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The significance of demands and motives across practices in children's learning and development: An analysis of learning in home and school



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ABSTRACT

Cultural–historical theory is grounded in the idea that learning and development are consequences of a person's meaningful interactions in societal practices. This article builds further on the idea by emphasizing the part played by the demands from practices in these interactions. These demands themselves may be a function of an intertwining of different institutional practices. First an analytical framework is introduced and illustrated through analyzing an example of how school demands are present in the home setting. This is followed by an example from school to illustrate that demands and motives that a child encounters have to be seen in relation to the objective of the institutional practice. The article concludes with a brief discussion of some implications of the analytical perspective for theories of learning and development. Particular attention is given to the unity of person and activity settings and their transformative interactions in activities.

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1. Introduction

The aim in this article is to extend the cultural–historical theory of Vygotsky and Leontiev's theories of children's learning and development so that the complexity of children's activities in different practices can be conceptualized. The argument draws on the analytic heuristic presented in Hedegaard (2012a, 2012b), which describes how actions in activities are nested within institutional practices which are influenced by broader cultural expectations and traditions. The analytic model points to how motives within practices may or may not reflect these broader traditions and how personal motives shaping actions in activities within practices may reflect these practice motives. This framework alerts analysts to the different motives in play in different organizations, pointing to the challenges faced by children when they move between institutions such as family and school where the practice motives may be quite different.

The main point in the present article is that children's learning and development take place through their engagement in activities in specific institutional practices that are in turn influenced by motives and demands from other practices (i.e., demands from school practice may influence learning at home). Home and school create different learning settings because the practice traditions and their aims and objectives are different; these differences give different possibilities for activities with different demands for learners. Through their life-course children move between different institutional practices. For some children this transition will be smoother than for others, but it will always imply some kind of rupture, because the demands and activities in the different practices will be different. When children move from one institution to another (i.e., from home to school) new demands and motives will arise and tensions and crises may be the result of how children's earlier motives relate to demands from the new institution, these tensions and conflicts indicate how a dynamic in concrete activity settings may lead to learning and development.

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In Vygotsky's (1998) and Elkonin's (1999) theories about children's learning and development the concept of transition from family and daycare to school is seen as possibilities for learning and developmental changes. In Vygotsky's theory (1998) this transition is reflected in his description of how children's concepts change from everyday concepts to scientific concepts. In Elkonin's theory the transition is conceptualized in how children's leading motive of play changes to the leading motive of learning. Vygotsky and Elkonin point out that children's transition from one practice to another may result in tensions and crises that may lead to the deconstruction of earlier competences and motives and their reconstruction on a higher level. Winther-Lindqvist (2012a, 2012b) and Zittoun (2006, 2008) support this theoretical point with their research. Winther-Lindqvist has described how children's motive orientation and identities change because the demands and conditions for activities change when moving from kindergarten to school and moving from primary school to secondary school. Zittoun has analyzed how transitions for young people moving from an educational institution to life outside school may be facilitated by their use of symbolic resources.

In what follows I will present case analyses of tensions between motives and demands that become visible during children's daily transitions between home and school. In doing so I shall explain the reconstruction of learning and development present in the dynamic of demand and motives, pointing to how it appears on several levels – a societal, a practice and an activity level.

I use the concept of transition in a more extended way than can be found in Vygotsky's and Elkonin's work on transition between preschool and school. Their focus has been on the horizontal dimension. The horizontal transition may be seen in relation to societal possible trajectories (Hundeide, 2005) when a child enters a new practice prescribed societally in relation to his or her age period (i.e., when a child moves from kindergarten to start in school). Transition may also be viewed as a vertical move, though also directed forward, as a zigzag of transition when a child moves regularly between different institutions, because she participates in several different practices. Lulu (8 years old), whose activities will be analyzed later, moves from home to school to afterschool club and home again each day, and during the week she visits her friends in their homes.

2. Demands and motives as central in conceptualizing learning

Analyzing demands and motives as dynamic factors in children's learning and development may be contrasted to the three common types of learning theory that see learning either as depending on stimuli/input reaction and feedback leading to behavioral change, or as cognitive change through a person's acting and adaptation, or the situated learning theory that conceptualizes learning as participating in social practice that leads to new position and identities (Greeno et al, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999).

The situated approach with its emphasis on the needs for analysis of social practice when examining learning has been important for overcoming the theories of learning as individual. A particular contribution has been the introduction of the concept of persons' learning through participation in practice in the actual lived world. Nonetheless learning in this approach is still conceptualized as change of the persons. The cultural–historical approach of Vygotsky (1998) and Leontiev (1978) builds on a wholeness approach that conceptualized person and environment as a unity. This view gives an alternative to the three broad approaches just outlined, to conceptualize person and environment as a unity, where learning takes place through changes in the unity of person and environment. These changes occur in a person's motives and their recognition of demands connects with changes in motives and demands of practice.

Lewin (1946) also formulated person and environment as a unity with his concept of *field* which inspired Barker and Wright (1954, 1971) to formulate the concept of *behavioral setting*. I have united these two ideas into the concept of *activity setting* (Hedegaard, 2012b). Because it is in the activity setting within a practice that the relations between institutional objectives and the demands from institutional practice can be studied in relation to a person's motives and the demands in the setting that are placed on both other people and material conditions. This interpretation is supported by how Leontiev formulated the relation between persons and the social conditions of the situation (the setting).

Humans do not simply find external conditions to which they must adapt their activity. Rather these social conditions bear with them the motives and goals of their activity, its means and modes (Leontiev, 1978, 47–48).

The way I conceptually extend Leontiev's theory is to locate the social conditions in the institutional practices with its objective that children are expected to orient to and acquire. In school children are expected to orient to the objectives of schooling through entering into the activities and recreating them in interaction with the other participants, thereby also creating demands in the concrete school settings on teachers and other pupils (see also Hedegaard, 2012b).

The implication of the dialectical relation between a person and his environment (life world) is that research about how the object (the environment/world) that a person relates to can never be separated from a person as a subject in the activities of everyday life in activity settings whether home or school. The subjects and objects define each other, requiring researchers to use analytic resources that capture this dynamic. In cultural–historical theory the relation between the subject's motives as she engages in an activity and the demands and the objectives of the practice in which the activity is located is seen as a mediated relation. This mediation is usually conceptualized as an educational process where tools, artifacts and procedures in all their variations are important mediators.

In the following case example a transition between practices at home and in school in everyday life may be examined. Moving from one place to another means that children's motive orientation and the demands they recognize change when the practices they enter differ. The case will illustrate how tensions may evolve that indicates learning and development.

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