

Chapter 3

Cultural-Historical Wholeness Approach: *Critical Activity Settings of More-Than-Parental Involvement*



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Abstract This chapter starts with a description of the cultural-historical wholeness approach as a theory of child development. The theory's considerable focus on the context in which such development takes place makes it capable of theorising the collaboration between different institutions that constitutes the developmental situation of the child. The concepts of an *activity setting*, in which both societal demands and individual motives intersect, and a *crisis* are described as productive tools for reflecting on different modes of more-than-parental involvement in ECEC. As an interpretative theory, this toolkit does not impose any particular model of parental involvement, but instead allows for reflection on the conditions that allow for different practices to appear, thus locating the level of eventual change-making.

Keywords Activity setting · Cultural-historical wholeness approach · Demands · Values · Parents

Understanding the Theory as a Theory of Child Development

The Vygotsky-inspired cultural-historical wholeness approach developed by Hedegaard (2005, 2009) and Flear (2010; Flear & Hedegaard, 2010; Hedegaard & Flear, 2008) perceives individuals' activities as always contextual, situated, and inseparable from their socio-cultural surroundings. While Vygotsky describes the context in very general terms, Hedegaard (2009, 2012, 2014) offers a systematic model of it.

Her theoretical modelling starts with the perspective of *society*, with its legal apparatus, cultures, and traditions, the model allows for consideration of the

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dynamics of the historical process through which the society has been created, and in which values and traditions have become laws and regulations.

These values and traditions are also related to the *institutional* perspective, where, together with regulations and laws, they constitute the institutional demands and expectations with which the institutions meet different individuals. Individuals respond to these demands by developing different motives and activities. These motives can either confirm or challenge the expectations implied in institutional activity settings. The activity settings thus intersect with the institutional demands and individual motives and activities, which make the *activity setting* the lens through which the dialectics between the human and the context become visible. These are dialectics in which both the human and the context are reconstituted, and neither side determines, but co-constitutes the other.

The model visualised by Hedegaard (2012, p. 130) provides some orientation through this complexity by drawing clear “bobbles” of the societal, institutional, and personal contexts shaping individual motives and activities. Fleer et al. (2009) have further shown how awareness of the societal perspective creates room for challenging and re-thinking Western hegemony’s definition and diagnosis of the child’s developmental milestones, including criteria for classifying developmental paths as “normal” or “deviated.” The societal level, including laws, cultural traditions, and values, can be related to very diverse (non-Western) countries and communities, which brings transparency and clarity to the idea that children around the globe grow in relation to very different expectations and demands, which they respond to by developing relevant motives, activities, and competences. Thus, the cultural-historical wholeness approach displaces the Western matrix of developmental indicators that is often placed on children who grow up in distinctive localities; instead, it promotes a deeper understanding of the child’s *developmental situation* within the context in which the child grows up.

With the concept of the *developmental situation of the child*, Hedegaard tries to capture the complexity and dynamics of the global and local dimensions (Fleer et al., 2009), or the macro and micro levels (Schousboe & Winther-Lindquist, 2013), mediated by the activity settings offered to the child in different institutions. The diverse demands encountered here do not have to stay within their particular cultures. In a context of diverse, multicultural societies with distinctive family configurations living different lifestyles, the child belonging to the majority culture can meet very different and even opposing traditions and demands in the different institutions that the child attends.

Fleer and Hedegaard (2010) showed how the different traditions underpinning practices at home and preschool may result in a huge transition for a child. They draw on an example of a boy, Andrew, whose *family practices* are characterised by “simultaneous participation structures for communicating,” “machine gun fire communication,” and “geographical roaming” (p. 155). These practices stimulate the development of competences and activities that are not in line with the *teacher’s demands*, the latter of which are connected to individual orientation and a focus on developing new skills (like practising to write the letter “A”). To cope with the

transition between these two contexts, Andrew develops some transition practices like “geographical scanning” and “strategic positioning” (p. 155).

The transition disposition may become more difficult to develop in cases where the family’s and school’s demands are anchored in very different value positions and cultural traditions. Using the example of children from a Turkish family in Denmark, Hedegaard (2005) shows the need for a communication platform between the school and family institutions to avoid confusing conflicts of demands, which may not be beneficial for the child’s development and well-being.

Together, these two examples (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Hedegaard, 2005) show how this theory’s conceptualisation of child development leads to the realisation of the importance of the interaction and collaboration between the institutions involved in the child’s daily life, which in these cases are the (pre)school setting and the child’s family. This theory enables the theorisation of interactions between the ECEC setting and the family by linking the institutions. Knowing that each one of them has its own activity settings may raise the question of what form the activity settings occur in/through which ECEC and a family interact. In other words, it raises question of power relation and social actors deciding on modes of parental involvement and areas of influence (Van Laere et al., 2018).

Cultural-Historical Wholeness Approach as a Theory of Parental Involvement: The Activity Setting

The focus of the cultural-historical wholeness approach on the whole context allows for more-than-parental involvement to be captured in its global-local, socio-cultural, and also interpersonal surroundings. The concept of the *activity setting*, a perspective where both the socio-cultural and the personal perspectives intersect, then becomes of particular interest. In this case, both the macro and micro dimensions of ECEC’s collaboration with parents come into play. The institutional belonging of an activity setting, in which both the family and the ECEC staff can interact, can vary in nature from the family’s home, an ECEC setting, or somewhere “in-between.” Figure 3.1 shows how such an activity setting (where a family and ECEC staff can meet each other and interact) is related to the following:

- The laws and regulations, as well as the cultural values, that shape the activity settings through the demands imposed on the institutions (families and ECEC).
- The cultural values that through the demands influence parental/families’ motives when creating/entering activity settings (of families’ involvement).
- The culturally anchored value positions and meanings that shape the ECEC staff’s motives when both creating and entering an activity setting (of families’ involvement).

The laws and regulations shaping these activity settings may be anchored in different kinds of steering documents. In the majority of countries, it is the ECEC

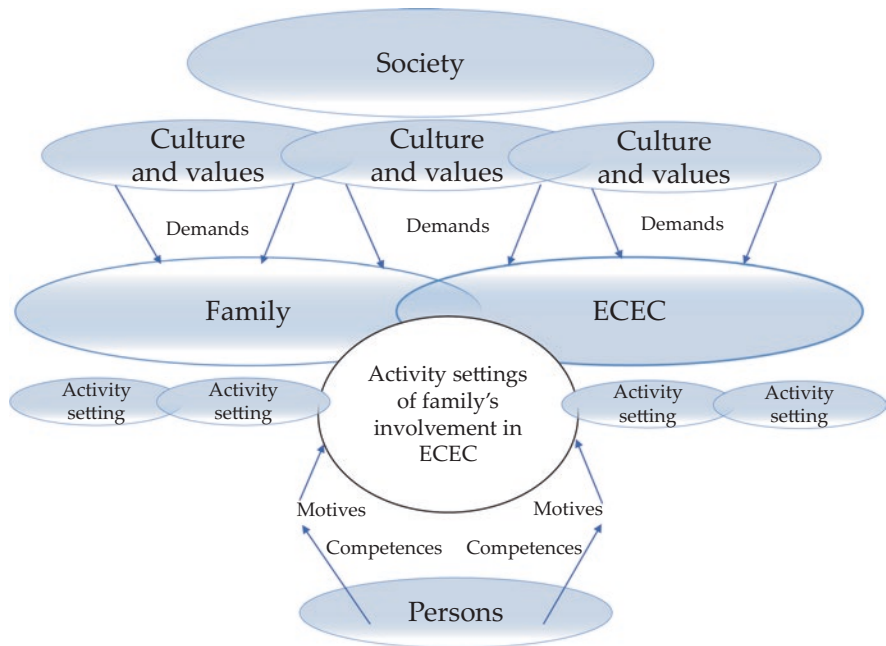


Fig. 3.1 Activity settings of families' involvement in ECEC. (Source: Own elaboration, inspired by the model of children's activity settings in different institutions of Hedegaard, 2012, p. 130)

curriculum or the framework's programmes and plans that point to important values or goals that shall be achieved through ECEC's collaborations with the children's caregivers. Specifically, Bennet (2010) shows the different values underpinning the two main traditions of ECEC, the preschool tradition and the social pedagogy tradition, and the different activity settings for children in ECEC settings that these traditions imply. Analogically, the activity settings for more-than-parental involvement are shaped by the cultural values and traditions of ECEC practices. In societies where the steering documents highlight the children's school readiness, like in England (Early Years Foundation Stage, 2017), or where the necessity to "complement and support family education" is emphasised (MSMT, 2018, p. 67, quoted in Kampichler, 2022, p. 65), as in Czech Republic, the activity settings may be different from those in countries like Poland, where the curriculum for ECEC obligates the staff only "to inform" the parents about the child's developmental progress (Sadownik & Lewandowska, 2022), or Hong Kong, where the steering document describes ECEC's collaboration with parents with verbs like "inform, involve, arrange, invite, provide, [and] encourage" (Hu, 2022, p. 129).

Epstein's (2011) typology of parental involvement in educational institutions, which is discussed in the 6th chapter, points out several forms of parental involvement. These include parenting, communication, learning at home, volunteering, decision-making, and collaboration with the community. Each of these forms, if present in a particular socio-cultural context, would unfold different activity

settings through which this type of involvement is practised. What is perhaps most important is that the cultural-historical wholeness approach allows us to see the activity setting of parental involvement as being established in a dialectics of cultural values and institutional procedures over time. This means that the activity settings and forms of parental involvement are established long before a particular family enters an ECEC setting with a baby or a toddler. As Van Laere et al. (2018) have put it, “it seems that the goals and modalities of parental involvement are defined without involvement of parents” (p. 189). The authors call this a *democratic deficit* that brings forth the risk of instrumentalising participation and reducing parents to mere spectators of their alleged problems. Looking at this democratic deficit through the cultural-historical wholeness lens allows us to understand the historical process in which the activity settings for parental involvement have been shaped, with the possibility of previous generations of parents/caregivers influencing later forms of collaboration. This might imply that certain parents have indeed little to say about the activity settings through which they can collaborate with the ECEC institutions, but throughout the years in which their child is there, they can develop motives for changing their ways of being involved, which again will be defined in advance for the upcoming generations of parents.

What this theory also moves us to realise is that individual motives may not be enough to change institutional practices, as the ECEC setting is enmeshed within many contextual powers. The activity settings of parental involvement are intertwined with the cultural values of the majority and all of their traditions. The majority of discourses underpinning the activity settings for the interaction between parents and staff tend to marginalise parents of minority backgrounds (Solberg, 2018; Sianturi et al., 2022) and lower socio-economic status (Crozier, 2001; Lareau & MacNamara Horvat, 1999; Lareau et al., 2016), particularly those who do not have the opportunity to learn the tacit social codes underpinning the activity settings (Sønsthagen, 2020).

However, as the cultural-historical wholeness approach always asks about the *conditions for appearance* (Dafermos, 2022; Vygotsky, 1997) of ongoing practices, it challenges the tacit obviousness of diverse routines and procedures. If the ECEC institution does not acknowledge the “family’s linguistic, cultural, vocational, artistic, social, emotional, spiritual, and ethnic dimensions” (Preston et al., 2018, p. 549), this theoretical toolkit will allow us to locate the reason(s). In illuminating the diverse aspects of ECEC’s intertwining relationship with society, the cultural-historical wholeness approach can help distinguish between the majority values dominating the framework plan for ECEC and the attitudes of the ECEC staff, one of which is the strong belief that an existing practice is the best one (Tobin et al., 2013).

In situations in which families co-create activity settings for their own participation, or when such settings are imposed by either the ECEC staff, a parental board, or simply tradition, reflection can be motivated by asking for the *conditions of appearance* (Dafermos, 2022; Vygotsky, 1997). The cultural-historical wholeness approach serves as a conceptual toolkit for reflecting on and locating the factors that facilitate and reproduce activity settings, motives, and practices. Relating the

practice to cultural values, formal regulations, or other conditions allows for reflection over possible activities that allow for change. However, according to Vygotsky, change also emerges through a crisis.

The Worse – The Better: The Crisis of a “Misbehaving” Parent

Vygotsky (1998) relates crises to a clear trajectory of change and challenge. He describes a crisis in the development of the child as a situation in which, “in a very short time, the child changes completely in the basic traits of his personality. Development takes on a stormy, impetuous, and sometimes catastrophic character that resembles a revolutionary course of events in both the rate of the changes that are occurring and in the sense of the alterations that are made” (p. 191).

An individual misbehaving in an institutional setting is usually an individual from whom the demands of the setting/institution are hidden, or who experienced a radical change of demands due to shifting institutional contexts (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010). In such cases, all the other actors in a social situation usually take the demands for granted. Rather than explicate the rules of the situation, they assume that they go without saying.

A parent or family member who enters an ECEC setting without knowing about the tacit demands of the activity settings – whether it be a parental meeting, a parental conference, or a daily “delivering” or “picking up” routine – risks awkwardness, discomfort, and miscommunication. The accumulation of such situations may become a crisis. However, a crisis, in this theoretical context, is not entirely negative, and is instead best construed as part of the coming change. When attempting to reconstruct Vygotsky’s understanding of crisis, Dafermos (2022) stated that “the concept of crisis is not an isolated concept but a moment of a dialectical account of the contradictory, developmental process as a dialectical unity of qualitative and quantitative changes, profession and regression, emergence and disappearance” (p. 8). This is to say that a crisis is a “space of the developmental act” (Dafermos, 2022, p. 9), or an opening up of pathways for determining the “complex links between the internal and external tensions and conflicts that serve as a driving force of development” (p. 9).

Asking for the *conditions of appearance* (Dafermos, 2022; Vygotsky, 1997) of a “misbehaving more-than-parent,” as when a grandparent asks about things that are irrelevant or uncommon during a pick-up, or a parent starts singing during a parental meeting – enables one to realise the tacit life of the concrete demands of an activity setting. As soon as the demands are transparent, it is possible to renegotiate them.

The cultural-historical wholeness approach and the concept of crisis allow for the continuous renegotiation of demands, as well as the trying out of new forms of activity settings, differently anchored in other cultural traditions and values, so that diverse parents can experience their resources and competencies as relevant to participation. This suggests that this theoretical approach encourages exploring

alternative methods of addressing the behavior of “misbehaving more-than-parents” beyond simply instructing them to conform to the demands of a specific activity setting. According to Dafermos (2022), when digging into the historical meaning of the concept, a crisis can be understood as a “decisive turning point” (p. 3) in the trajectory of diseases or wars, or a moment “when everything is possible” (p. 3), and the course of a human activity, or a historical process in general can take an unpredictable and even revolutionary direction. In other words, thinking with this theoretical toolkit inspires to co-create activity setting with negotiable demands, thereby allowing parents/families to get involved in diverse ways. For example: a parental meeting where we only sing and make music, or where the parents come together to make toys for the children.”

Enabling dialogue and negotiation of activity settings for parental involvement, rather than immediately working to resolve the crisis, is about taking continuous advantage of it through unceasing collaboration. The potential for crisis, according to Vygotsky (1997, 1998) and Dafermos (2022), lies in the dialectics between conflicting forces and the tensions between co-existing alternatives and agonisms. Opening up a communicative space for the exchange of conflicting meanings can accelerate the birth of new forms, forms generated with and not without the parents (Van Laere et al., 2018). Such a strategy could, however, also lead to chaos and confusion, as discussed in the study of Morrow and Malin (2004), who show how an increased level of empowerment exacerbates disagreements and thus many dilemmas for educators meeting the parents. However, the (agonistic) meanings appearing in the space and the empowered voices articulating them could also make the dialectics of the cultures, values, and traditions involved in the variety of activity settings more visible.

The cultural-historical wholeness approach is based on an awareness of the ongoing historical process, with its values and demands. Informing parents about the existing demands of the activity settings that parental involvement comprises and “equipping” them with the tools that allow them to enter into the existing activity settings is not necessarily negative and undemocratic. Knowing the demands of a setting allows one to communicate their own issues in the right time and place, to the relevant ears, and thus be heard. Communicating meanings in a way that the listeners (i.e. ECEC staff or other parents) resonate with can transfer the dialectics between the values and traditions from which the ECEC and the parents operate to the existing activity settings and thus possibly transform them therefrom. In other words, knowing how to approach and participate in the recognised activity settings could be the only way of changing them, and thus just the start of the transformation process.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I will relate this theoretical approach to the aspects of parental involvement that were highlighted in the first chapter, which were (a) the more-than-parental, intergenerational approach to the home-ECEC relationship; (b) the recognition of genuine parental belonging to children's lives; and (c) the value of conflict and disagreement. The cultural-historical wholeness approach does not impose any kind of parental or more-than-parental involvement, but rather relates the existing forms of families to the values and demands living or appearing in the social contexts of institutions. These values/demands can be either resisted or confirmed by individual motives. This means that in the case of an intergenerational family appearing at a parental meeting, this approach allows challenging the established values by asking, "Who do we value as a caregiver, and who do we assume to come to parental meetings, if grandparents attending a parental conference together with parents is such a big shock for us?"

In relation to the next aspect, the cultural-historical wholeness approach recognises the family as a very important context of the life and development of the child. This is to say that this theory would rather ask questions about the *conditions for the appearance* of practices in which families are not acknowledged by ECEC.

This does not, however, mean that the relationship between ECEC and family needs to be harmonic and free of conflicts. As this theory builds on dialectics, or the continuous exchange of contradictory forces, connections, disconnections, tensions, and drama (Dafermos, 2022), it sees agonist disagreement as a perpetual power of the historical process and improvements. This means that the value of conflict is implied in this theorisation of more-than-parental involvement.

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