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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 adaption, 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.

3. Demands and motive in a homework setting

I will draw on a case study analyzing the dynamic between motive and demands in Lulu's family. The parents and children agreed to participate in a research project about children's everyday life in families and their transitions across into other institutions. The children were followed over 8 months in Copenhagen, Denmark (part of the project is described in [Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013](#)). The focus child is Lulu (8 years), she had just entered 2nd grade, when the observations started. Her siblings are Kaisa (4 years), Emil (6 years) and Laura (10 years).

On weekday afternoons Lulu's mother left work 2.30 pm so that she could fetch Lulu and Emil, at 3 pm from the school day care facility. Then they then walked together to fetch Kaisa from kindergarten. Laura walks home herself from her after-school club. On the day described here, coming home around 4 pm the mother made tea and afternoon snacks, (fruit and bread), and Laura and Lulu immediately after finishing the snack started doing homework set by their school for around an hour. I will illustrate how the children each contributed differently to the homework situation, where Lulu's opposition to doing homework can be seen in contrast to her older sister and also to her younger brother's engagement in homework. The notes were taken in real time in Danish by the researcher who sat in the same room as the children. They have been translated by the author.

3.1. 16th November: Tea drinking and doing homework

Lulu had picked some small hard berries on her way home, and as soon as she is home she finds the box with sewing materials and starts to place the berries on a string. Kaisa finds some pearls and asks her mother to help her to get started so she can put them on a string. Emil finds the first aid box and starts to look into it. Mother then goes to prepare tea. Coming back, Mother asks Emil if he has any homework (though as Lulu tells her she knows that children in kindergarten class do not have homework). Emil expresses that he would like to do homework, and says he has got a booklet to put his papers into. He says he will write all the letters he knows on a piece of paper. Mother then says she also wants to hear their names. Emil draws an A and names it. He draws further Å, R, L E, O, H, T and B. After a short while Lulu takes out her math exercise book. She announces that she has some tasks where she has to multiply, and announces she does not like to do this. Then she says I hate these kinds of tasks where you have to multiply. Laura had entered the room and has taken out her exercise book. Lulu announces that she does not want to do her homework today. Mother tells her that it does not help to say so, she just has to do it. Laura says she has to practice dictation and wants Mother to listen to her spelling the difficult words. Mother looks into her exercise book. Emil then addresses her mother: "Why do you only bother to help Laura?" Mother again orients herself to Emil and asks: "Can you try to find the B on the paper?"

Emil points out the T and Mother says correct, then she asks for a B. Emil points to B. His mother then asks if he can find a word that starts with B. Laura knocks on the table (in Danish "bord") while she smiles at Emil; he says "bord" Laura and Lulu pulls his pants ("bukser"). He says "bukser".

Lulu has now started her homework which is a math task with multiplication. She is guessing the results. Mother says: "Look at the numbers when you calculate and find the abacus." Lulu goes to find the abacus. She cannot find it and takes some colored clips instead which she says she will place in rows with 10, each in different colors. However, it is not a workable abacus. Emil gets upset and says to Mother: "You have started with me, so please help". Emil is saying the letters as Mother is pointing to the letters on the sheet. Lulu asks again about help with her math calculation. She formulates a result. Mother: "This does not make sense you need to find the abacus." Now Kaisa starts to say with pleasure profane word such as shit, pig, prick. At the same time she is working on a bracelet for her grandmother drawing pearls on a string. Emil has crawled onto Mothers lap. She asks him to find a word with L. At the same time she has to listen to Laura, practicing spelling words. Father comes home from work, while Laura begs to be read several words. Mother tells Emil that they have to stop now. All three children doing homework tell Father they cannot concentrate.

3.2. Societal conditions for practice in the family

Society gives conditions for how practice may evolve in home and school and other institutions, societal policy gives trajectories for both life course and everyday practices thereby putting demands on the institutions for creating certain forms of practices. The practice though may vary considerably and may lead to variations in how different institutions put demands on their participants. In this case Danish society creates conditions for the homework setting, by having public (state) school, and after school care and allowing the mother to have flexible working conditions so she can fetch the children early from after school care. In the home the mother had created a tradition for a homework setting before having dinner. What characterizes the home practice is that it is influenced by demands or restrictions from other institutions. In the homework setting it is directly the school with demands for doing homework. In addition, indirectly school influences several other activity settings in the home (i.e., the

morning setting, the bedtime setting). Influence also comes from work institutions, since their father has to be at work he cannot be part of the homework setting.

3.3. *Demands, support and opposition in the homework settings*

The mother has created a cosy setting at the dinner table when they come home in the afternoon. This is a way to socialize the children into homework. She supported the children's homework by attending to their work and difficulties with homework. The mother initiated the homework by asking Emil if he has homework. She did not ask Lulu, though she knows she has homework, thereby letting Lulu play with her berries but also indirectly orienting Lulu to homework by asking Emil about homework. The children though were not passive respondents to demands from their mother in this situation they actively contributed to creating the setting that also placed demands on the mother for help, and they created opposition and conflicts. Emil's exercise with the letters interfered with Laura's and Lulu's homework; they became irritated at their mother and each other because they ended up competing for their mother's attention and help and complained to their father when he came home. Mother also had to attend to Kaisa, who when the demands from the other raised conflicts, used the situation to pronounce profane words, that she is not allowed to do normally, but her mother could not attend to her because there were too many demands from the other three children directed at her.

Lulu resisted working with the math tasks at home in several ways, both directly by formulating that she hates math, that she does not want to do math and reluctantly entering the setting of doing math, by postponing her participation by pulling berries on a string and later by playing with clips, instead of finding the abacus, and then by guessing the results for her math calculation.

Following Lulu in school into her math class, another picture appears which is different from the homework situation. In school she is oriented from the start to the math activity and continues working toward the goals set by the teacher.

4. **Lulu doing math in school**

4.1. *21st November: Class hour in math*

Children are placed together, four children at each table. Lulu wants to sit next to Sarah which she is allowed to do. They have to do their math exercises and the teacher asks if they will do it together on the black board or individually. Lulu answers that it is cosier doing it together at the black board. The teacher then writes "92 minus 66", and asks Lulu to solve the problem. Lulu answers that one has to borrow 10 and then it becomes 26. After her success Lulu seems to be engaged and participates in the calculations, she then copies what is done at the blackboard into her exercise book. She yawns and the teacher says they are welcome to work by themselves, but Lulu answers quickly apologetic no! no! Lulu continues to follow the calculation counting at her fingers and copying it into her exercise book. After a while she and Sarah start to work on the task themselves while some children still continue at the blackboard. She concentrates on calculating still using her fingers. Sarah announces that this is fun; Lulu says that she does not think so but she continues working on the tasks. Sarah and Lulu smile to each other because they are on the same tasks in their exercise book. The teacher asks if Lulu will come to the blackboard, but she announces that she has started to calculate the tasks by herself.

The other children have finished their exercises and the teacher now explains how to calculate the surrounding of squares and triangles. Lulu has not finished but continues with her exercises. Lulu yawns several times and looks at Sarah who also has finished her exercises. The teacher comes and looks at what Lulu has done and tells her that she does not need to work on the calculations anymore. Lulu though continues and finishes her exercises. Lulu shows her exercises to Sarah, they compare and Sarah shows her a mistake that Lulu corrects. The teacher gives all children two tasks as homework. Then they have lunch hour.

4.2. *Lulu's initiated activities and conflicts in school and in the homework setting*

Lulu was more oriented to work with the math task in the school setting than at home. Here she took several initiatives; she is the one who answered, when the teacher asked the children to choose, if they want the exercises worked out together at the blackboard or to work by themselves at their desks. She is called to work on a task at the blackboard. She succeeds and could explain how to do the calculation (an explanation that her mother had taught her some days earlier). Her success seemed to please her and after a while Lulu took initiative together with her best friend to start to calculate by themselves being aware of each other's progress. She explained when the teacher again tried to call her to the blackboard that she now wanted to do the calculation by herself. Lulu was not as fast as the other children and started to get bored, but when the teacher told her she may stop she continued and finished the math tasks. In contrast to doing homework, she did not want to skip the tasks, but wanted to finish like the other children and calculate correctly so she compared her results with Sarah's and corrected her mistake.

5. Adults and children's demands at homework- and in school settings

The demand for homework that children meet in specific family settings and the demands they put on their parents and how children and parents relate to these demands in their interactions, either to accomplish them or opposing the demands, may lead to conflicts. The demands can be found both in the material conditions (i.e., doing math immediately when coming home after the snack) and objects (i.e., the blackboard contra exercise book, the missing abacus) and in the activities (multiplication tasks). Conflicts can arise both from missing objects, not being able to handle the tasks involved, but also as conflicts between different intentions of the persons in the activity settings.

The homework setting in Lulu's family is perhaps supported more than in most families in Scandinavia (Forsberg, 2009). Homework is not always so directly supported by a mother sitting down next to the children, but mostly the parents frame the homework situation, and it is seen as a problem from the schools' perspective, when parents do not do this. Often the child who is doing homework is seated so they are isolated from siblings who are not allowed to disturb them (Forsberg, 2007, 2009; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009).

The variation between children doing homework can be wide. In the other family I followed for the present study, the children, Esben (6 years) and Anne (10 years), were only observed once doing homework. In their homework situation Anne was writing an essay about a novel she had read. Her mother did not sit down with the children, but blamed Anne for doing her work too slowly which meant that she could not finish before dinner. Following Anne in school I observed that she was very fast and therefore did not need to do homework.

The homework setting may vary but the main objective in homework settings is to work with school tasks, this though differs qualitatively from working with the same type of tasks in school. The demands that make Lulu engage in calculating in school can be seen as coming from the activity settings that are defined both by the other children and the teacher. In the school setting Lulu shows no orientation to play in contrast to what happened in the homework situation. At home, the main objective for the different activities within the practice of family life may be care and leisure. Lulu is supported in playing most of the time at home. Both the mother and father engage with their children in play activities (i.e. the father playing word games at the dinner table, and the mother sometimes invented collective play after dinner). Therefore perhaps Lulu is more oriented to play at home, and these orientation and motive take over as soon as she finds it difficult to do her homework. Lulu's social situation in the homework setting however changed after Christmas when her mother agreed that Lulu could go to Sarah's home in the same apartment building in order to do their homework together. So Lulu instead of transgressing into play in the homework situation found a new motive connected to her relatively new position as a school girl to go and do homework with her best friend Sarah.

Table 1 outlines the forces at play in the learning dynamic as differentiated forms of demands and motives related to society, institution, activity setting and person that recognize the inherent or at least potential, unity of societal traditions and values, institutional practices, children's social situations and participation in activities in learners' engagement with the demands in tasks.

6. Activity settings and a person's social situation

Focusing on the child's social situation requires a search for the child's perspective – which means an interpretation of a child's motive orientation in the different activity settings the child participates in everyday life and how the child's motive orientation relates to the demands that the child meets while participating in different settings. To understand children's learning and development in a specific setting (i.e., a homework setting), one has to see them in this setting in the practices (i.e., their family) but also as participants in several other institutions, and how practice in one institution crosses over and influences children's activities in another institution. To get a school child's social situation at home one also has to conceptualize how school practice influences home practice and puts demands on children's everyday activities in cooperation with parents and siblings. Consequently, for children's everyday activities at school one has to conceptualize how home practice influences children's activities in school (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010).

To focus on a child's social situation of development and to take a child's perspective implies that one has to follow how the child's orientation in the world interacts with the demands that the child meet in the different institutional settings. These demands are understood broadly as in Lewin's theory (1946) as forces from the surrounding world on the child that guide the child's activities but also as forces from the child onto his surroundings. These forces have to be located in the activity settings that the child participates in as forces that structure the child's day and as direct demands from other persons and from objects that have drawn the child's attention.

Table 1

Relations between demands and motives at the different levels of perspectives that persons' life can be viewed from¹

Structure	Process	Dynamic
Society	Societal tradition- and value-demands	Societal conditions
Institution	Practice demands for type of participating	Value laden goals/objectives/motives
Activity setting	Social situation demands on both child and others	Situated motivation/engagement/interests
Person	Reciprocal demands for concrete ways of participation	Motive orientation/intention

¹ Table 1 is a modification of Table 1.1. in Hedegaard, 2012a.

Parents and children in a family in their everyday practice dialectally create conditions for each other's activities. Parents through having responsibility for children's upbringing are positioned differently in their interactions with their children from how siblings are positioned with each other in interactions. Parents and children are also located in different positions over their life courses. Their life courses are mainly dependent on the trajectories a society provides for its citizens. How these trajectories are realized in a person's life becomes a person's life course. Parents have a role in shaping their children's life courses by making interventions in order to promote what they identify as a good life and future for their children, and they do this more or less all the time. Children also intervene in siblings' and adults' lives; their interventions are related to their age period and position in the family (Bozhovich, 2009).

Adults, however, tend to have a more future-related interaction with children than children have with adults or other persons. Gradually though a child through her upbringing moves from orienting herself in the concrete situation to also become oriented temporally to days, weeks and years ahead and to what is going on in other settings beyond the immediate situation in a specific activity setting in which her activities take place. An example of how children come to anticipate transition on the daily level can be seen from the following observation of preparation for leaving to go to school in Lulu's family. In this situation there are Father, Laura, Lulu, Emil and the researcher. For the children this is a recurrent situation with variation. In this situation we see how the children also take responsibility. The children model the father in relation to each other. The researcher is included as a person the children take responsibility for.

6.1. 28th November: Leaving for school 7.30 am

The father tells Laura and Lulu that they have to be ready for school. Lulu tells Emil that they are on the way to going out of the door. Emil asks his Dad if they are on the way going out of the door. The father says "soon", and then Emil gets up from the sofa where he has been sitting next to the researcher looking at what he was writing. Emil finds his boots that are behind the sofa and puts them on. He tells the researcher they are about to go out of the door. The researcher answers that he is ready.

In this setting the siblings relate through formulating the father's demands to each other and following up on this by getting into their outdoor clothes. They orient each other in handling demands from recurrent everyday activities at home. Lulu's demand on Emil can be interpreted that she is learning to take responsibility both for herself and her younger brother, who has just started in school. Emil is imitating her and takes responsibility of demanding that the researcher gets ready, since the researcher is going with him to school. To keep a wholeness perspective when focusing on children in an activity setting in a specific practice one also has to look across institutional practices and conceptualize how other practices (e.g., school practice), put demands on the actual practice at home. Children's motives and the demands they meet enter into a dynamic process of interchange in their activities in the actual setting. Thereby children contribute to their own education and upbringing through their contributing to the activity settings in specific practices.

7. Conclusion

To describe and understand the conditions for children's life in modern society one has to identify the institutional practices in which they participate, and the activities that dominate within the institutional practices, what demands the practices put on children, and what possibilities they give for activities and how children act in these activities. Children's learning and development in families and school take place through children's engaging in and so recreating activities in specific activity settings alone or together with other people (i.e., parents, siblings, teachers and classmates); the crises they experience in the different settings, such as when Lulu recurrently opposed doing the math homework and engaged in other activities and her mother continued to demand that she did her homework, may be the result of conflicting demands and motives arising from moving between home and school. Learning and development are conceptualized as progressing through conflictual relations between demands and motives that both change the child and his environment.

This definition offers a radically different approach to the focus on the individual and rational causality of so many psychological models of learning. As I have already suggested, the critique of an over-emphasis on the individual which was formulated by situated learning theory (Lave, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) was an important step. The argument here is that the conceptualization of learning as a social process that is accomplished through a person's participation in practice does not go far enough. We need a clear account of the unity between person and practice and the approach provided by the cultural historical theory introduced by Vygotsky and by Leontiev gives a paradigm within which we can recognize learning and development as the dialectic between persons and environment. The key feature, I suggest, is that the change of persons; their motive orientation and competences, are dialectically related to the change of their environment (the demands of new activities).

This relationship could be observed when Lulu went from the math activity in the homework setting to math activity in the school setting. Over the observed period Lulu's leading motive changed from play to learning, indicated by her formulation when the observation started at home that she hates math and in school that she does not think it is fun to solve the math task. But she accepts the activity in school and her social relation with Sarah may have led to her accepting the demands of doing math both in school and later at home, moving out of the activity setting at home creating a new one together with Sarah at her home. Change

in Lulu's motive orientation relates both to the demands from objectives of the specific practices and the motives of the concrete activities.

As demonstrated in Lulu's case mediation takes place through demands that have to be analyzed both in relation to traditions and objectives of practices and the child's social situation within the practices.

To follow how demands and motives may interact in the child's everyday social situation I have used the concept of activity setting. I have conceptualized an activity setting as guided by the expectations of a practice to be found in everyday institutional practice in a society (Hedegaard, 2012b). Making the transition every day from one practice to another a child meets different demands but also becomes oriented in different ways, guided by the objectives of the specific practice that give room for specific activities within them. In school the leading objective is children's learning of subject matter; at home the leading objective is care for the children. In school, care is also an objective but subordinated to learning and at home learning may also be an objective but is here subordinated to parents' care for their children.

It is therefore important to take children's perspectives (e.g., their motive orientation) into consideration, as well as the objectives of the practice, when analyzing how children's learning takes place in this multi-complexity of different practices with different objectives. It is by using the concept of activity setting as an analytic framing that learning and development can be seen as a unity of person and environment. This recognition becomes possible because it is the persons' motive orientation and her demands on others when participating in activities in the actual settings that may be analyzed in relation to the demands directed at them. How these motives and demands become coordinated may lead to changes in both the person's activities and the setting and thereby in the long run to changes in the practice traditions.

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