation Autism Center, where a presentation was delivered by its director and by Brazilian Assistant Professor Daniel Novaes Gomes Pereira. The occasion provided important reflections on human development and Lev Vygotsky’s defectological studies. The center’s director presented his research, and Professor Daniel discussed his study with a child with autism in the early years of elementary school. His reflections on the theory highlighted prospective work on the singularization of the human psyche through the child’s learning activity and the teacher’s teaching activity (Participant 3).*

The great contribution of the Vygotsky’s perspective is to highlight the role of social and cultural factors in development, even in the face of biological insufficiency. Development is seen as a dynamic process, and not as a static limitation, that is, “in the case of people like this, development ‘is not a passive evolution of the particularities originated from the beginning, but is a development in the proper sense of the word, that is, it includes in itself a series of new formations’” (Novaes, 2024, p. 6).

About this fragment of the report, Novaes (2024) argues that, in contemporary times, the area of autism often clings to a pathologizing view based on behavioral deficits, which may even be linked to market interests, such as medicalization and the creation of educational apparatuses focused only on disability. In opposition to this view, the research adopts the historical-cultural approach, prioritizing the expression “person with autism” and not the clinical term “autism spectrum disorder” (Novaes, 2024, p. 3). This choice aims to emphasize that autism “composes the subject but does not define it completely”. Thus, the diagnosis should serve as a clue for pedagogical planning in the school, and not as an end in itself. It is important to highlight that this way of looking at the child with autism in the educational context was perceived in the autism center from the way teaching is organized: for the future, for the child, and not for the diagnosis.

*For instance, there is a studio for producing stop-motion films. In this studio, children develop scripts, create characters, handle recording, and work with sound design. What stood out was the intentionality and planning behind the activities, since the center serves children who, as teenagers, attend school and later return to the center to work – such as the cameraman (photographer) currently employed there (Participant 3)*

In this sense, we understand that the role of the school and its organization can affect the development process, creating the necessary conditions for the subject to develop through prospective work focused on their singularities (Pereira, 2022). Constitutive singularities develop in a process of signification, which is dramatic and happens in school. For this reason, so-called egocen-

tric speech – the child’s “talking to oneself” – has an organizing function in human activity. It acts as an “indirect path to the solution of a problem” and, therefore, has a social character and is a precursor of the adult’s internal thinking. In short, Novaes’ work uses historical-cultural theory to open “paths that open up... to the new investigations that tension the limiters present in the very terminology of ‘autism’” (Novaes, 2024, p. 3), reaffirming that the singularity of the subject is constituted in the relationship with the other and in social practices.

In Fundamentals of Defectology, Vygotsky (1995a) considers that, in his time, the task of teaching children with disabilities suffered a crisis, as it occurred in other parts of the world.

On the one hand, there is a lack of diagnoses that help in the understanding of neuroatypical factors and the paths necessary for the educational process; on the other hand, specifically in the Brazilian context, there is an excessive number of diagnoses in certain sampling sections. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), there are 2.4 million people diagnosed with autism. How, then, to look at this situation from the experience at the autism center? The Vygotsky’s framework contributes to reflect on the problem presented through the notion of drama of human development, which is singular in social relations.

*A tour in the place was also provided, which enlightened the understanding of how the institution operates and how Autism spectrum disorders are addressed in Russia. Another important moment in this visit was the presentation of Professor Daniel Novaes Gomes Pereira, from Brazil, whose research focused on a case involving an autistic child. Having his session carried out at the Center was meaningful, suggesting the intentional and careful planning behind the program organization (Participant 7).*

### **“So what?”**

The Summer University program did not originally include a visit to the grave of Lev S. Vygotsky, along with those of his wife and two daughters. However, at the request of Participant 6, the organisers added this visit, which all participants later described as the most meaningful and memorable event of the programme.

Participant 1 reflected on the experience in the following way:

*...visiting the grave of L.S. Vygotsky was deeply significant. It was a powerful moment of unity through shared reverence and respect. I hesitate to say ‘respect for his memory,’ because within the cultural-historical framework, Vygotsky and his ideas are very much alive. In that moment, this sense of continuity felt especially vivid – his legacy lives on in such diverse people, from different countries and cities. It was an extraordinary moment of beauty.*

This moment may reveal another dimension of memory as a higher mental function: memory not merely as recollection, but as the co-creation of a shared meaning field – one in which the meanings embedded in Vygotsky’s ideas continue to evolve. In that instant, each participant sensed that Vygotsky remains alive, precisely because his legacy is continually reinterpreted, re-embodied, and carried forward.

The participant 1 added further:

*The moment of speech at the grave was truly a moment of unity – not only of people from different countries where the cultural-historical theory continues to develop, gathered in one place, but also of past and future. Lev Semyonovich bequeathed to us the cultural-historical approach, and at that moment, we stood before him – those who, a century later, continue his work and inherit the promised land he opened up. Could Lev Semyonovich have known that he would unite so many remarkable individuals from diverse places and cultures, not only in physical space but in shared meaning? Indeed, Vygotsky may rightly be called a prophet who identified the central questions of psychology decades ahead of his time.*

For Participant 5, the visit felt like a pilgrimage:

*Going to Lev Vygotsky's grave was a really poignant and humbling event. It felt like a pilgrimage to stand at the grave of a thinker whose ideas have changed the way we think about learning, culture, and human development. It was calm and thoughtful, but it was also full of historical and philosophical meaning. I felt a strong connection to Vygotsky's work and to a global community of thinkers who are still working to understand his ideas. This was because I was surrounded by other scholars and students who also respected his legacy. We put flowers down in respect, and a lot of us either shared our thoughts or stayed quiet to think. It was a moment of anchoring for me – a reminder that theory is not just abstract, but very real. I thought about how brave Vygotsky was to question the most common scientific notions and how many great ideas he had in such a short time. Being there in person made me feel even more responsible as a teacher to keep working on his unfinished thesis. The visit gave a spiritual element to the academic path, changing what had been intellectual adoration into something much more personal and lasting.*

Participant 6 situated their reflection within Rolfe's reflective framework:

*Regarding the visit to Vygotsky's grave (What), it deepened my appreciation of his life, work, and intellectual legacy (So what). The visit was truly a unique moment – a moment of forming a memory I want to preserve as much as possible. A solemn moment of reflection, with a sense of respect and some surprises that marked this memory.*

It is noteworthy that, during discussions at the Summer School concerning Vygotsky's texts, non – Russian-speaking participants consistently highlighted the difficulty of fully grasping the nuances of cultural-historical theory, primarily because they accessed these works exclusively through translation, without the possibility of engaging with the original Russian texts. In striking contrast, when the conversation turned to Vygotsky as a person, cultural differences and linguistic barriers appeared to dissolve. The significance of Lev Semyonovich as an individual was profoundly felt and emotionally experienced by all participants, transcending national and linguistic boundaries.

Participant 8 described the experience as unforgettable:

*A separate and unforgettable experience was visiting Vygotsky's grave together with our international guests. I witnessed the emotions of colleagues from other countries as they stood by the grave of the creator of a concept that, for them, is not merely*

*another psychological theory but a guiding framework for the practice by which they live.*

The participant 8 further elaborated on the significance:

*It is also important to say a few words about visiting Vygotsky's grave. Vygotsky once wrote: '...through others we become ourselves' (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 169). I felt this idea deeply when I saw the reactions of international colleagues to this moment – the tears, admiration, unwavering gaze, and above all, their genuine interest in the person himself. I do not claim that my view is the only correct one, but it seems that those of us living, studying, and conducting research in Russia have, to some extent, lost the sensitivity and responsiveness in our relationship to the figure of Vygotsky and other great Teachers (Leontiev, Luria, Zaporozhets, Elkonin, Galperin, and many others). Perhaps, in some ways, we have even become estranged from them. Yet, for us as Russian citizens, Vygotsky remains 'close.' By contrast, our international colleagues do not share this sense of closeness, and so even the brief experience of standing beside the person who laid the foundations of their life's practice becomes for them an extraordinarily meaningful symbolic act.*

This participant added that the experience reminded them of the need to view Vygotsky not only as a theoretician but as a living human being:

*This experience of observation 'soberingly' reminded me of Vygotsky's importance and rekindled my interest in him as a person. In my view, the estrangement of classical figures from the younger generation of Russian researchers can partly be explained by the fact that we encounter Vygotsky and others mainly on the pages of textbooks and monographs, mediated through theories and interpretations, while knowing little about them as people. During my work at FSC PIR, together with colleagues under the guidance of Academician V. S. Sobkin, we actively explored the lesser-known aspects of Vygotsky's biography. As a result of this work, several articles and a monograph were published, shedding light on Vygotsky as a living human being with his own experiences, fears, affections, and other personal dimensions (Sobkin, 2022; Sobkin & Emelin, 2022, 2023; Savchenko & Siyan, 2024).*

This moment of unity and remembrance can be connected to Vygotsky's own words from his *Notebooks*, edited by Zavershneva and van der Veer (2018): "I will die at the summit like Moses, having glimpsed the promised land but without setting foot in it" (p. 497). Witnessing the encounter of so many generations of researchers engaged in his work, across languages and nationalities, was described by participants as a moment of rare beauty and for some, one of the most important experiences of their academic lives.

### **"Now what?"**

Our last discussion will be on what we learnt from Summer University and future plans.

Participants 2, 7, 9 and 11 agreed that:

*...many meaningful moments during the Summer University. They emphasised the value of the practical workshops conducted by Professor Viktor Zaretsky and Professor Alla Kholmogorova, which offered deep insights and plenty of food for thought. Equally significant was Professor Olga Rubtsova's lecture, which shed light on important issues related to the translation of Vygotsky's*

*original texts into English. This raised awareness of how certain theoretical nuances can be lost or misrepresented in translation.*

For Participant 4,

*Vygotsky's legacy is not a static memory but rather a call to action: to transform what has already been lived into possibility, the given into becoming. This participant noted returning from the Summer University with renewed energy for research, especially with the aim of deepening discussions on drama in Vygotsky and the theoretical and philosophical foundations of his work.*

We would like to end this paper with the words of Participant 10, who described the role of the Summer University 2025:

*...Summer University has become a special kind of collective reflection on the current state of the cultural-historical approach in world psychology, on the development of theoretical models, and on the methods applicable within it. Lev Semionovich teaches us to remember the history of our science, to trace it, to go beyond the boundaries of our own research, and to rise in our reflection to a higher level (Vygotsky, 1982).*

Participant 10 further added that: *I believe the Summer University offers participants such an opportunity – to return once more to the methodological roots of their own research and to construct a perspective for its continuation within the framework of the cultural-historical and activity approaches.*

Thus, the Summer University enabled participants to engage in deeper reflection on the methodological foundations of their own research within the cultural-historical framework. Crucially, this process involved not only recognizing the potential and the “zone of proximal development” of their studies but also acknowledging certain limitations – such as those arising from lan-

guage barriers. Notably, ISCAR itself, by highlighting these constraints, simultaneously pointed toward ways to overcome them and inspired participants to reconsider familiar concepts from fresh perspectives.

## Conclusions

The paper concludes that the legacy of Vygotsky's ideas remains highly relevant and in demand across diverse contexts. This is also evidenced by bibliometric analysis (Shvedovskaya et al., 2025). Concepts he developed – such as contradictions, mediation, perezhivanie, and drama – are not only alive but continue to be reinterpreted and applied in education, psychology, and research. The visit to Vygotsky's grave symbolically reinforced this living legacy by uniting participants across generations and cultures in shared reflection. And the personal communication between representatives from CHAT from different continents made it possible to share tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962) and create an active community.

Thus, reflection itself emerges as a crucial scholarly practice, linking biography, history, and theory. The Summer University demonstrated how reflective engagement can strengthen cultural-historical psychology, sustain Vygotsky's intellectual heritage, and inspire researchers to carry it forward in contemporary, global, and technologically dynamic contexts. The reflexive methodology uncovered seldom-discussed aspects of how different cultures reinterpret cultural-historical and activity theories from their own unique perspectives.

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All authors participated in the discussion of the results and approved the final text of the manuscript.

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