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## Education Practices and Maturation<sup>1</sup>

*The article briefly discusses the question of how we should establish special educational practices that could help students mature. In identifying such practices, the author looks to a number of empirical studies that allow us to understand what significance the concept of “maturation” has for children and teenagers. In conclusion, the author notes that modern educational systems rarely provide students with the opportunity to try on adult roles. To allow this, changes will have to be made and special mechanisms will have to be designed that enable children, teenagers, and college students to show initiative and take responsibility.*

Lev Vygotsky wrote the following in one of his lectures that focuses on the characteristics of childhood development and describes the importance of adulthood as an ideal form (cited in Elkonin 1994, p. 7):

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English translation © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text © 2015 “Obrazovatel’naia politika.” “Obrazovatel’naia praktika vzrosle-niia,” *Obrazovatel’naia politika*, 2015, no. 4(70), pp. 28–30. Translated by Kenneth Cargill.

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None of the developmental models that are known to us provides for an initial form of development that already reserves space for something higher and ideal that will appear during the last stage of development. Such a model would directly interact with the first steps that the child makes as he develops this initial, or primary form. This model represents the most unique form of childhood development that distinguishes it from other types of development where we could never expect to find such a state of affairs.

How is this ideal form cultivated, and what role do schools, which are largely responsible for structuring the lives of students, play? The issue of how we should translate categories from the field of developmental psychology into the language of educational system design, which B.D. Elkonin and I first raised in an article from 1993, is quite important (Elkonin and Froumin 1993). We see the subject of design as an exercise in mediation whose main task should be to present the child with adulthood (maturity) as the end goal that the child should aspire to, i.e., it should give form to the event of maturation.

However, to implement this design you need to understand what meaning the notion of “adulthood” has for children and adolescents. What criteria and markers do they understand as constituting adult and childish behavior? What constitutes the ideal form of adulthood? The landmark study in the search for answers to these questions was the famous one by D.B. Elkonin and T.V. Dragunova, which observed fifth-grade students over the course of a school year to identify the specific features of their transition to adolescence. It was discovered that one of the developments of young school-age students is the feeling of adulthood. The researchers found that it is possible to distinguish this feeling of adulthood, which is characterized, firstly, by the adolescent’s desire that adults treat him not as a child, but as an adult; secondly, by the desire for independence and to protect some areas of his life from the interference of adults; and thirdly, an insistence on his own independent behavioral decisions even when adults disagree (Elkonin and Dragunova 1967).

This confirms that school is a social institution, which largely does not determine, but rather accompanies the process of student

development and maturation, which rely on social and natural processes. In this regard, to design an educational space that allows children to encounter the forms of adulthood, it is first necessary to understand what currently constitutes the criterion of adulthood.

Data that were collected from interviews held during the large-scale “Education and Career Trajectories” longitudinal study, which was conducted by the Institute of Education of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, can help us answer this question. An analysis of more than 100 interviews with adolescents between the ages of 16 and 17 revealed what they thought constituted the attributes of adulthood: working a part-time job; earning pocket money from a part-time job; spending money on an item that is independently selected (e.g., the first independently purchased article of clothing); making independent choices about one’s body, including diets, sports, and makeup; self-management of one’s own time and schedule; determining for oneself what one likes and dislikes, what is right and wrong, and what is interesting and not interesting; comparisons with one’s peers (I am a certain kind of person, they are different, but these other people are like me), and developing romantic relationships that help establish a gender identity (Pavlenko 2014; Yanbarisova 2014). In general, we can say that the main categories that are used to describe adulthood are “financial autonomy,” “making independent decisions and following through on them,” and “responsibility.” Thus, adolescents’ ideas about adulthood have remained largely stable over time since the late 1950s, with the exception, perhaps, of new economic categories, which now represent an important element of maturation and understanding what adulthood is. The “Education and Career Trajectories” study has been constructed as a longitudinal one (with a panel of more than 3,500 respondents) that is aimed at understanding the patterns of how people develop from one age group to another and to determine the typical paths that people follow while maturing.

The mechanisms that are used at school and in the educational system as a whole to help students mature and plan out their lives have been identified in a number of empirical studies that were

carried out at the Institute of Education. One of these projects analyzed the interrelationships between the particular features of school and the trajectories of graduates of 19 schools from various regions. The pilot study failed to find a significant connection between the features of the school and the objective characteristics of student life-courses. However, it was possible to extrapolate connections between the particular features of the school and perspectives on maturation and how “the ideal form” is seen from the pilot study data (Novopashina, Froumin, and Khasan 2013). To clarify this hypothesis, an ethnographic study was launched at two large regional-level educational institutions in Moscow, which included observation of how processes are organized at the school, in-depth interviews, and a statistical analysis. This study focused on interactions between age groups and social stratification. Various kinds of childhood and the perspectives of various social groups were discovered: The first set of data indicates that social status is more tightly linked to future plans than academic achievement.

Our analysis of maturation has also covered university students. Thus, in 2015, we launched an international study of student experiences, in which 12 Russian universities participated. The main task was to discover a transforming experience, the different educational and professional trajectories, and factors that determine the diversity of these life-paths.

It can be said that the main gap in modern childhood is the divergence between the requirements of the educational system that largely structures the lives of children and adolescents and the requirements of the system of maturation, which requires people to develop their own sense of independence, responsibility, and initiative. Unfortunately, modern schooling with the exception of certain schools and programs pays much too little attention to establishing mechanisms that help inculcate a sense of adulthood. It does not offer a proper environment for free experimentation, taking on responsibilities, and acting on one’s own initiative. Moreover, the data from the same “Education and Career Trajectories” study show that the teacher is almost never an intermediary who helps define the image of adulthood. At the

same time, despite the fact that adulthood manifests itself in many respects outside of school and the educational process, the classroom plays an important role and functions as a important space where children differentiate themselves from others.

To address the gap between the current requirements of the school system and the particular features of the situations that allow children and adolescents to manifest themselves as adults and to try out new forms of behavior and relationships, it is necessary to establish new educational practices and to design the educational environment in light of the mechanisms of development and maturation.

In other words, it is necessary to specifically design “environments for maturation,” which would enhance and add value to modern schooling by offering an engaging and facilitative learning and development context where the youth will be able to best unlock their potential for social experimentation and would feel themselves free and independent to show initiative and take responsibility.

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