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### Comments

## Transitions as dynamic processes – A commentary

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### Introduction

Studies of learning have been paradoxically, and rightly, criticized for being non-developmental, or a-historical. Also, it has taken time and effort for researchers to really take account of the socially, situated components of learning. In this beautiful collection of papers, the editors invite us to take seriously the historical, cultural, situated, and dynamic nature of learning. These papers plunge into the complexities and messiness of schools, relationships to parents, diverse social and cultural settings, or sorts of knowledge. Avoiding dilution, the papers share a common cultural–historical theoretical frame that allows considering the dialectic relationships of various activity settings, together with the demands they make on actors, and how these might correspond, or not, to people's own motives. Finally, what connects the papers is obviously the notion of transition – home-to-school (Hedegaard, Bøttcher, Sanchez-Medina), in the child's development in different settings (Fleer, Ullstadius), in the case of migration (Sanchez-Medina et al.), or the transformation of educational systems (Chaiklin).

The papers give us first an overview of the heuristic power of the cultural–historical framework developed by Marianne Hedegaard (this volume, and Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005; Hedegaard, Fleer, Bang, & Hviid, 2008; Hedegaard, 2003) and invite us to give a specific attention to the directionality of the system – that is, what demands a given setting makes on children, and conversely, how children are oriented toward these demands. The evident strength of this tradition is its capacity to highlight the dialectic nature of the processes by which the child or the learning person participates in the creation of his or her social environment, and by which the implied actors and institutions, whether they are aware of it or not, contribute to the creation of the conditions from which the child will feel, think, and act. Such processes can be shown because of three further strengths of this tradition, illustrated across the papers: first, its theoretical anchorage; second, its epistemological choice to consider the child (or the learner's) perspective, and third, following these points, its methodological creativity, which allows researchers to, for example, follow children from home to school and back (see also Hedegaard et al., 2008; Hviid, 2008) or shift activities and motive orientation within the same setting (see Fleer in this collection). Hence, the paradigm is consistent and, thanks to this consistency, opens door for further theoretical developments.

In what follows, I will first underline the interest of the dialectic processes highlighted by the papers; on this basis, I will then question the use and implications of the notion of transition.

#### A. Dialectical approach to change

In Hedegaard's paper, the temporal horizon is that of the daily moves from home to school and back in the life of young children. We follow Lulu doing some task at home with her mother and siblings, and then at school. An analysis in terms of

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activity settings allows Hedegaard to show how different demands are made on Lulu at home and at school; the latter is clearly oriented toward work (mathematics), family life contains a possible demand toward play, and so Lulu can maintain a play-oriented motive at home; yet doing homework at the home of her good school-friend, she presents a school-like motive orientation.

The question of perspective is even more sensitive when it comes to disabled persons. In her paper that examines the developmental consequences of school–family relations, Bøttcher shows the dramatic implications of dialectic dynamic: two boys with severe cerebral palsy found themselves in equivalent conditions in a special education setting, with extremely contrasting consequences for their developmental trajectories. In one case, the staff included the parents' perspective and knowledge of the child's need and abilities to tailor the educational setting, allowing remarkable learning; in the other case, the parents were not heard and the setting was poorly adjusted to the child's needs and capacity for expression. Hence, the educational settings were differently related to the family settings and the parents' expertise and knowledge about the children; the demands on the second boy were consequently not adjusted to his motive orientations, partly because these were unheard. Interestingly, Bøttcher shows how the first child was able to communicate his dissatisfaction loudly, while the other's expressions were perceived as silent. In the first case, these interpreted motives catalyzed the whole adjustment of the system – pedagogues asking for the mother's expertise, tailored education – while in the other, a growing mismatch between the child's motive orientation and that of the pedagogues took place.

With a different methodological strategy, Sanchez Medina and his colleagues show how the experiences of migrant families of their children's learning at school actually appeared as compatible with the demands of the school, hence perhaps fostering motive orientations in their children that parents considered appropriate. In her microgenetic analysis, Fler beautifully shows how the same activity setting – interacting with an I-Pad – can engage children with different and contrasting activities and associated motive orientations, some playful, others more oriented to learning aspects, and actually allows for rapid “flickering” between these different motive orientations. Ullstadius takes a longitudinal perspective, where she follows mothers' relation to their children's activities, and shows that, if in some cases, there is a progressive adjustment of one to the other – which would be an adjustment in motive orientations – in others, the children's expression are perceived as disruptive – children's motives are seen as contradictory to the demands of the setting, and crises therefore arrive. Finally, at a macro-social level, Chaiklin proposes a subtle model for analyzing different preschool settings, and their evolution in the wider contexts of their societal demands. Hence, from such perspective, preschool programs and activities themselves appear as presenting motives and goals that might correspond to wider historical constraints, and through these, to various people's motive orientations; conversely, the practices emphasized by school might contribute to the development of children, whose orientation might, in turn, substantially contribute to the transformation of these environments.

While these papers all illustrate these dialectical movements between activity settings, and within settings, between goals and motive orientations, or between a setting and its wider institutional and societal setting, they give different attention to the core person involved – the child, or the learner. But how do we have access to the child or the learner's motive orientations? These young participants are never asked directly what they like or how they interpret the situation – which is in many cases impossible. In these papers, motive orientations are deduced or rather inferred from children's verbal statements, from actions they engage in, but also, from non-verbal, embodied modalities of expression. In that sense, all these acts are seen as communicative, or minimally, as externalizing part of the participant's experience – admitting that externalizing can take a wide variety of semiotic modalities (verbal, gestural, postural, etc.) (Abbey, 2007; Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Kharlamov, 2012; Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Musaeus & Brinkmann, 2011; Rodriguez, 2007; Valsiner, 1987, 2006, 2007, 2008). But this then supposes hypotheses about the children's psyche – what they feel, interpret, wish, hope for, understand or dislike. Yet from a temporal perspective, the child has a continuous experience; it is he or she who moves from home to school, or plays with a parent then a friend (Hviid, 2008). Of course, some aspects of this experience are foregrounded in specific settings – being the older brother might be more relevant at home than at school; yet these experiences do not switch on and off. Hence, if motive orientations can be evaluated in the light of the demands of specific settings, from a developmental perspective, these orientations are just one part of a continuous process of sense making. In effect, it is part of the constant process people have of connecting on-going experiences with past ones and possible and future ones, thanks to internalized or surrounding semiotic means – more or less organized or complex traces of past experiences, words, languages images and so on. As continuous process, sense making is never the same twice; thinking about football is not the same on a sunny day after a victory as it is on a miserable day after losing a match. Of course, some activities demand the uses of strongly structured activities and semiotic means – generally, doing mathematics is disconnected enough from daily activities to be always the same – yet even so, mathematical division can awake a child's deep fears of being dismembered (Boimare, 2004), or feelings of inequalities (Perret-Clermont, Carugati, & Oates, 2004; Perret-Clermont & Nicolet, 2003). Hence, sense making is a continuous process, in the flow of which single sub-orientations can be singled out – although these are changing. Inferring children's motive orientations is therefore a delicate endeavor.

### *Transitions and development*

This leads me to reflect on the notion of transition. In this collection of papers, what are the transitions at stake? In Hedegaard and Bøttcher's papers, transitions are related to the child or the learner's here-and-back move from home or family life to school; in Sanchez-Medina et al., this transition is also mentioned, with an emphasis on the whole family's migration from one country to another one. Changing scale, Fler considers changes in patterns of activities when she examines transitions in and out of the imaginary, very much in the line of Schuetz's explorations (Schuetz, 1945). Adopting a longer time scale, Ullstadius considers the

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