Dialectics of preschool education in the context of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory

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Abstract

There are two ways of understanding child development. The first places emphasis on the human cultural dimension. The essential component of culture is a system of cultural norms known as "ideal forms," wherein the adult acts as a bearer of these ideal forms or culture. From this standpoint, the child acquires already established forms (in this sense, old norms). The second approach is based on understanding the child's infinite and unlimited capabilities. The realization of such opportunities, due to their unlimited nature, involves going beyond the zone of proximal development. This requires conceptualizing a different space, oriented to new forms of culture that are not yet in existence—the space of child realization. The orientation of this space is the opposite to that of the zone of proximal development: instead of an old norm being acquired (i.e., the adaptation of the child to their culture) the goal for an adult is, in the space of child realization, to help the child realize their intent by creating new elements of culture.

Keywords

cultural-historical theory, zone of proximal development, childhood, space of child realization, culture.

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Introduction

The process of cultural development by preschoolers can be considered learning. However, learning cannot be called creative in terms of culture because its end result is clearly defined by culture. Children learn what is already known and represented in culture. The routine and reproducible nature of preschool institutions is emphasized in the work of Alasuutari and Markstrom (2011):

> We use the concept of social order to refer to the rule system of the institution. The social order includes explicitly stated, and, hence, discursively formulated, rules, principles, and norms of preschool, and its routine-like habits. The latter is the sequel of everyday practices, i.e., recurrent events in the daily life of preschool and habitual discourses and premises ... The social order of an institution is always constructed. Preschool also presumes specific conduct, characteristics, and relationships among its actors—children, teachers, and parents. (pp. 519–520)

The analysis of statements by teachers and parents in interviews that these authors conducted showed that reproducibility is a systemic characteristic of a preschool organization. Obviously, the idea of the child's dependence on adults and the child's subordination to an adult predominates. The requirements for creating conditions for the manifestation of the child's autonomy and independence, which serve as preschool education goals, are "governed by and allowed only within the limits of the institutional order" (Alasuutari & Markstrom, 2011, p. 530).

A similar result was obtained in a study by Einarsdottir (2014). Children aged 5–6 years were given cameras to record the most interesting events in the preschool establishment and then asked to speak about their teachers' role in the kindergarten. The study showed that, first, the children displayed the most interest in their peers and events related to interactions with them, rather than with the adults. The children noted the importance of assistance and support from their teachers and their role as observers when the children were engaged in independent activities. At the same time, the children spoke of their teachers as preschool controllers and monitors of student compliance with the rules, the violation of which caused negative emotions in teachers.

Einarsdottir (2014) noted:

> many of the children who participated in the study talked about the role of the preschool teachers as controllers and rulers. They reported that the teachers were the ones that made the decisions and it was their job to make sure the children did the right things. (p. 693)

Thus, the tradition of understanding culture as a system of "ideal forms" prescribes the reproducible nature of preschool education as having dominant adult control.

It remains an open question as to what makes it possible to develop a child's creative personality if reproducibility predominates. In her 2017 study, based on a survey of Chinese preschool teachers, Cheung showed that, although the development of creativity was considered an absolute value, teachers did not, in practice, have the wherewithal to

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implement it. With a shortage of time and a tight schedule for the children to fulfill various tasks, the teachers chose the strategy of having children comply with the instructions of an adult, thereby making it impossible for the children to show much initiative. Notwithstanding the educational reforms now underway, some teachers proceeded from the fact that a successful lesson is one carried out to the end; a lesson in which children begin to do a lot of talking is considered ineffective.

Thus, a special task arises to understand how to support the development of a child's creative personality in the kindergarten environment. It is important to stress that creativity is the process of creating something new or, to be more precise, a new product. Does a child have a chance to generate a creative product? And what opportunities should there be to let them achieve such an opportunity? We are faced with a special problem of analyzing the concept of the space of opportunities, and how it correlates with the notion of the proximal development zone.

This problem requires theoretical reflection. Such an attempt is presented in the present article.

Development and culture

The success of preschoolers' development is largely determined by how well communication between adults and children is organized (Howes, Fuligni, Soliday Hong, Shuang, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2013; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2002). One of the most common views of children is that they are inexperienced people unable to join the productive activities of the adult community and therefore require a special period to prepare for adult life. Representatives of the cultural-historical theory share this approach (Veraksa & Sheridan, 2018). Thus, Elkonin (1978) wrote:

> There arises a situation in which a child cannot be taught to master instruments of labor because of their complexity, and also due to the fact that the division of labor formed creates opportunities for choosing future activities that are not determined unequivocally by the parents' activities. Then comes a period of time in which children are left to their own devices. (p. 63)[1]

Leontiev (2009) pointed out the child's limitations:

> A human being is not born with the endowed historical achievements of mankind. The accomplishments of previous generations are embodied neither in him, nor in his natural inclinations, but rather in the world of products of social and historical practice that surrounds him—in language, in science, and in moral norms, in works of art. A man acquires truly human qualities and abilities by appropriating these achievements. (p. 376)

The very fact that a child is born into a culture speaks of the need for the child to acquire it. Leontiev (2009) noted this: "the main thing for development is to involve the child in communicating with the adult, in acquiring the world of material and spiritual phenomena that have been created in the course of the historical development of human society" (p. 374).

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The importance of the child's interaction with the environment for their development is emphasized in the context of cultural-historical theory: the social environment is considered not as a factor but the source of development (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198). As Veresov (2019) points out, in Vygotsky's original writings, the social environment as a source of development is understood in a specific way. "Source" here is not a metaphor—as in the source of a river from which the water flows naturally—but rather an infinite source from which the "child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198). This highlights the active role of the child. The source does not determine the process; it becomes a resource when the child begins to draw from it.

Culture appears as a source of cultural or ideal forms. Elkonin (1978) wrote, "the child interacts with some ideal form, i.e. the level of development of human culture that the society into which he was born, has reached" (p. 32). The important point is that cultural forms are already in existence. They arose before the child's birth and act as established models. The process of acquiring these models or ideal forms determines the child's development.

Vygotsky (1983) contrasted two aspects of the development process—a natural one and a cultural one:

> The growth of a normal child into civilization is usually a pure alloy of processes of their organic maturation. Both development planes—the natural one and the cultural one—coincide and merge with each other. Both series of changes interpenetrate each other and form, in effect, a single series of the socio-biological formation of the child's personality. (p. 31)

He regarded this opposition to be necessary, albeit conditional: "the nature vs. nurture conflict within human psychology is correct only conditionally ... we, however, believe that distinguishing between either of them is an absolutely necessary prerequisite for any adequate research into human psychology" (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 35).

In analyzing the process of child development, Vygotsky (2019) emphasized one of its contradictory features:

> the greatest peculiarity of child development is that this development takes place under conditions of interaction with the environment when the ideal form, the final form, that which should emerge at the end of development not only exists in the environment and comes into contact with the child from the very beginning … that is something which should emerge at the very end of development somehow influences the very first footsteps of that development. (p. 78)

To explain this circumstance, he introduced the concept of the primary form, and that of the final form. He most likely understood the primary form to be the genetically conditioned, initial mental formations that underlie the child's interaction with their culture and which evolve in the course of this interaction:

> We saw that the child at the very beginning of development acquires only the primary form, i.e. let us say in the field of speech the child utters only

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> single words. But these single words are part of a dialogue between the child and the mother, who has already acquired the ideal form, that which should appear in the child at the end of development. Can the child in a year or a year and a half of life acquire this ideal form, i.e. simply assimilate it, just by imitation? He cannot. Can the child of this age nevertheless, by moving from the first step to the very last, more and more come to adjust this primary form to the final form? Yes, research shows that this is exactly what actually happens. (Vygotsky, 2019, p. 79)

Vygotsky (2019) understood the ideal form to mean mental formations that are to appear at the end point of development and which also already exist in culture and are cultural models:

> Let us agree to call this developed form, which should appear at the end of child development … a final or ideal form—ideal in the sense that it is a representation of what should emerge at the end of development, and final in the sense that it is what must emerge at the end of child development. (p. 78)

Vygotsky (2019) considered the process of development as an interaction between the primary and ideal forms:

> How, for example, does the notion of quantity, the child's arithmetical thinking, develop in the child? As is well known, the child in the beginning, let us say, in the years of preschool, is still very restricted and vague in his idea of quantities. But these first forms of child arithmetical thinking come into contact with the already developed arithmetical thinking of adult people, i.e. once again the final form that should appear as a result of the whole of child development is present already at the very beginning of child development and not only is it present, but it is factually defining and directing the first steps of the child onto the path of developing this form (p. 78).

We would like to emphasize once again that the essential feature of the child development process is the indispensable involvement of two individuals: an adult and a child. The adult acts as a carrier of the ideal form. The child learns that form by improving their primary form through the process of interaction and by imitating the adult. In this case, the child is regarded as inept, or little aware of the cultural content that has evolved and stabilized. This content is humankind's past. We can say that the child is imperfect in the context of the past.

Education and the zone of proximal development

Clearly, there is a need for teaching in connection with the development of ideal forms. Ideal forms constitute the foundation of culture. However, the ideal form does not reveal itself to the child directly. The child acquires it with the help of its carrier or mediator, whose role is played by the adult. Vygotsky (2009) considered a situation in which the carrier of the ideal form, the adult, is absent:

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> Imagine a child in this environment where there is no ideal form, i.e. that the development of the child is not subject to the law of which I just spoke, namely, that the final form is absent and does not interact with the beginning form, but that the child develops in an environment with other children, i.e. there is an environment of his peers and the lower, beginning form. Will the child develop appropriate activities, appropriate properties? Studies show that he will, but it in a very peculiar way, i.e. they will always develop very slowly, very peculiarly and at no moment will they reach the level which they achieve when there is in the environment the appropriate ideal form. (p. 80)

Leontiev (2009) proposed to study a similar scenario:

> If our planet were to suffer a catastrophe, in which the only survivors were small children while the entire adult population perished, the human race would not come to an end, but the history of mankind would inevitably be discontinued. The treasures of culture would continue to exist physically, but there would be no one to reveal them to new generations. (p. 375)

The explanation of these consequences is based on the principle of objectivity, which Leontiev (1975) considered the main characteristic of human activity:

> An activity may seem pointless, but scientific research into the activity requires the discovery of its subject. Given that, the object of activity is twofold: firstly, as one that has independent existence that subordinates and transforms the activity of the subject; secondly, as the image of an object, as a product of mental reflection of its property, which is realized due to the subject's activity and is unrealizable otherwise. Even at the inception of an activity its mental reflection reveals its objective nature. (p. 84)

Considering objectivity as a property of human activity, Leontiev emphasized that products of human activity are also characterized by two types of properties: natural and objective. If natural properties reflect the spatial and physical features of objects, objective properties reflect the extent to which these objects can satisfy human needs. To meet these needs, it is necessary to identify these objective properties. Significantly, objective properties do not embrace the logic of spatial and physical relations. The human use of objects requires special forms of activity that differ from natural interactions with objects. That is why objective properties are not directly presented to the child's consciousness. It is only with the help of an adult that the child discovers and masters the ways of making use of objects of human culture—without an adult, a child's development will be delayed, according to Leontiev.

These two examples convincingly reveal these authors' positions on the role of the adult in child development. The child is able to master cultural achievements (ideal forms) only with the adult's assistance. In fact, the adult acts as a supreme being, who knows what the child needs to do, and how they need to do it. In this case, the adult not only produces an ideal form but also directly instructs and controls the process of interaction between the primary and ideal forms. This control (control from above) is dominant in

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the sense that the adult, as a carrier of the ideal form, knows the correct result in advance, and they have reasons to direct the child's actions in accordance with a predesigned scheme.

This process occurs in a special educational space, which is determined by the presence of the zone of proximal development. In fact, the zone of proximal development appears as a meeting place of the primary and ideal forms. As follows from the above, the leading role in this process—organizing the zone of proximal development—belongs to the adult. The adult selects cultural models, shows ways of dealing with them, and controls the results of their acquisition. Vygotsky characterizes this process as a special form of education that leads to development—developing education.

This resonates with Popper's (2008) statement on knowledge:

> when we start to do something—for example, building a house—then it is not in our will to continue it as we please unless we want to get buried under its collapsed roof. Rather, there are structural laws that we need to be revealed to us, laws that we cannot change and that are autonomous. (p. 82)

In other words, a child should not only obey an adult's instructions, but they should also obey those laws that are behind this knowledge. Here, we have a situation of double subordination: the child obeys the direction of the adult because the adult represents the supreme form and, conversely, the child must obey the objective laws that characterize this supreme form.

Popper defined the latter case as the autonomy of "world three": knowledge possesses some objectivity that does not depend upon the person. In this sense, knowledge makes the same demands of any child who is trying to acquire it. This interpretation of the properties of knowledge has a consequences in at least two areas: 1) the expediency of a class-based learning system and 2) norm-setting for children and the child development processes.

In view of the above, we can provide some considerations of the role that learning plays in child development. Models can be regarded as ready-made schemes imposed on children's meanings that determine the content of their future products. In other words, the child's very thinking assumes a reproducible nature. The main criticism of this approach—in which an adult plays the leading role—is based on the fear that children's creative abilities would be limited to, and oriented toward, the reproduction of academic standards (Miller & Almon, 2009). The need to support the child's initiative, their emotional development, and the evolution of creativity and ethical consciousness is stressed (Wardekker, Boersma, Ten Dam, & Volman, 2012).

At the same time, a child who grows up in society must know the basic rules of this society to be socialized. In fact, the cultural models are bearers of such rules. In this sense, the foundations of culture are situations of social interaction, which are normalized, standardized, and stable. Cultural situations are situations that repeat many times—that is, they are reproducible. Moreover, when a child finds themselves in a normal situation and obeys the accepted rules, the child becomes a social unit, without individuality. We can say the culture does not demand individuality. Once again, we

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emphasize that any social activity rests on stable forms of agreements (i.e., normalized situations), which characterize the interaction between participants in the process of social communication. The social functions of society give rise to the need for cultural norms.

A set of cultural tasks and situations imposes age limitations on the child's acquisition of cultural forms. The greater the number of cultural norms a child learns, the deeper they become "rooted" into culture. Thus, preschool childhood is loaded with content that involves the maximum possible acquisition of cultural norms.

The child's voice and the space of child realization

There is another point of view, according to which the child is regarded as the subject of the educational process and their life (Johansson, 2011): the child influences the choice of the content to be mastered, and manages their own time (Komulainen, 2007).

A rather popular answer to the question of how to implement this approach in practice is to let the child make their own choices. Indeed, the child is repeatedly given choices every day: for example, in US preschool educational practice. However, the adults control the choices that are available to the child (Canella, 1997).

Some authors define their position in terms of the opportunities that are created in the preschool environment. The object–space environment acts in dual way, both as a set of standards and in allowing the child to act on it according to their own will, without pressure from the adult, thus opening up new opportunities. This method allows children to follow a creative path. The position of some authors, on an adult's proper position in relation to children's play, is very typical in this respect. So, for example, Singer (2015) believes that an adult should abstain from interfering with children's play.

The point is that the zone of proximal development is controlled by the adult, by whom the child is guided, and the situation itself, as noted above, is reproducible. In the space of possibilities, the child acts as an initiator. However, a possible result of the child's worldview—obtaining a creative product—is highly limited by the arsenal of skills the child possesses. By what means can a child obtain a creative product (i.e., something that is not available in their environment)? Either by discovering new properties in a known object, or by virtue of new properties being brought into the object–space environment from the outside.

We believe that the subjective spatial environment, by itself, does not guarantee that the child will take initiative and implement their intent successfully. The child should get backing from adults, in which case, the adult acts as an intermediary between the child's initiative and its implementation. This process is addressed in the concept of "the voice of a child." The understanding that the child has the right to a voice is largely based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. "The voice of the child" is directed orthogonally to the processes organized by the adult. However, many teachers see their task as making it comfortable for the child to incorporate their voice in the schemes already offered by adults and consistent with cultural norms and expectations. Thus, Alasuutari (2014) noted that a competent child today is understood as one who has the right to express their views and to be involved in discussing matters that concern

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them. However, as shown by the research conducted and observations made, teachers often tended to disregard children's issues:

> Even though the principles of Finnish ECEC [early childhood and care] are framed by the idea of the competent child, this study reveals that at the micro level the domestication of the idea is a complex process … Therefore, the idea of the competent child is also partly "lost in translation." (Alasuutari, 2014, p. 255)

Even the child's zone of proximal development does not invent new forms of culture, though "it can be seen as a dominant discourse in education at the macro level [and] it is too simplistic to assume that it is self-evidently a dominant approach in the educational practices." (Alasuutari, 2014, p. 255).

In part, it seems to us that this trend is due to the fact that teachers often find the tasks of interaction with "children's voices" difficult to understand. Similar data were obtained in another study. Sargeant and Gillett-Swan (2015) conducted a mass survey of primary school students, which showed that children were not only aware of the difficulties in the educational process but also offered productive solutions for adults: "Voice-inclusive practice is underpinned by an environment where the children feel free to participate at a level of their choosing … Many teachers continue to select strategies that are reliant on the hierarchical maintenance of control and power" (p. 188).

Komulainen (2007) discussed the problems involved in understanding the child's voice. She emphasized that the adult tends to lack confidence that they will hear the child in a proper way. In this sense, the child's voice always leaves room for interpretation: "in daily nursery work different interpretations of the child's verbal intentions would emerge" (Komulainen, 2007, p. 16). Moreover, since there is no certainty of its correct interpretation by the adult, it turns out that the child's voice always contains some additional meaning brought in by the adult. In other words, the child's voice reflects not so much the child's desire as it does the cultural form in which it is interpreted. It turns out that the adult constantly interprets the child's meaning. Thus, we should view the child's voice as a complex social construction rather than an individual, authentic phenomenon (Schnoor, 2013, p. 460).

As noted by Tertoolen, Geldens, van Oers and Popeijus (2017), referring to the work of Wertsch, the voice of a subject, including that of a child, is inherently social by virtue of the specifics of human interaction: "As one's voice comes into contact with other voices, the meaning of what is said may change under the influence of those other voices, and so voices become more and more multi-voiced" (pp. 252–253). Given this, they connect the development of subjectivity with the possibility of manifesting a child's voice in the environment that surrounds the child. They found that the content of the child's voice largely coincides with that of the statements by close adults: parents and teachers.

Maybin (2013) obtained data that supported the conclusion that "contexts … are not monolithic but layered and interlocking, incorporating diverse and sometimes fluid patterns of indexicality" (p. 395). Thus, as social constructs, children's voices prove to be not only complex but also heterogeneous. In connection with this, Schnoor (2013) saw the main problem in distinguishing the child's own voice against the background of everyday voices: "it does not try to elicit 'voices' by specialized methods or established

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research situations, but expects 'voices' to emerge and change in the relations, interactions, and performances among and between children and adults" (p. 469).

However, the complexity of the task is exacerbated by the fact that the success of its solution also depends on the child's interpretation of the situation itself. For example, Wong (2016) notes, "a child who perceives learning new things as being challenging will actively participate in learning, while a child who perceives learning as being stressful may avoid learning new things" (p. 974). Undoubtedly, the fact is that, no matter how accurately the adult has conveyed the meaning of the child, the adult's interpretation is regarded as one belonging to the child. Actually, we are faced with the phenomenon of objectifying children's meanings and inscribing them into culture.

We believe it to be essential, irrespective of the extent to which an adult accurately heard the voice of a child, for the adult to objectify the child's meaning in the form of a cultural idea and to help the child express it in an appropriate form and realize it in socially significant products. What is important is that the child accepts the adult's assistance and considers it a way of realizing their own design. The process of realization is not limited to making a product but also involves its social presentation and institutionalization so that the child can speak to their peers and parents as a creator of a new cultural element. It can be an element of the culture of a kindergarten group, several children's groups, or a whole kindergarten, and, on an even broader scale, the culture of a city or a region.

We thus propose to introduce a new term that denotes a special semantic space for children's activity—the "space of child realization"—a space that allows the child to present themselves to others as a creator of culture—that is, a personality. This concept denotes an area that is, in a sense, opposite to that of the zone of proximal development. Where, in the zone of proximal development, the child follows the adult by copying them, in the space of child realization, the adult follows the child by helping in their activity. And where, in the zone of proximal development, a product is the result of acquiring a well-known element of culture, in the space of child realization, the child creates a new product that is not already inscribed in cultural norms.

Moreover, in the zone of proximal development, the child learns their culture's past, while, in the space of child realization, the child's development is due to their creation of a future culture. In fact, we have two methods of development: development oriented toward the past and development oriented to the future.

The space of child realization is not limited to the subjective spatial environment but is determined by the effectiveness of children's activity, in association with the creation of a new product, that was authored by a child. We are talking about the fact that the space of child realization is a special part of childhood that ensures the child's development in the social space, in the system of social relations. It is important to note that the adult's goal is not so much to create the most diverse environment but rather to ensure the process of the child's realization of their own ideas, experiences, and voice. What matters here is not just for the voice to be heard but rather for it to be directed toward the child's self-realization and to be transformed into a product. In this case, a preschool institution with a relatively poor environment, if it provides space for children's self-realization, may be educationally more effective than a kindergarten with a rich environment. Thus, it changes the understanding of the aims that education is to fulfill. The structure of the education process takes the shape as shown in Figure 1.

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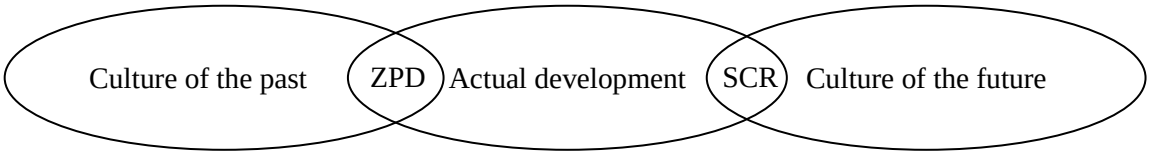

Figure 1. Structure of the education process. ZPD = zone of proximal development; SCR = space of child realization.

Conclusions

Teachers should take into account the fact that a child is a creature of their culture, who must acquire cultural norms that are adequate to their society. However, if we confine ourselves to this, then the space in which the child develops turns out to be alienated from the child's interests. Hence, the second task a caregiver faces is to ensure the child's self-realization by creating a new space in which the child gets adult support in generating new products.

Family education faces the same challenge. The task of the family is to provide the possibility of unfolding the space of child realization, wherein the child may realize their ideas. Thus, a child's participation in discussing family problems, including the right to have a say, raises the level of their moral consciousness, which indicates the importance of supporting the space of child realization (see Walker & Taylor, 1991). Another option for constructing a space for child realization is by providing a project activity for preschoolers (Veraksa & Veraksa, 2015).

The data available on this account allows us to talk about the unfolding of the space of child realization from an early age. Products may include ideas proposed by the child for general discussion and children's works that embody the children's own design and are carried out on their own or with the adult's assistance.

The demarcation the two spaces—the zone of proximal development and the space of child realization—allows one to speak about the different types of communication that characterize each of them. Communication between an adult and a child in the zone of proximal development aims to get the child to acquire their culture's ideal forms and, in fact, means instructing children. The task of this type of communication is to get the child to understand the adult's instructions and to obey the logic of the structural relations behind the system of scientific knowledge.

The space of child realization requires a different type of communication and interaction between adult and child. In this case, the adult should listen properly to the child's voice to understand their intention and not only help the child to realize this intention but also create the conditions that support its relevance. We believe that the search for new educational practices, such as participatory research (Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014), is largely associated with the construction of a space of child realization.

Thus, we can say that the child's development in their early years is determined not so much by being in a subject-developing environment as by the possibility of being in two spaces: the zone of proximal development and the space of child realization—that is of both mastering the culture of the past and taking part in building the culture of the future

[1] All the translations are the author's.

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