Every new theory, Vygotsky asserted, requires a new methodology – a new way of “collecting data,” inscribable aspects of the flow of human activities which our theory specifies as relevant to understanding the phenomenon of interest.

The idea of a mesogenetic methodology arises from the general proposition that to understand behavior means to understand the history/genesis of behavior. This proposition has long been acknowledged as a fundamental tenet of cultural-historical approaches to the study of human nature. The actual representation of this idea in the practice of cultural-historical psychologists has, however, been restricted to implementing only parts of the overall paradigm. In place of research programs that include phylogenetic, cultural-historical, ontogenetic, and microgenetic data within a single, integrated field of inquiry, scholars have either focused entirely on a single genetic domain (ontogeny or microgenesis, for the most part) or the relationship between two neighboring domains (e.g., ontogenetic changes in microgenetic processes). The reason for this state of affairs is obvious: phylogenetic and cultural-historical change generally take place at rates so slow with respect to the ontogeny of the investigator that integrated research is impossible. In the relatively few cases where the goal has been to study the relation between phylogeny or cultural/historical development and ontogeny, “cross-species” and cross-cultural methods, with all of their attendant methodological problems, have been used.

What I am referring to as a “mesogenetic” approach to the study of development is one in which the time scale falls between the ontogenetic scale focused on individuals and the macro-genetic societal scale implied by the historical difference between peasant and industrialized societies. The basic strategy for this research exemplified by the 5th Dimension has been to create a system of activities with its own standing rules, artifacts, social roles, and ecological setting, that is, its own culture. The system of activities is implemented in a plausible setting with plausible collaborative intent on the part of the university and community institutions to enter into a long term partnership. Then the developmental history of the activity system in its context is traced to observe “its” struggle to develop and survive.
A basic characteristic of the mesogenetic approach involved in designing, implementing, and seeking to sustain 5th Dimension is that the expected lifespan of such activities is about three years (based on a sample of 120 such efforts in our data base). However, some 5th Dimension-inspired programs continued for a decade or more and some have yet to expire. This range of 5th Dimension longevity means that it is possible to obtain critical data associated not only with the conception, birth and growth of a cultural-historical system of activity, but with the decline and eventual demise of such systems. This point is important because students of development in the Vygotskian tradition argue that the principles of development manifest themselves no less in the process of aging among the elderly and among infants.

A difficulty with critically engaging the study of lifespan development at the ontogenetic level is that researchers themselves and the objects they are studying (other human beings) develop on roughly the same time scale. Birth and death. The same is not true for 5th Dimension activity systems. In so far as they continue for a number of years, and the researcher begins the work when s/he is young enough, it is possible to document the process of the development of “the activity system itself” including the process of its demise.

In what follows, I provide a history of the development of the concept of a mesogenetic methodology. It was not there when we began the research. It developed, as Vygotsky would expect it to, in the process of seeking to overcome the barriers to creating and sustaining our activity system over time.

**The Development of the Concept of a Mesogenetic Methodology**

While we did not have a self-conscious, articulated concept of a mesogenetic methodology when we began, we did have a tool kit of methods and theoretical ideas. We had designed and implemented activities before but never with the intent to sustain them as long as possible and observe their demise. It is certain that we did not fully understand the implications of our focus on sustainability.

We had come at the problem of sustainability so to speak, backwards – from the shock of discovering that our investigation into the characteristics of successful programs for STEM inclusion had a known answer, stamped with the approval of the AAAS (1984). The issue, as we saw it, was not a specification of what was required to induce the kind of academic changes that policy makers were striving for; it was crucially a matter of how to sustain already proven effective programs. In the beginning, we really did not know what to expect at the “cultural-historical level,” at the level of the programs in their community.