

The Zone of Early Detection: A Preventative Perspective in Changing a Life Trajectory

What is the Zone of Early Detection?

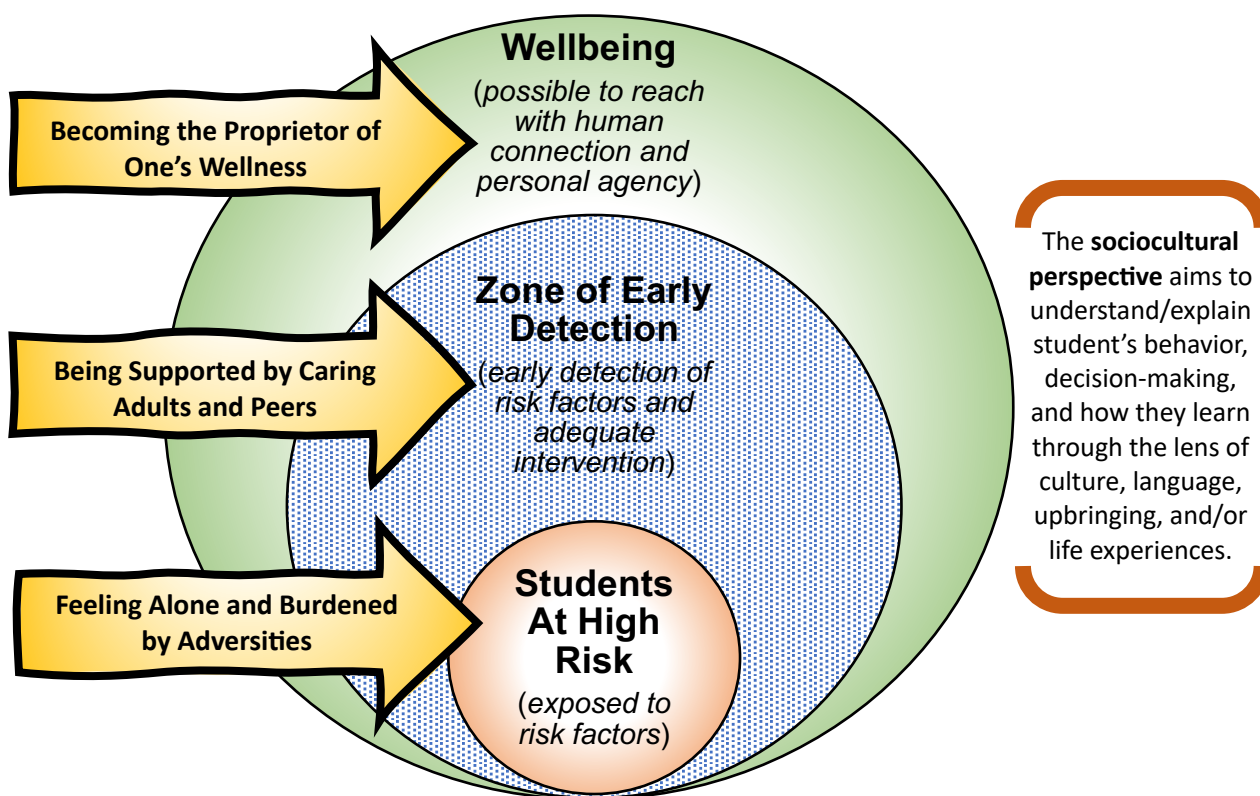
The **Zone of Early Detection (ZED)** was inspired by Lev Vygotsky's seminal concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; 1978).¹ The ZPD was developed to account for the learning potential of children and the social interactions with cultural artifacts/tools such as culture, language, values, beliefs that are at the educator's disposal to use as scaffolders to support students.²

Thenceforward ZED, as a sociocultural framework, seeks to better understand the gap between: (1) the prevalence

of psychological distress as determined by the level of exposure to risk factors associated with mental illness; and (2) the development of protective factors linked to wellbeing as determined by human connection and personal agency. Exhibit 1 shows an illustration of ZED.

The key elements in the definition of ZED are the notions of potential resiliency of students when exposed to multiple risk factors and the role that early detection can play in changing life trajectories. These elements also reflect student's potential for creative enthusiasm and engagement in guiding their development.

Exhibit 1. ZED and Prevention of Mental Health Issues



There are three key notions central to ZED: (1) the resiliency of students to thrive when exposed to multiple risk factors; (2) the role that early detection—under the facilitation of caring adults and peers—can play in helping students create a life trajectory and be

fulfilled by their new life experiences; and (3) the uniqueness of students' culture, language, and life experiences, as assets and protectors that promote resilient behavior and action, lies, then, in developing personal agency and self-advocacy.

¹ Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² Shabani, K., Khatib, M., & Edadi, S. (2010). Vygotski's ZPD: instructional implications and teachers' professional development. *English Language Teaching*, 3(4), 237-248.

Students' Resilience to Overcome Adversities

Feeling overwhelmed from everyday exposure to stressors from a very young age can increase the risks of mental health issues later in life. Stressors can impact mood, sense of wellbeing, behavior, and health.³ This is the level of ZED in which students are at their most vulnerable to risk factors associated with the onset of mental health disorders.

Our responsibility as educators and providers is to work side-by-side students and engage them in gaining appropriate knowledge and learning experiences that help them recognize the risk factors associated with psychological distress. Additionally, to help students realize their potential to overcome the risk factors by engaging them in decision-making toward creating a path to their wellbeing and prosperity.

Adolescents who develop the ability to adapt well to adversities, trauma, threats, and sources of everyday school and life stressors have at least one stable, committed and trusting relationship with a supportive and caring adult (e.g., parent, teacher, counselor). Adolescent's ability to withstand adversity can be determined by whether they have a close supportive bond with a caregiver or caring adult.⁴ Peer support has also been associated as a potential resource for adolescents to build and/or strengthen their resilience.⁵

Early Detection and Human Connection

Being connected to caring adults and peers can create safe environments where meaningful and purposeful conversation and sharing life experiences happen. Dialogue under the guidance of a trustworthy and caring adult that does not impose, does not judge, does not stigmatize, can lead to understanding and analyzing the underlying root causes of stress and anxieties that are disrupting an adolescent's flow of life. Simply put, human connection is a pillar of wellbeing.⁶ As educators and providers, our responsibility is to ensure that students experience healthy human connection that helps them thrive in school and community life. A sense of school and

community connectedness can translate to improving students' self-efficacy, regulating their emotions, and cultivating their resilience and wellbeing.

Establishing meaningful and purposeful teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer relationships, which engenders community and togetherness, is an essential element of early detection and in designing interventions that are appropriate and adequate to the adolescent. This space within the ZED is a purposeful form of action which operates upon strengthening human connection and supportive relationships. This part is critical to preventing prolonged suffering and changing an adolescent's life's trajectory from acute and/or severe mental disability to productivity, prosperity, and wellbeing.

Sense of Agency and Empowerment

This level of ZED means youth realize their autonomy, become their own advocate, recognize the role they play in building their capacity, participate in changing and managing their life trajectory, and become a constant mode of action for sustaining their wellbeing. Building resilience takes time and requires youth to continue working through difficulties, failures, pain, and suffering.

Our responsibility as educators and providers is to work closely with students to design strategies that are appropriate and relevant to them in breaking down daily stressors, that threaten their mental wellbeing, into manageable tasks. By doing this, students can better diagnose, identify, and cope with their many stressors all the while strengthening their self-efficacy and resilience.

A sense of agency is possible when adolescents have access to safe spaces where they can express, explore, embrace their self-identity, and strengthen their self-efficacy.⁷ Empowerment is critical to mediating the impact of risk factors associated with psychological distress, and in the recovery of youth when facing life adversities.⁸ In short, agency and empowerment are essential protective factors associated with improving youth's mental wellbeing and healthy outcomes.

³ Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S. D. (2005). Stress and health: psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 1*, 607–628.

⁴ Gartland, D., Riggs, E., Muyeen, S., Giallo, R., & Affi, T. O. (2019). What factors are associated with resilient outcomes in children exposed to social adversity? A systematic review. *BMJ open, 9*(4).

⁵ Tang, Y., Diao, H., Jin, F., Pu, Y., & Wang, H. (2022). The effect of peer education based on adolescent health education on the resilience of children and adolescents. *PLoS one, 17*(2).

⁶ Martino, J., Pegg, J., & Frates, E. P. (2015). The Connection Prescription: Using the Power of Social Interactions and the Deep

Desire for Connectedness to Empower Health and Wellness. *American journal of lifestyle medicine, 11*(6), 466–475.

⁷ Sidle, A.A. (2019). Action on agency: a theoretical framework for defining and operationalizing agency in girls' life skills programs. *Gendered Perspectives on International Development*.

⁸ Grealish, A., Tai, S., Hunter, A., Emsley, R., & Murrells, T. (2017). Does empowerment mediate the effects of psychological factors on mental health, well-being, and recovery in young people?. *Psychology and psychotherapy, 90*(3), 314–335.