

# One More Time on the Zone of Proximal Development

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The article presents an analysis of L.S. Vygotsky's concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD); considers various ZPD definitions; provides a critical review of the most popular definition of ZPD as adopted from L.S. Vygotsky's 1935 work and used as basic by English-speaking authors. Taking into account the fact that L.S. Vygotsky's general methodological intention was to establish psychology as a practice and that his developmental theory as well as the ZPD concept development remained incomplete due to the known life circumstances, we analyze L.S. Vygotsky's writings that allow for another ZPD conceptualization, which differs from the one implied by the 1935 definition, so as to attempt at reconstructing the concept. In reviewing L.S. Vygotsky's assumptions regarding the learning-development relationship; ZPD; its relevance for diagnostic assessment and teaching; feasibility of extrapolating the ZPD concept onto different personality aspects, the authors identify substantive aspects of the ZPD concept that the "canonical" definition lacks. The article describes a multidimensional model of ZPD, which has taken shape within the Reflection-Activity Approach to assisting students with overcoming learning difficulties and which integrates Vygotsky's key ZPD-related ideas. E.G. Yudin's conceptualization of methodological functions of conceptual schemes is used to reconstruct the methodological status of the ZPD concept. The authors demonstrate that, since its inception, the ZPD concept has passed through the stages of an explanatory principle, a research subject, and a methodological tool for constructing new subjects of research and development.

**Keywords:** zone of proximal development, L.S. Vygotsky, multidimensional model of the zone of proximal development, Reflection-Activity Approach, counseling to facilitate overcoming of learning difficulties, subjectness position in education, methodological status of the concept.

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“What he would have had yet to get done is enormously greater than what he was able to get done. The value of what he was destined to accomplish and what remained unaccomplished is greater than the value of his achievements. This is what makes his death a true tragedy.”  
L.S. Vygotsky [3, p. 5]

## Idea of This Article

In recent decades, cultural-historical psychology has undoubtedly become one of the most influential theories of mental development globally, and Lev S. Vygotsky — its founder — has become a most frequently cited psychologist. References to cultural-historical psychology tend to be growing constantly, and the areas of its application tend to be expanding rapidly. A concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is most widely used in various areas of psychological practice. The analysis of the rates of ZPD-related publications in various research databases revealed their continuous growth:

over the past 20 years, their number had increased from 10–20 to 70–90 per year in Web of Science; in the Russian Science Citation Index (RSCI), there was an even greater upsurge from 1–2 publications in 2002–2003 up to almost 500 in 2019 [33]. We will use a case of the ZPD methodological status evolution to attempt to answer some questions regarding the secret of relevance and popularity of Vygotsky's mental development concept without addressing the analysis of the cultural-historical concept in general. This is all the more important since the controversy over the interpretation of this concept and, as a matter of fact, over the cultural-historical theory itself, has not subsided yet [5]<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Some sources, for example, Wikipedia [...], attempt to discount Vygotsky's contribution to global psychology, explain his popularity by political reasons and “the cult of Vygotsky”, and explain a high demand for cultural-historical psychology by “the Vygotsky bubble”. A rebuttal of this perspective falls out of the scope of this article whose author considers himself a representative of the cultural-historical tradition and was taught by Vygotsky's disciples and associates. Over the last 25 years, he has been able to ascertain that ideas of the relationship between learning and development; interiorization, and the zone of proximal development are crucial for the practice of helping children overcome learning challenges [ 15; 16; 19; 47; 48; 48 etc].

This article has the following key objectives as related to the methodological analysis of the ZPD concept:

– To make an attempt to reconstruct the evolution of the ZPD methodological status throughout the last 88 years.

– To delineate most controversial points regarding the ZPD definition.

– To provide our own answer to a question regarding a feasible interpretation of ZPD,

– Using a multidimensional model of ZPD, to demonstrate the ZPD concept heuristic potential, which enables its use as a methodological tool for research subject and project design in various areas of practice and fields of psychology.

The author approaches the aforementioned issues from the perspective of a developer of a Reflection-Activity Approach (RAA) to providing developmental assistance to children helping them overcome learning challenges [17]. RAA relies on the basic foundations of cultural-historical psychology, and one of its central concepts is the concept of ZPD, which was introduced by Vygotsky and elaborated on notably in the works of Russian psychologists.

### **Brief Historical Background: This is Important to Remember**

L.S. Vygotsky's journey in psychology lasted only 10 years. In 1924, he started his psychological career tackling the issue which has remained urgent and largely unsolved until now, i.e. development of children with different deficits. Moreover he focused on creating conditions for these children's normal development, general and professional education [6]. This focus predetermined several directions, in which the psychology that Vygotsky started to develop evolved. First of all, the research question was practice-oriented ("What to do so that...") from the very beginning. Secondly, at least three fundamental questions of psychology arose from it: How can the development be understood? What is normal development? What is abnormal development? Throughout the decade that was to follow, Vygotsky centered his work around the search for answers to these questions, at least, as evidenced by his publications [28].

In 1927, feeling on the verge of death (having spent six months in hospital with a fatal diagnosis without any improvement and having been registered as a disabled person), Vygotsky wrote a fundamental methodological work – "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" [8] – describing what psychology needed to and could be like. In this book, he formulated and provided a rationale for his key idea that *psychology needed to become a practice*. He had never referred to this work later; he had never made any attempts to have it published, and the psychological community found out about its existence only when the first volume of a six-volume edition of Vygotsky's selected works had come out in 1982. One cannot help thinking that – in anticipating his close and inevitable death – Vygotsky wanted to use his chance to write about *the point that was most important for him in*

*psychology*, – i.e. *facilitation of human development* and establishment of a scientific approach to creating conditions for human development rather than mere research into humans and their development. Later, when fate had allowed him another 7 years of a fruitful creative life, he created concepts that could be excellent "tools" for implementation of the idea of psychology as a practice. However psychology with its focus on academic theoretical objectives has failed to use these tools for many years. It may well be that seeing that the idea of psychology as a practice had not yet entered "the zone of proximal development" of psychology itself, on one of his final days, L.S. Vygotsky left the following note in his journal, "This is the last thing that I have done in psychology – and I will die atop, like Moses, looking at the Promised Land, never entering it" (14, p. 568).

In the early 1930s, he arrived at the idea of development as a process that occurred for a child in the course of mastering the humankind's cultural and historical experience as carried by an adult for him/her. This idea was embodied in his key work on the higher mental function development (1931). In this work, Vygotsky proposed the concept of interiorization as a mechanism of development. This concept does not only explain how development occurs, but also possesses a huge heuristic potential for psychological and educational practice. P.Y. Galperin realized this potential brilliantly in his method of the stage-by-stage formation of mental actions, which helped to convincingly show how mental actions (various mental processes) arose from the external object-oriented activity by means of interiorization [11].

Introduction of "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD) concept became crucial for elaboration of the cultural-historical theory of mental development. A comprehensive literature review carried out by G.L. Vygotskaya and T.M. Lifanova [6] makes it possible to even trace the date when L.S. Vygotsky formulated the ZPD concept for the first time rather than used this term as a metaphor. This happened on 03/23/1933 in his closing speech at a conference on diagnostic assessment, i.e. a little over a year before his death. Therefore, Vygotsky had extraordinarily little time (just over one year seems too short by historical standards) to demonstrate the ZPD concept potential for implementation of his idea of *psychology as a practice*. This time was hardly sufficient to follow the elaboration of the concept to its logical end. Not unsurprisingly, the debate on the ZPD definition has lasted until now and has flared up rather than subsided. Various views on the ZPD definition have been expressed [5]; the issue of correspondence between the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding (whether they are equivalent or not) have been discussed [30; 33]; attempts have been made to provide an expansive interpretation of ZPD and to prove feasibility of its extension to different areas of personal development [2; 16; 28; 35]; ZPD has been contrasted to the space of the child's capacity actualization [4]; attempts to apply it in contexts that go far beyond the scope of its initial application within the framework of the child intellectual development have been made and discussed [31; 38; 44; 49 etc.]

When identifying turning points in the evolution of the cultural-historical approach to understanding of child development mechanisms, it is worth highlighting another assumption, which stayed out of the focus throughout decades, although L.S. Vygotsky considered it “the most positive feature of this new theory” [9, p. 230]. This is the assumption that “a single step in learning can represent a hundred steps in development” [9, p. 230] which was formulated in “Thinking and Speech” as early as in 1934 although it was never found in any of his numerous notebooks, as E.Yu. Zavershneva (the main expert on Vygotsky’s archive) stated it. Drawing an analogy with Vygotsky’s epigraph to his book about the crisis in psychology (“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”), we can say that the “hundred steps” assumption which researchers and practitioners had neglected for a long time proved to be the cornerstone for solving some of the seemingly unsolvable issues of child development. We will take a closer look at this point in the last part of this article when considering the ZPD multidimensional model [15; 46].

Based on the aforesaid, we can draw several important conclusions, which set the “mode” of treating Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology in general and the ZPD concept in particular as the core (epicenter) of the concept of development.

Firstly, accepting Vygotsky’s position designated in 1927 and representing the position of a scientist who pioneered establishment of the new psychology as a development facilitation practice, we consider theoretical ideas and concepts that he developed as *tools of this practice*, rather than scientific concepts that are designed to explain reality but do not necessarily have a heuristic potential for practice.

Secondly, taking into account that the basic concepts which grounded Vygotsky’s developmental framework appeared as late as during the last 2–3 years of his life, the cultural-historical theory should be viewed as fundamentally incomplete. That is, one needs to discriminate between different levels within Vygotsky’s theory, i.e. between its “zone of actual development”, which it had reached when its author was still alive, and its “zone of proximal development”, which can be used to make judgments on Vygotsky’s ideas that he had had no time to provide a complete rationale for and to follow to their logical end. An effort to analyze and to integrate these ideas into a whole enabled us to arrive at the ZPD multidimensional model [15; 46] as a feasible elaboration of Vygotsky’s ideas.

Thirdly, it is worth bearing in mind that since L.S. Vygotsky’s “Thinking and Speech” was translated into English in 1962, cultural-historical psychology has started developing along two relatively separate lines of the Soviet & Russian and “Western” cultural-historical psychology (let us put quotes around the word “Western” as today cultural-historical psychology is represented on all the five continents, and Vygotsky’s writings can be read in multiple languages rather than in Russian and English only). Analyzing the concept of ZPD and tracing its evolution, one needs to account for the existence

of these two lines and the differences between them since some works that are important for Russian psychologists have not yet been translated into English. Furthermore, the only ZPD definition that can be found in “Mind in Society” (1978) [46], the most frequently cited book on cultural-historical psychology in the West, was given by L.S. Vygotsky in a booklet for teachers published by his associates and disciples in 1935, i.e. after Vygotsky’s death. This definition lacks important meanings that have become a relevant starting point for the Russian ZPD research at the turn of the 20th – 21st centuries. N. Veresov [5] devoted several works to analyzing differences between the two conceptualizations of “ZPD” (Russian and Western), so we will not dwell on this issue here. Let us discuss the differences that are important for providing a rationale for the perspective of practicing psychologists relying on the Reflection-Activity Approach and the ZPD multidimensional model in their work [15; 16; 17; 18; 20; 22; 46; 47 etc.] and communicating this perspective to the reader.

### Issue of ZPD Definition

The definition of ZPD provided by L.S. Vygotsky (or his associates who prepared the booklet for publication in 1935) is most well-known both in Russia and other countries, which use “Mind in Society” [45] as their main reference. Let us give this definition. “... The child’s zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” [7, p. 42; 45, p. 86]. This definition is usually regarded as “classical”, i.e. expressing the core of the concept, its essential content, according to Vygotsky. Is it really so?

Firstly, we believe that definitions of this concept in other Vygotsky’s texts, e.g. as of 1933 and 1934 [9; 10], differ significantly from the classical one, and we analyzed these differences in detail earlier [15; 46]. In particular, L.S. Vygotsky used the word “distance” in no other writings, and in addition to the term “under adult guidance” he used phrases “with the adult’s help” and – which is of principal relevance for us – “in collaboration with an adult”. One has to admit that this makes a difference: in the first case, the adult-child relationship is the one between a leader and a subordinate, whereas in the second case, the relationship is cooperative. On the other hand, what does the word “distance” refer to? If it denotes a type of problem solved, then it is all about learning rather than development. If it refers to cognitive capacities, then how are they measured? There is nothing said about this in the definition itself.

Secondly, considering the context, we can see that Vygotsky prefaced this definition (in the original Russian text) with the words, “*Providing that we call ...*”<sup>2</sup> and then introduced the idea of the two developmental levels

<sup>2</sup> These words are absent in English version of the definition in “Mind in society”.

of actual and proximal development. By the level he understood nothing but “the child’s mental age” as determined by independent or adult-assisted problem solving. If a ten-year-old child solves problems at an eight-year-old’s level, his mental development level is 8 years old. If with the adult’s help the child deals with the problems up to a nine-year-old’s level, then this is precisely his/her level of proximal development, and the “distance” between the two levels is 1 year. If the child handles problems up to an eight-year-old’s level when dealing with them independently and up to a twelve-year-old’s level when being assisted by an adult, then the “distance” will grow to 4 years. Vygotsky suggested taking these differences into account when forming learning groups (classes) and organizing education. “The distance” is the difference between the two ages as determined (measured) by problems of a varying degree of difficulty. Does the abovementioned definition reflect what L.S. Vygotsky wrote in other texts on ZPD appropriately? Of course, it does not. His understanding as presented in other texts was much more subtle and richer in terms of both meaning and content. So, why did L.S. Vygotsky formulate this definition in this very way here?

To answer this question, one needs to consider the context in which L.S. introduced this “provisional” definition. The context was as follows. The booklet was written for teachers and pedologists who were used to determining the child’s developmental level judging by the child’s independent problem solving alone. However L.S. Vygotsky urged them not to finish the examination at that stage, but to start it from that point so as to identify the level of problems that the child could solve if assisted by the adult (in the definition he wrote “under adult guidance” while he mentioned “with the adult’s help” earlier). To substantiate the need for assessment of what the child was capable of doing in collaboration with others, he introduced a simple “working definition” to illustrate his main assumption about the relevance of diagnosing of what the child would be able to achieve in collaboration with the adult. Experts in cultural-historical psychology understand that this idea was grounded in the concept of development as a process of mastering the cultural-historical experience in the course of the child-adult joint activity (L.S. Vygotsky termed it “in collaboration”), and that the development of uniquely human higher mental functions occurred through interiorization. However it was important for teachers – given their “zone of proximal development” – to take a step towards understanding the point of assessing what independent problem solving the child was yet incapable of but already handled successfully in collaboration with them. This “working definition” suited this objective quite well. Therefore, we believe that one needs to treat this most famous and popular definition, which “Mind in Society” [45] had unfortunately almost canonized, as an exclusively working construct that Vygotsky had created to solve a specific practical problem, and namely,

communicating the importance of assessing not only the actual but also proximal level of development to teachers and psychologists since, if we agree with this viewpoint, “all the issues of pedology in both normal and special schools will look different” [7, p. 52] as Vygotsky clarified it himself<sup>3</sup>.

History tolerates no what-ifs so we cannot say what the ZPD definition would have been, had Vygotsky been able to work on it for at least a few more years. However even in this “highly sector-specific” text for teachers, L.S. Vygotsky mentioned the context that he found most relevant, i.e. the goal of promoting “the integral personality development”. Keeping in mind that in “Problems of Age” (the book that has not yet been translated into English) he wrote that the ZPD concept could be extended to other aspects of the personality, the ZPD definition under consideration ceases to be valid as hardly all personality aspects can be assessed by “the measure of age”. What should one do then? What definition should be used? Or is there no definition?

Drawing on the fact that Vygotsky had little time to develop and implement everything that he had planned, and that even despite 16 volumes written within 10 years, he wrote hardly everything that he could have written, it can be argued that an effort to understand what Vygotsky meant by the ZPD concept resembles arranging a puzzle of odds and ends of thoughts scattered around different texts, or the reconstruction of the whole from its fragments.

We made this effort in 2006 having been stimulated by “Problems of Age” editor’s note to L.S. Vygotsky’s words that the text would consider the diagnostic value of the ZPD concept, whereas “its educational value will be considered in one of the following chapters “. The editor’s note said, “L.S. Vygotsky had never written these chapters”. An attempt to imagine “what *else* Vygotsky had no time to write about” stimulated the author of this article to develop the ZPD multidimensional model described for the first time in an article of the same name [15; 46].

#### **Four Ideas by L.S. Vygotsky that 1935 Definition of ZPD Fails to Reflect**

Vygotsky’s texts contain a number of indications that he laid a greater emphasis on the concept of ZPD than the definition of 1935 represented. In particular, we can highlight at least four of these points. Firstly, he noted that the concept of ZPD could be extrapolated on to personality development in general. The second point is that the child’s development is dependent on the adult’s assistance. The third point is that ZPD has two boundaries rather than one: the first one separates ZPD from the zone of actual development (independent problem solving); and another one runs between ZPD and the zone where the child fails to interact with the adult with full awareness (L.S. Vygotsky put it as “thought-

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<sup>3</sup> L.S. Vygotsky’s idea of ZPD measurement got implemented as late as in 1976, when A.Y. Ivanova (daughter of S.Ya. Rubinstein who was L.S. Vygotsky’s student and B.W. Zeigarnik’s colleague) developed a standardized procedure for assessing ZPD [27].



fully”, i.e. not just “through imitation”), which we later termed it as “a zone of unattainable challenge” [15; 46]. The fourth point is L.S. Vygotsky’s famous statement, which he quoted in “Thinking and Speech” published in Russian in 1956 and translated into English in 1962, that it was not only that learning preceded development but, under certain conditions, a single step in learning could represent a hundred steps in development.

In the West, Vygotsky’s followers paid little attention to this his idea for a long time although he believed that it was “the most positive feature of this new theory” [9, p. 230] referring to the developmental theory obviously. At the same time, Russian psychologists attached greater importance to this assumption [26; 35], and V.P. Zinchenko [26] considered this idea to be a rationale for the assertion that the child development was fundamentally unlimited, which was embodied in the definition of the ZPD, but was not apparent. From a theorist’s perspective, L.S. Vygotsky’s idea is quite simple: within ZPD, in collaboration with adults, children can solve problems that they cannot solve independently; and tomorrow they will be able to autonomously handle problems that they solve in collaboration today. Therefore children’s capacities get continuously enhanced and progressive development unfolds when the adult creates proper conditions to this end. It is a practitioner’s business to determine and to be able to create these conditions. And the nature of these conditions, i.e. in which way adults need to build their interaction with children so as to create developmental conditions is of greatest interest from the practical perspective.

One of these conditions is the child’s subjectness position exercised when interacting (engaging in joint activity, cooperating) with an adult<sup>4</sup>.

### “Is it Under Guidance or In Collaboration?”

The definition given in the 1935 booklet, which was translated and published in “Mind in Society” [45], provided that within ZPD children were able to solve problems that they failed to solve independently under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. This text is a transcript of Vygotsky’s speech given in December 1933. The same text, just like some others [9; 10], includes such phrases as “in collaboration with the adult”, “with the adult’s help”. That is, L.S. Vygotsky used the expressions “under guidance”, “in collaboration”, “with the help of” as synonyms, or as indicating that the adult’s assistance could vary and be provided

from different perspectives. The definition given in 1935 (which included only the expression “under adult guidance”) lacks this point which is important to understand the way how the child-adult interaction is built within ZPD. Due to this, the term “collaboration” fades into insignificance losing its conceptual load. However it was this very term that many Russian psychologists adopted in the 1990s and that allowed to infer that when cooperating with an adult, a child became an agent of his/her learning and even an agent of self-development [14; 23; 38; 41; 47, etc.). In the second decade of the twentieth century, assessment of the child’s subjectness position<sup>5</sup> in learning has become a most important area of scientific research and practice. This is really crucial as the nature and the dynamics of developmental processes are largely determined by the way in which the child-adult relationship unfolds in the course of their educational interactions: either the child develops as an agent of activity meaning that he becomes an agent of self-development as well or the adult develops certain abilities in the child, and the child is subject to the adult’s educational, psychological, and other influences.

We have put the subtitle “Is it Under Guidance or In Collaboration?” in quotes not by chance as these are not alternatives: the adult can direct (guide) the interaction with the child and to be the child’s coworker simultaneously. Acting under adult guidance, the child can also manage their interaction adopting the position of a coworker, i.e. an agent of the activity, as well.

What is the difference between the developmental processes in education when the child is an agent of learning and self-development (within a collaborative relationship) and when the child fails to exercise the subjectness position subordinating his/her activity to the adult’s will (this relationship is an alternative to collaboration)? The effectiveness of training will depend on the teacher’s mastery, and higher mental functions will develop in both cases. However the collaborative relationship and the subjectness position arising from this relationship include a mechanism of self-development which explains the effect theoretically predicted by Vygotsky in the aforementioned formula of “A single step in learning can represent a hundred steps in development”. When studying, the child learns to solve problems that he/she is yet incapable of solving independently through the interaction with the adult. Then, by means of interiorization, the child becomes able to handle them autonomously. But where, *in what space*, then, do these hypothetical hundred steps occur? Non-obviousness of an answer to this question might explain an amazing fact that even a special book dedicated

<sup>4</sup> Here is what Vygotsky wrote in “Educational Psychology” (1926) about the teacher-student interaction, “The educational process must be based on the student’s individual activity, and the art of education should involve nothing more than guiding and monitoring this activity” ... (the English translation was adopted from Vygotsky, L.S. “*Educational Psychology*”, 1997, p. 48). “Until now the student has always stood on the teacher’s shoulders. He has looked upon everything through his teacher’s eyes and judged everything by the way his teacher thought. The time has come to place the student on his own two feet... The child must himself be made to walk and to fall, to suffer pain from injuries, and to decide what direction to follow. What is true as repaid walking, that it can be learned only on one’s own two feet, and only by one’s own tumbles, is equally applicable to all aspects of education” (adopted from [6, pp. 97–98]. The English translation was adopted from Vygotsky, L.S. “*Educational Psychology*”, 1997, p. 342).

<sup>5</sup> The concept subjectness position corresponds to the concept sense of agency in Western psychology. This concept was worked out in special study and includes two important components — activity and awareness [32], [33], [34].

to the analysis of “Thinking and Speech”, which includes a chapter on Vygotsky’s metaphors, lacks mention of this formula although “zone of proximal development” is used 47 times! [43].

### Searching for Space to Understand L.V. Vygotsky’s Formula

An upsurge of interest in cultural-historical psychology due to active penetration of psychology into practice (not exclusively in Education) at the end of the last century was accompanied by an increasing focus of various professionals (educators; psychologists; neuropsychologists; psychotherapists) on the concept of ZPD. Since the late 1990s, a special area of the ZPD research in Russian cultural-historical psychology has evolved and become popular, and namely, the search for other ZPD dimensions (in addition to an intellectual one) (let us recall Vygotsky’s idea that the concept of ZPD could be extrapolated on to personality development in general, “on to other aspects of the personality”). A number of Russian psychologists have focused their efforts on searching for areas of not only intellectual but also personal development of children in the course of their interaction with an adult within ZPD. E.E. Kravtsova [28] argued that the concept of ZPD referred primarily to personality development. N.L. Belopolskaya demonstrated an emotional dimension of ZPD in her works [2]. A study by L.F. Obukhova and I.A. Korepanova [36] focused on the meaning-making dimension of ZPD. G.A. Zukerman [40] suggested considering ZPD as a space of different developmental options depending on the type of assistance. An effort to integrate and synthesize these ideas by linking them to a practice of assisting children with overcoming learning difficulties by means of the Reflection-Activity Approach (an area of research and practice being developed within the framework of cultural-historical psychology) resulted in the development of the ZPD multidimensional model [15; 15; 29; 21; 46; 47; 49, etc.]. This model integrated the ideas that Vygotsky had expressed in relation to the concept of ZPD and its relevance for understanding of the learning-development relationship. These developments resulted in the establishment of a theoretical model of the ZPD [15; 46] and development of a specific method of analyzing cases of child assistance. This method helps to identify changes (steps) in the child’s development that accompany changes (steps) arising from the child’s learning with the adult’s assistance [19; 20; 21; 34; 47]. A presentation made by the author of this article at the 2006 conference provoked a heated debate among the ZPD section participants. However a post-conference article that summarized the content of each presentation quite extensively never mentioned that the ZPD multidimensional model had been presented [29]. The effort to convey the heuristic potential of the ZPD multidimensional model in a brief conference presentation seemed to have failed [16]. Further research and practice of applying the Reflection-Activity Approach to assist with overcoming learning difficulties showed that the multidimensional

model had both theoretical relevance being one of the hypothetical ZPD “frameworks” and could also serve as a tool to solve purely practical problems including those that seemed to be unmanageable.

### ZPD Multidimensional Model as Key Conceptual Tool of Reflection- Activity Approach to Overcoming Learning Difficulties

Before describing the ZPD multidimensional model itself, let us give a brief account of the Reflection-Activity Approach (RAA) to helping students overcome learning difficulties providing assistance that contributes to development [17].

The central idea of RAA consists in using learning difficulties as a resource for development, “The things that hinder us will help us!” What this process may look like?

First of all, challenges are an inevitable component of learning because the child attempts at doing something that he/she has not learnt yet. According to L.S. Vygotsky, education is arranged in such a way that “the child always has to bite more than he can chew” (Vygotsky’s literal translation would be “jump higher than one’s height”). Having faced difficulties, the child becomes aware of the boundary between what the child can already do independently and what he/she is yet incapable of; experiences the need for the adult’s help; expects it and accepts it eagerly (if they have a cooperative relationship). The adult’s involvement in the child’s problem solving acquires a special value: without the adult’s help, the child will fail to handle the task and will fail to do what he/she wanted or what he/she was to do. When overcoming difficulties with the adult’s support, the child both learns and develops.

Secondly, if the adult builds a cooperative relationship with the child, then *they unite* and exercise collective agency over actions to cope with a challenge. The subject of their activity is a search for *specific modes of action* that will enable them to overcome difficulties; to correct mistakes and to prevent them in the future. Interacting within ZPD, the adult and the child initiate the process of interiorization, in which the modes of joint actions will later become the child’s own modes of action.

An overcome difficulty is a “step” in learning. What steps in development can be facilitated by the child’s awareness that acting “*in this way*” he/she will avoid “*these mistakes*”? And what changes can and should occur for the child if he/she has taken this step? A theoretical answer to these questions lies in the ZPD multidimensional model. *The ZPD multidimensional model embodies Vygotsky’s ideas regarding the capacity of the ZPD concept to be extended to various aspects of personality development, as well as his idea of a specific learning-development relationship which empowers one step in learning to result in a hundred steps in development.*

The diagram (see Fig. 1) depicts a child and an adult (a teacher; an educational psychologist; a counselor; a parent, etc.) who are agents of the child’s progress in the course of learning. In the diagram, the area “above the

child” depicts the child’s abilities, qualities, personality features which relate to the educational activity (learning) being carried out. They are designated as potential dimensions of development, i.e. they can change while overcoming learning difficulties. For example, a successful accomplishment of a challenge can be accompanied both by an improvement in cognitive functions (attention, memory, ways of thinking), and improvements in reflection; motivation; self-efficacy, etc. Each dimension, including the dimension indicated by the plane of a learning activity, falls into three hypothetical zones: the zone of actual development (ZAD), within which the child can solve problems independently without the adult’s help; the zone of proximal development (ZPD), within which the child can perform only with the adult’s assistance; the zone of unattainable challenge (ZAN), within which the child is incapable of a thoughtful collaboration with the adult (the boundary between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible). Assumingly, the steps in learning represent changes in the ZAD and ZPD boundaries on the plane of learning, and the steps in development are qualitative changes in every dimension. Vygotsky’s formula – “A single step in learning can represent a hundred steps in development” – gets filled with concrete meaning within the framework of this model: one-step progress within an educational dimension can be accompanied by simultaneous qualitative changes in many dimensions.

It is essential (prerequisite) that the child engages in joint activities as an agent who actively looks for obstacles to be addressed so as to manage the task and appropriates the experience of overcoming difficulties in collaboration with the adult investing efforts to learn how to solve problems that are unmanageable so far. All the changes that the child may face can be depicted as new formations or “steps” in a specific dimension.

Participating in the process of overcoming difficulties as an agent, the child engages in activity as arranged by the counselor in accordance with the “Intention – Implementation – Reflection” scheme which N.G. Alekseev proposed to describe and arrange a project-oriented action [1]. The Intention arises as an idea to get rid of specific mistakes. Then, with the counselor’s support, the child becomes the agent of intention implementation, and reflection of this implementation. Making efforts to implement his/her intention, e.g., learning to avoid a certain type of mistakes, the child assisted by the counselor starts with identifying the link between his/her mode of action and his/her mistake. Then he invests efforts in becoming aware of the mode of action so as to understand which aspect of it results in mistakes and challenges. Through gaining awareness of the faulty mode of action, the child frees him/herself from its power and – with the adult’s help – attempts to change it. Reflecting on the mode of action is central here since it sheds light on a specific aspect that needs to be modified. Understanding how to

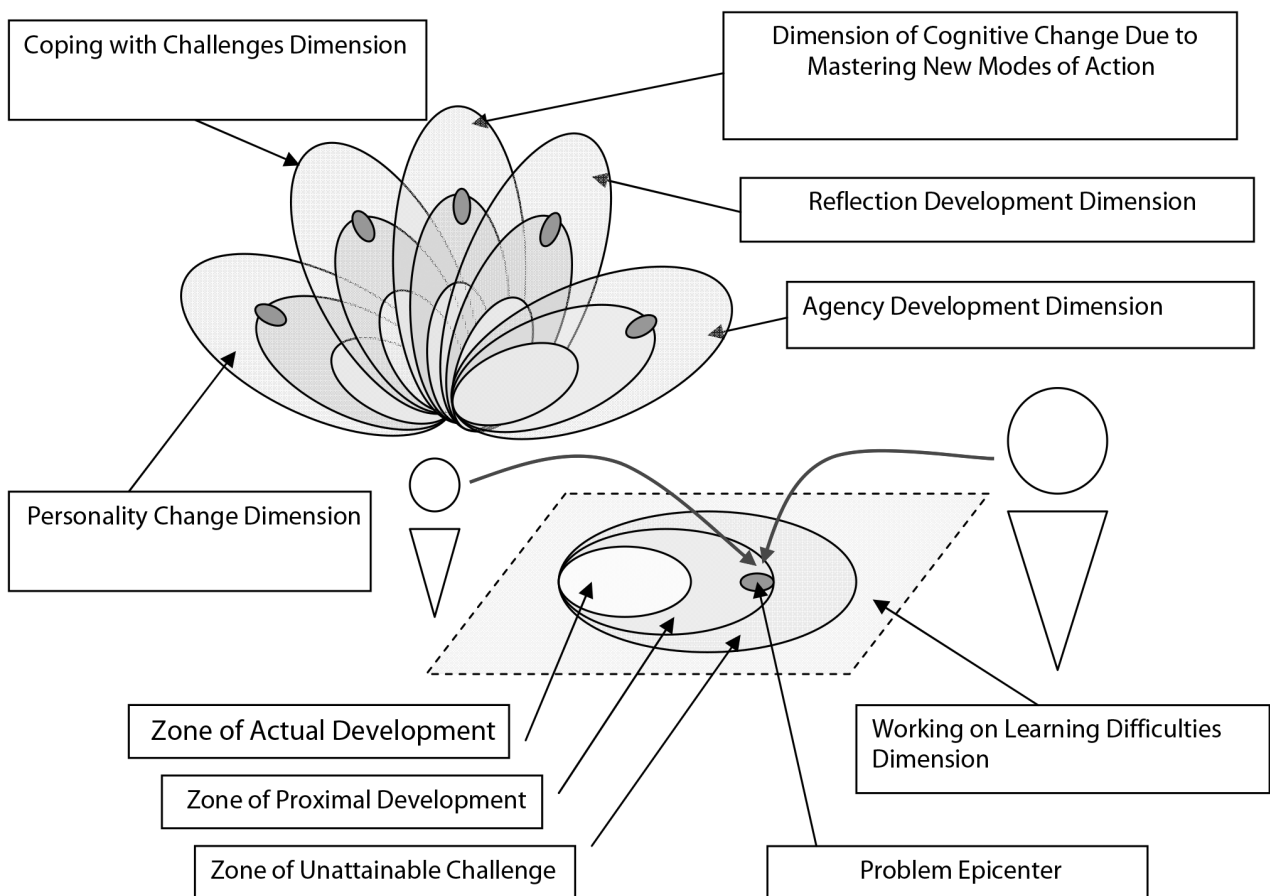


Fig. 1. ZPD as a generality of dimensions of potential developmental steps in the course of learning [15; 46]



produce change is now part of the child's creative work performed with the counsellor's support. After the child finds a new mode of action, and tries, tests, and ascertains its effectiveness, it is helpful to reflect on the process of intention implementation, which is also done with the counselor's help. Final reflection allows to make meaning of the most important points in the dynamics of the process of overcoming difficulties. These include differentiating between what the child is able to do independently; what the child is incapable of; what he/she can accomplish with the adult's assistance and what he/she needs to learn so as to use a new mode of action autonomously. In this way, reflection enables the child to become aware of "the dual resource" – what the child is able to do independently and what he/she is capable of when acting in collaboration with the adult but what he/she will be able to do independently in the future [22]. This brings about a new issue and a new idea for joint actions in the future. All new formations that arise in different dimensions as a result of this dynamics can be accounted for as "steps in development" in a specific dimension [20; 21; 34].

It turned out that it was possible to use the ZPD multidimensional model as a development assessment tool with first-year students – future psychologists. These students held no ZPD stereotype as created by its "classical" 1935 definition which we believe to ignore Vygotsky's most important and heuristic ideas about ZPD. We provide a brief account of this work as an illustration.

*In 2017, the following case arose in the course the first lesson of the Psychological and Educational Assistance with Overcoming Learning Difficulties Course during first-year undergraduate students' training at the Counseling and Clinical Psychology Department of the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education. A teacher found out that most students did not feel confident when writing words with an unstressed vowel and made grammar mistakes occasionally. Then, the teacher and the students invested a collective effort in reflecting on and becoming aware of a mode of action that resulted in errors. Afterwards, they collaborated to build a mode of action that would eliminate mistakes and would allow anyone who had mastered it to write words with unstressed vowels competently and to feel confident that there would be no errors.*

*Later on, the students were asked (one needs to keep it in mind that these were freshmen who were ignorant of Vygotsky's name so far; never attended the Developmental Psychology course, and had no idea about ZPD, etc.) what other change could occur to a person who used to rely on a faulty mode of action that had resulted in errors, and then he/she had mastered a robust mode of action that had enabled him/her to write without errors. It took the "warmed-up" students 5 minutes to single out 25 new formations that the child who had mastered a robust mode of action might have developed. At that time, the teacher was drawing these new formations*

*as dimensions above the child's image on the blackboard, and then asked another question, "Can you demonstrate and provide a rationale for 100 steps in development that can arise in this case?" The students agreed to complete this task, and at the end of the course, each student presented a text where they had listed one hundred dimensions, within which quantum leaps could occur due to mastering of a new mode of action, and five of them had detailed descriptions of how these changes could occur. The concept that had raised doubts among professionals in 2006 seemed natural and logical to first-year students in 2017. By the way, in the same year, this experiment was planned and replicated (rather than carried out spontaneously) by V.K. Zaretskii and I.A. Nikolaevskaya during an option course on RAA at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where Jean Piaget – L.S. Vygotsky's famous opponent – had worked. The option course was designed for senior students, master's students, and even PhD students. Some of them decided to describe 100 possible steps in development in a given situation of transition to a new mode of action as their credit test assignment and handled this assignment quite creatively.*

In this article, we do not provide numerous practical examples illustrating this self-development mechanism, which makes it possible to break new grounds on various developmental dimensions after making a single "successful" step in learning. This phenomenon which we called the "explosive dynamics effect" was described in a range of publications [19; 25; 34; 47]. The only thing that we would like to note here is that historically, the task of providing assistance so that a single step in learning would facilitate multiple steps in development stood out as a vital practical task for us when L.Z. Saltykova, the President of the "Deti.msk.ru" charity fund, had approached us in 2012. She asked for help with arranging school training for orphaned children with disability and severe somatic conditions and diagnosed with developmental delay and mild intellectual disability. The initial educational and developmental level of these children seemed to be so low that even a perfectly arranged educational process would hardly change their lives significantly due to health limitations and specific social situation of development. Nevertheless, the next 8 years of work showed that it was possible to create conditions for these children's normal development enabling them to overcome their limitations, to receive education and to self-actualize [47].

Christel Manske [32] who positions herself as Vygotsky's follower and whose main practice in recent years has dealt with preparing preschool children with Down syndrome to inclusive education in a regular school described similar cases of "explosive dynamics" and subsequent progressive development in her works. In one of her books, she dedicated the first chapter to the ZPD concept. This chapter could be called "a hymn in praise of the zone of proximal development"<sup>6</sup>. Judging

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<sup>6</sup> The titles of some paragraphs in this chapter look as follows, "In the zone of proximal development, we share joy and pleasure with each other. In the zone of proximal development, no child is a loser. ... In the zone of proximal development, a person begins to understand himself better with the help of another person... In the zone of proximal development, affects are not suppressed, but get culturalized. In the zone of proximal development, we attach great importance on meanings that are relevant for the person ... In the zone of proximal development, a leap from one level of mental development to a higher level is possible" [ 32, c. 5].



by the paragraph names, even without diving into the content, we can see that the idea of the multidimensional model is undoubtedly close to C. Manske [32].

### Evolution of Methodological Status of ZPD Concept

This article has attempted to trace an amazing evolution that the concept of the zone of proximal development, which initially served as an explanatory principle of interiorization and organizing of education for children with different levels of potential development, has undergone over the course of 88 years.

If we use the idea of various functions of conceptual “tools”, which E.G. Yudin examined using the example of the methodological functions of A.N. Leontiev’s conceptual scheme of activity [42], then it can be argued that the concept of ZPD fulfilled the function of an explanatory principle from its development in 1933 and until the late 1990s. Even V.V. Davydov’s [12] work, which referred to the ZPD concept repeatedly, employed it as an explanatory concept rather than an integral part of the research subject.

Nevertheless, the attempts to operationalize this concept in relation to various aspects of child development (cognitive, emotional, meaning making) which were made in the aforementioned works of the Russian authors [2; 15; 28; 30; 36; 40] facilitated ZPD transition from the status of an explanatory principle to the

status of a subject of study. Being an integral part of the designed research subjects, the ZPD concept facilitated design of other subjects, such as development of the emotional sphere, meaning making, subjectness position, learning autonomy, etc. It may well be that the enormous heuristic potential of the ZPD concept hidden in two Vygotsky’s fleeting replicas reflecting the ideas that the ZPD concept can be applied to various personality aspects, and that a single step in learning can represent a hundred steps in development, facilitated the discovery of another methodological function of this concept, and namely, its capacity to serve as a methodological vehicle for designing of new subjects of research and practical development in various areas of psychological and pedagogical practice: special needs education [32]; providing children with psychological assistance with overcoming learning difficulties by means of the Reflection-Activity Approach [20; 47, etc.]; psychological counselling for teachers [24]; psychotherapy [22; 37; 38; 39; 44; 48; 49] and a number of other areas of research and practice [31], etc.

In conclusion, let us get back to Vygotsky’s words about why teachers need to learn to identify the zone of proximal development and to work with students within it. If this happens, then “all the issues of pedagogy in both normal and special schools will look different” [7, p. 52]. V.P. Zinchenko [26] elaborated on this idea in his essay devoted to L.S. Vygotsky, “If a teacher is sensitive to a child’s zone of proximal development, it will grow into the prospect of his unlimited development”.

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## Еще раз о зоне ближайшего развития

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В статье дается анализ понятия зона ближайшего развития (ЗБР) Л.С. Выготского, рассматриваются варианты его определения, проводится критический анализ наиболее распространенного определения ЗБР, взятого из работы Л.С. Выготского 1935 г. и являющегося основным для англоязычных авторов. Исходя из общего методологического замысла Л.С. Выготского о создании психологии-практики и незавершенности его концепции развития, в том числе, незавершенности разработки понятия ЗБР в силу известных жизненных обстоятельств, делается попытка реконструкции понятия на основе анализа различных работ Л.С. Выготского, допускающих возможность иного понимания ЗБР, чем данного в определении 1935 г. В ходе анализа различных положений Л.С. Выготского о связи обучения и развития, о ЗБР, о его значении для диагностики и педагогики, о возможности применения понятия ЗБР к разным сторонам личности устанавливаются содержательные элементы понятия ЗБР, не вошедшие в «каноническое» определение. Дается описание многовекторной модели ЗБР, разработанной в рамках рефлексивно-деятельностного подхода к оказанию помощи учащимся в преодолении учебных трудностей, в которой интегрируются основные идеи Л.С. Выготского о ЗБР. Осуществляется реконструкция методологического статуса понятия ЗБР в опоре на представление о методологических функциях концептуальных схем Э.Г. Юдина. Показано, что с момента своего появления понятие ЗБР проходит стадии объяснительного принципа, предмета исследования и методологического средства построения новых предметов исследований и разработок.

**Ключевые слова:** зона ближайшего развития, Л.С. Выготский, многовекторная модель зоны ближайшего развития, рефлексивно-деятельностный подход, консультативная помощь в преодолении учебных трудностей, субъектная позиция в учебной деятельности, методологический статус понятия.

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